

The Consultant and Strategic Planning: When Inclusion Matters

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A consultant can play a variety of roles in helping a nonprofit complete a strategic plan. Possible roles include: facilitator, coach, researcher/data gatherer, and writer.

This case study takes a look at strategic planning through the eyes of a consultant asked to serve a very large nonprofit that ranks inclusion of board, staff, members, and others as an important measure of the planning process' success.

ABOUT AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL USA

Amnesty International USA is a large membership organization whose purpose is to end human rights abuses. At Amnesty in 2003, there were over 150 staff; 18 board members; 1600+ action groups; 25 programs; 10,000 volunteers; and, 300,000 registered members.

Amnesty's members are at the center of Amnesty's work. Amnesty's members in Chapters throughout the country write the cards, letters and emails that highlight human rights abuses and seek to gain the release of the abused internationally. Amnesty members work side-by-side with staff to fulfill internal needs and implement program plans. Evidence suggests that without the members, the success that Amnesty experiences would be drastically reduced.

WHO INTERNALLY WAS INVOLVED IN THE PLANNING?

To oversee the planning process, the Amnesty Board appointed a Strategic Planning Committee (the SPC) to plan and oversee the planning process. Board and staff, representing different components of the organization, were assigned committee seats. The Board Chair chaired the SPC and the Executive Director also held a seat on the committee.

Transparency is a core value that informed the design of the planning process. For Amnesty, transparency means that decision-making processes must be open, inclusive, and accessible. As such, for every Amnesty activity, every voice that wants to be heard must be heard and then reflected in any completed activity. Success then is measured not only by the extent intended outcomes are achieved,

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but the nature and in particular, inclusiveness of the process. Planning is one more activity where the process is as important as the results.

The organization's Membership Director was assigned by the Executive Director as part-time staff to the SPC Committee. An important part of the staff person's job was to serve as liaison between the consultants, the SPC and the rest of the organization in addition to managing meeting logistics and serving as a general internal resource for the process. And, as liaison, this staff person served as the vital source for the consultant on organizational culture, structure, protocol, and issues.

In addition to the SPC, three other committees played an active part in the planning process. A Membership Committee was assigned the task of helping design and subsequently assess the results of the information gathering activities that were part of the planning process. This committee was comprised of paid and volunteer representatives from across the organization and included individuals self-identified as having grave concerns about the organization's internal operations. The committee also helped develop the membership-specific goals and objectives and reviewed the remainder of the plan before its submission to the board and membership.

It should be noted that at the time within Amnesty not all members believed that they were respected, trusted, or even valued by the staff and Board. While small in number, this faction of members was very active and heard. The Strategic Planning Committee believed it was important to include members of this faction on the Membership Committee in addition to members who were satisfied with the status quo. This mix of members often made for lively conversations but the commitments by all to the Amnesty mission made it possible to construct well crafted and probing information-gathering tools.

The organization's New Media Task Force and Multi-Cultural Committee (akin to a Diversity Committee) also participated in the planning process. The consultants worked with each committee to collect information that helped craft goals and objectives specific to their respective charges.

Throughout the process Amnesty members and staff from every part of the organization committed significant amounts of time to the planning process including the dedication of portions of regional and annual business meetings and participating in surveys and focus groups. And finally, the Board of Directors committed many hours of dedicated parts of its agendas to monitoring and understanding the activities and work of the SPC.

THE PROCESS

The Strategic Planning process first kicked off in November of 2000 but was stalled for a couple of months and began anew with the recruitment of an external

facilitator in late February 2001. The process concluded with a presentation and vote at the annual meeting in mid-April 2002 that led to some final adjustments for the June 2002 Board meeting and ratification.

1ST STEP: PLANNING TO PLAN

The first step in the process focused on recruiting an external consultant who would provide guidance about the process, facilitate committee meetings, help design and conduct the data collection, and assist in the analysis of the collected data. The decision to bring in an external consultant followed an earlier attempt by members, staff, and board to develop the plan without assistance. That experience was found to not provide enough objectivity or adequate resources to mediate differences between the many parties seeking to be heard and included in the planning process and results.

