

Strategic and Operational Plans: Lessons in Effective Plan Stewardship

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Strategic Planning is a relatively new practice in local county government, but Marin County has been creating and implementing strategic plans for almost twenty years. This case study examines the strategic plan implementation process conducted by the County Administrator Office and the Health

and Human Services Department. Adaptations and lessons learned are examined and the concept of “plan stewardship” explored in terms of implications for inter- and intra-departmental collaboration and oversight.

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Strategic Planning

Although the concept of strategic planning can sound remote and complicated, it is something we all do. When we plan a vacation, a personal budget, or a professional path, we are strategically planning how to achieve a clear set of goals. A strategic plan is founded upon a vision and continues long after the initial groundwork is set; it is a functional tool that can be used to set a clear path for the future, allowing the vision to mature and change. When external or internal factors unexpectedly alter planned operations, strategic planning can also act as a resource to assist in making prudent and equitable decisions.

In the early 1920s, the Harvard Business School developed the Harvard Policy Model, one of the first strategic planning methodologies for private businesses; it was not until the early 1990's that this practice became common in the public sector (Poister, 2010). The migration from the private to the public sector was delayed because the model needed to be adapted to the inherent differences in the two sectors: government agencies are held accountable to the public and their function is to improve the community and manage public resources as mandated; private sector companies are held accountable to shareholders and their function is to deliver a product that provides increases in financial returns for the company and shareholders. Initially, public sector strategic planning focused on designing comprehensive plans to ensure efficiencies reliant upon narrow chains of authority, which often resulted in strategies and organizational structures becoming siloed and isolated. However, current strategic planning efforts now incorporate a framework

that values outputs, quality of services and broader community needs. These changes have resulted in a holistic design of strategies that align and elevate the goals and aspirations of government in partnership with the community.

Stewardship

However, by its very design, a strategic plan can be so focused on high-level goals and performance measurements that it does not ground itself in the actual tasks necessary to achieve those goals. According to Mintzberg (1994), a strategic plan can draw executive management's focus to a high-level interpretation of goals, resulting in the opposite of the very thing that strategic planning aims to do, which is to unite the organization around common goals and the strategies to achieve them. The result is a plan that is managed by executives who receive hard data packaged and presented in a way that does not necessitate a qualitative understanding of the work that has resulted in the data points. Data is representative of a point in time and does not show nuance, removing the opportunity to have a full picture of the issue and underlying problems that may surface eventually. This results in plans that separate goals and strategies from implementation, and therefore create or solidify an artificial stratification of staff into those that strategize and those that perform. Mintzberg (1994) and Poister (2010) suggest that the intention of a strategic plan can still be realized in what this paper will refer to as the stewardship stage. Once the plan has been finalized, implementation begins, and it is in this stage that the efforts of executive management and line staff coalesce. In a review

of the literature, effective plan stewardship is comprised of the following three core components:

- **Engagement:** Communication of the strategic plan. Communication should result in staff not only understanding the “strategic intentions but what [each] subunit and individual must do to realize them” (Mintzberg, 1994).
- **Involvement:** Adherence to the goals and performance measurements of a plan through the implementation of continuous quality improvement plan that sustains/adapts the strategies, making the plan functional within operational systems.
- **Maintaining Relevancy to Department Operations:** Visibility of the plan goals in everyday office settings, documents, and operations, creating relevancy to everyday operations.

This paper will focus on Marin County, the successes and challenges it has faced in the process of implementing both a department-wide strategic plan and a countywide strategic plan, and a recommendation will be made for Santa Cruz County, as it embarks on the second year of its own strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning in Marin County

Marin County is an excellent case study in progressive strategic planning. In 2000, the Marin County Board of Supervisors adopted the first countywide guiding principles and at the same time, directed the County Administrator to create an inclusive strategic plan to bring the county organization into alignment with the guiding principles. In 2001, a Strategic Plan for the County of Marin was created and then in 2015, a five-year Business Plan was developed that built upon the previous plan. Following this, the County of Marin Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) adopted a strategic plan with two components: an Internal Strategic Plan (also known as the Operational Plan), adopted in 2017; and a Strategic Plan to Achieve Health and Wellness Equity (also known as the Community Plan), adopted in 2018.

Marin County Plan Stewardship

Significant efforts went into the stewardship plan for each of Marin’s Strategic Plans. HHS has allocated “personnel and infrastructure resources...[specifically] hiring an executive-level Chief Strategy Officer who is responsible for overseeing the execution of the strategy, as well as creating organizational structures and systems within the department to ensure work is coordinated, integrated and aligned with shared goals” (HHS Community Plan, 2018). In addition, an extensive engagement process was implemented throughout by both the Marin County Administrator Office (CAO) and HSS. The HHS engagement component involved the following strategies:

- **Management Forums:** Managers attended trainings to better understand Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound (SMART) goals and then were asked to take what was learned back to their teams
- **Conference Calls:** These calls were made available to staff interested in learning more about the plan but not able to attend an informational meeting
- **Town Hall Meetings:** These meetings were provided at lunch time and presented to staff at each location (a total of 5 or 6)
- **Frequently Asked Questions:** A list of frequently asked questions were emailed to all staff, informing them of the Community Plan

HHS Lessons Learned – Executive and Middle Management Perspective

HHS learned several lessons from the rollout of their 2017 Operational Plan and 2018 Community Plan. In conversations with executive and middle management staff, some overall lessons learned emerged:

- Principles of the plan need to be embedded in the culture
- Momentum achieved during the planning stage needs to be sustained so that staff remain engaged
- Strategies need to be brought to the unit level to provide context and purpose to the work

- Shared understandings are helpful, especially for new concepts such “participatory leadership”
- Executive-level sponsorship of each focus area should be promoted
- A plan for using data to create accountability should be created

HHS Lessons Learned – Line Staff Perspective

At a town hall meeting conducted in March 2019, staff were presented with the 2018 Community Plan by key leadership staff who had also been instrumental in its design. The meeting was structured using a question and answer format, with key leadership taking questions afterwards. Two key questions emerged from that meeting:

- How will the action items in the community plan connect to daily work?
- How does the Operational Plan connect to the Community Plan?