The Strategic Planning Committee began its work with a facilitated full day meeting to plan the planning process. The resulting plan-to-plan included an outline of activities, detailed timeline and assignments, as well as a conversation about the organization's vision, mission, and values. The mission conversation focused on understanding who are Amnesty's customers and how Amnesty's work contributed to changes for those customers. The vision discussion focused on thinking about Amnesty's programs, membership, operations, and governance in its "ideal" state. And, the values focused on identifying the philosophical parameters and principles that guided Amnesty's decisions and work.

2ND STEP: COLLECTING INFORMATION TO INFORM DECISION MAKING

In its first two-day meeting the Membership Task Force reviewed the planning process and primarily discussed the type of information that was needed to ensure that the planning process and outcomes fully reflected the needs and interests of members. One particularly interesting conversation centered on the difference between activist members (those who participated in chapters and wrote letters or took other actions to implement the Amnesty work) and those who were donor members. In many ways, activist members perceived staff as considering donor members as more valued.

In part, and as a result of this concern, the Committee recommended that activist members and donor members receive unique surveys to provide quantitative information about these members. The survey would be distributed via mail and e-mail and where appropriate, by hand, as well as placed on Amnesty's website. The Committee also recommended that focus groups be conducted to obtain more qualitative information about members. High-end donors were also interviewed in groups. In all 43 focus groups were conducted.

In addition to collecting information about members, the SPC agreed that all staff must be surveyed and interviewed. Senior managers were interviewed individually while line staff and middle managers were interviewed in groups. Current and selected past board members were also interviewed. Any or all of these individuals may have also completed the membership survey because most hold membership status.

Beyond internal constituents, interviews of Amnesty affiliate international staff and “providers” and experts in the human rights field and from other large membership organizations (like the NAACP) were conducted. Insights from these sources were sought to provide an understanding about Amnesty’s external environment.

All information was collected, collated, analyzed, and presented to the Strategic Planning Committee by the planning consultants.

3RD STEP: SHARING THE INFORMATION

The findings from Step 2 were distributed for reflection and discussion by Senior Managers, the Membership Task Force and the Board and put on the website. The object of this distribution was to understand how true the *data* felt. The input from all of these sources was summarized and presented to the Strategic Planning Committee by the staff liaison and consultants. The conclusion by all was that “the data rang true and reflected the state of the organization and its environment.”

4TH STEP: VISION, MISSION, VALUES, GOALS, AND OBJECTIVES—THE PLAN

The completion of the data collection process established the beginning for constructing planning goals and objectives. The operating rule was that goals and objectives would be directional; long range; focus on program, membership, operations or governance; and, must reflect the data. The data was to serve as the rationale for each goal.

The staff liaison and the consultants next met to craft a document containing draft goals and objectives. These were then discussed in full one or two day meetings with the Task Forces and Committees. Staff and members were encouraged to provide their input through feedback forms that were attached to the document and posted on the website.

All of the resulting contributions from the members, directly and in Task Forces, were then used to revisit the draft document. A document that contained the mission, values, goals, and objectives was reviewed by the SPC and then presented to the Board for its consideration and action. In accordance with Amnesty process, the strategic plan was now ready for member action, which required it be prepared as a resolution for the regional and annual meeting’s considerations.

5TH STEP: ADOPTING THE PLAN

The consultants and one or more members of the Strategic Planning Committee and Board next brought the draft strategic plan to the regional meetings. At this point, the primary role of the consultants was to help those present fully understand the origin of each goal and its objectives as well as the data that informed these statements. At each regional meeting, those present can add amendments that change the content and language of a resolution. Some regions opted to propose changes while others moved to accept the plan for presentation and action at the General Meeting.

Once the plan arrived at the General Meeting, caucuses were held to find common ground where regions had made changes in content or language. Again, the consultants served as a resource for questions. Members of the Strategic Planning Committee were the plan's authors and they represented the intent of the plan and facilitated discussions to reach agreement around competing regional differences.

A finalized resolution was presented to the members, and the Strategic Plan, with a bit more discussion, was approved. Staff were given the task of developing a work and staffing plan that was reviewed and accepted by Amnesty's Board. Today, as is described in the last section of this article, the Strategic Plan fully informs the day-to-day inner and external workings of the organization.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE STRATEGIC PLAN'S FOCUS

The plan primarily focused internally. While strategic plans tend to focus on external trends, the life stage and internal conditions of an organization may dictate otherwise. This was true for Amnesty—strategic internal demands dominated external demands.

The SPC and the membership had concluded that:

- ▶ Program prioritizing, a focus on individuals and communications must be complete
- ▶ Membership must be diverse, increased and retention must be high
- ▶ Operations/Management must be planful, effective and efficient
- ▶ Governance must be accountable, responsive and effective

SO, WHAT HAPPENED?

A year later AIUSA conducted a complete review to determine how much progress it had made in implementing its plan. Here is what they concluded.

According to the Deputy Director of Policy and Programs, in general, the 2003 fiscal period was a challenging time for Amnesty. Fundraising, as for many nonprofits, was difficult. But, AIUSA did not lay off staff.

The year was also challenging for the Board. Rather than paying attention to its every-day duties, the Board had an internal member-related challenge that tested

the very core of its values, structure, and programs. This challenge significantly diverted the Board from pursuing any of the Governance-related Strategic Planning goals and objectives.

Staff developed their work plans using the Strategic Plan goals and objectives. The plan served as a reference point for priority setting (around resource allocation and activities) especially when choices were to be made (given reduced resources). Most important, the plan significantly lessened the otherwise exhaustive and repeated discussions that AIUSA members and staff usually have (and traditionally value). The Board and managers believe that this is the result of lots of buy-in and acceptance of the plan.

As a result partially of the economic conditions, and partially the longer-than-anticipated amount of time needed to realign staff to pursue the Membership goals, the work outlined in the membership plan is just beginning. With new membership managers (the leader did participate in the planning process) in place and the plan as the blueprint, the Deputy Director believes that the plan for membership should be accomplished without affecting the intended outcomes.

By the end of the year, AIUSA will be putting in place a Senior Deputy of Operations. One of this person's primary responsibilities will be the monitoring, reporting, and updating of the Strategic Plan. This is a new position that reflects the commitment AIUSA is making to continue to give strategic planning a prominent position within the organization.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIONS

The Board may have lost some ground on its own commitment to and even understanding about the plan. The institutional challenge so consumed members that little else could gain focus. Those members who went through the planning process, including the current Board Chair (as there has been some turnover) have voiced a commitment to ensure that the Governance goals in particular are pursued. Developing a planning committee for this purpose is in the works.

About the planning process, Management and staff believe that the information collection component was particularly important. The resulting data as it was referred to throughout the planning process, proved critical to informing and maintaining an objective decision-making process. Equally if not more valued about the process was the focus on planning activities that built ownership and buy-in. Thanks to these activities, the plan has credence and is valued.

For the future, the Strategic Plan will remain an important reference for decision making, and planning processes will be inclusive and engaging and based on sound information that reflects internal and external factors.

FOR CONSIDERATION: LESSONS LEARNED

Four key lessons rise out of the AIUSA strategic planning process:

- ▶ Great strategic plans are informed by the data but good process ensures that the data is the source of decisions over feelings and perceptions. Separating the people from the directions is essential.
- ▶ Strong internal staffing and external guidance (facilitation, objective data collection, and general planning expertise) makes a difference in effectively and efficiently moving the planning process along in a timely and appropriate manner.
 - Internal staffing is critical to understanding and working with the political and logistical elements of the planning organization.
 - External guidance helps provide a common language and objectivity (no stake) in the analysis of information and decision-making. The process needs to ensure engagement, expedite discussion and ensure that all that must be discussed is discussed and is strategic/results focused versus operationally focused.
- ▶ To ensure the plan is carefully and completely thought through, understood, owned (and implemented), board, staff, and volunteers must be active throughout the planning process to guide, vet, and act. Extra effort is needed to ensure all these parties are kept current and fully informed about the planning activities, information that is being gathered, and status of the planning process.
- ▶ As is true for all management—roles and responsibilities must be clearly delineated and lines of authority and reporting expectations clear.