CAO Lessons Learned

Concurrently, the CAO conducted an internal evaluation of their 2015 Five-Year Business Plan and in April 2019 an update was provided to the Board of Supervisors. The results of the lessons learned are summarized below:

- Decisions related to the Strategic Plan are being made at the top of the organization hierarchy while staff who carry out the actual tasks are not connected to the vision and purpose of the organization
- Staff engagement can wane after the implementation of the Strategic Plan
- Performance management has been tied to the annual budget; therefore, departments ensure that what is proposed to be measured will be successful, instead of stretching the organization
- No formalized process exists that uses strategic plan outcomes to guide department-level performance

In response, the CAO implemented the following strategies, grouped below into the three core components of stewardship:

- **Engagement:** A Stakeholder Group was formed that consists of department directors, assistant directors, board members and various members of the community
- **Involvement:** Three workgroups consisting of department directors act as subcommittees that meet with employee groups to ensure that decisions and recommendations function at all levels of the hierarchy, specifically through the connection of line staff ideas to accountability measures
- **Relevancy:** Cross Functional Teams will provide an evaluation of plan performance measures that each center on one focus area; teams will consist of staff from across departments and will assess whether strategies and indicators are aligned with current practices and data collection strategies

Recommendations for Santa Cruz County

In 2018 the County Administrative Office (CAO), for the first time in the history of Santa Cruz County, designed and implemented a county-wide Strategic Plan. The CAO is now in the process of finalizing and implementing an Operational Plan. All county departments have been involved in the development of both plans, but this paper will provide stewardship recommendations for the Human Services Department.

It is evident from reading Marin County’s strategic plans and from talking with the executive and middle management staff that they were thoughtful and methodical in the design and gathering of feedback. Once the plans were implemented, a common perception from executive and middle management and line staff was that a connection needed to be made between daily activities and plan outcomes. Middle management staff provide that connection between executive management and line staff and are therefore key to distilling broad concepts into actionable steps. The proposal below relies on existing structures and resources except for the addition of a Cross Functional Team, similar to what the Marin CAO implemented. The sections below

provide a description of the recommendations and starting points for measuring effectiveness.

Engagement: HSD executive management from each Operational Plan committee meet with unit managers and staff to share the purpose of the plan and explore staff ideas for implementing at least one strategy connecting a plan goal to unit-level tasks. It is recommended that the meeting be informal, small, and at a round table (if no round table is available, arrange chairs in a circle), instead of having the executive management standing at the front of a room talking to seated line staff. Prior to the meeting, unit managers would work with their staff to review the plan and identify which of their operations align with at least one of the Focus Areas and related strategies. This should not be framed as a labor-intensive task, but more of a relationship-building tool for staff and executive management to engage in a dialog around the Operational Plan.

- Number of engagement meetings between Operational Plan committee and units by end of fiscal year (goal determined by count of units in each department and scheduling availability).

Involvement: A Cross Divisional Team consisting of executive and middle management and line staff meet quarterly to design unit-level measurements and discuss progress and challenges towards achieving Focus Area strategies. Prior to the meeting, line staff will be trained by unit managers in SMART goal development and the performance measurement will require consensus approval. Line staff will also report out at the Cross Divisional Team meeting. Additionally, when applicable to the Focus Area, it is recommended that staff collect feedback from participants and provide a summary of this information in their report at the Cross Divisional Team meeting.

- Number of performance measurements (includes participant surveys when applicable) that align with each Focus Area of the Operational Plan (goal based on number of HSD strategies in support of each Focus Area).

- Number of unit staff who have attended a Cross Divisional Team meeting during the fiscal year and presented a progress report on their unit's alignment with the Operational Plan, results from community participant survey (when relevant), and recommendations for improvement or change (goal based on number of units/teams in HSD and at least two staff attending each meeting).

Relevancy: Visible reminders of the Strategic and Operational Plan goals in everyday office settings, documents and meetings will sustain relevancy. HSD already posts the Strategic Plan in hallways; it is further recommended that a poster of the plan be prominently placed in all meeting rooms, especially those where clients meet with staff. Additionally, documents produced by administration should be aligned with Operational Plan goals based on the format already being used in Board Memos.

- By the end of the fiscal year, all new projects, initiatives, solicitations and contracts will connect to at least one Operational Plan Focus area and, if applicable, include at least one performance measurement that connects to a Focus Area strategy. Additionally, there will be efforts to align strategies and performance measurements amongst departments responsible for implementing the same Focus Area strategies.
- By end of the fiscal year, executive management will regularly share updates at Operational Plan Committee meetings on the progress and challenges of stewardship goals.

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