



Overview of Non-Profit Program Planning

by Carter McNamara, PhD

This document explains a basic framework in which non-profit programs can be developed. The framework suggested in this document will produce a program that is highly integrated with the organization's mission and other programs. The framework serves as a sound basis for writing program proposals to funders, as well, because the framework closely follows that of the standard proposal document. In addition, the program will be clearly structured for a straightforward program evaluation, which has become one of the most important aspects of program planning in recent years.

This document is several pages long and includes the following sections:

- [What's a Non-profit Program?](#)
- [6 Cornerstones for Solid Program Planning](#)
- [8 Guidelines to Keep Program Planning on Track](#)
- [Program Direction: Goals and Objectives](#)
- [Program Process \(Process, Resources and Budget\)](#)
- [Program Evaluation](#)

■ **What's a Non-profit Program?** A program is a collection of resources in an organization and is geared to accomplish a certain goal or set of goals. Programs are one major aspect of the non-profit's structure. The typical non-profit organizational structure is built around programs, that is, the non-profit provides certain major services, each of which is usually formalized into a program.

Two other major aspects of the non-profit structure are its governance (the board and, for some, the chief executive, too) and its central administration. The board oversees the entire non-profit organization. The central administration exists to use the non-profits common resources to ensure each program is developed and operated effectively.

(Note that in for-profits, a program typically is a one-time effort, geared to accomplish a specific goal and then stop. It seems that in non-profits, a program is an ongoing and organized effort to provide a highly needed service.)

Keeping Perspective: Program are Systems

Programs, like other organizations, can seem a highly confusing, amorphous mass that is very hard to comprehend. It can be hard to keep perspective. However, like an organization, a program is a system with inputs, processes, outputs (tangibles) and outcomes (impacts on clients) -- with ongoing feedback among the parts. This systems perspective helps keep clarity about programs and will help a great deal during program planning.

Program inputs are the various resources needed to run the program, e.g., money, facilities, clients, program staff, etc. The process is how the program services are delivered, (e.g., clients are counseled, children are cared for, art is created, association members are supported, etc). The outputs are the units of service, (e.g., number of clients counseled, children cared for, artistic pieces produced, or members in the association). Outcomes are the impacts on the clients who are receiving the services, (e.g., increased mental health, safe and secure development, richer artistic appreciation and perspectives in life, increased effectiveness among members, etc). The outcomes are the "guiding light" for the organization and help it keep its direction. This is why funders are increasingly requesting outcomes-based evaluations from non-profits.

■ **6 Cornerstones for Solid Program Planning** With these cornerstones in place, the non-profit is assured of a program plan that has a strong foundation and can survive multiple changes as the program develops.

- Programs Should Tie to the Organization's Mission
- Program Planning Should Tie in With Strategic Planning
- Involve the Board
- Conduct Program Planning as a Team
- Program Planning Should Involve Potential Clients as Much as Possible
- Don't Worry About Developing a Perfect Program Plan

Programs Should Tie to the Organization's Mission

Each program should be strongly associated with the organization's overall mission. That is, the organization's leaders should work from the mission to identify several overall, major goals that must be reached and that, in total, reach the mission. If an idea for a

program comes up at some time other than during strategic planning, non-profit leaders must ask themselves if the program is really appropriate for the organization.

Program Planning Should Tie in With Strategic Planning

Depending on the nature of the organization, strategic planning typically includes review of the organization's vision, mission, values, overall issues and goals (each of which often becomes a program) and strategies to reach the goals (strategies to reach the goals often are the roadmap for how the program meets its own goals). Because the program planning must be tied to the nature of the organization's mission, the program planning should be closely tied with the organization strategic planning as well. Typically, at a point right after the strategic planning process has identified strategic goals and issues, a team of planners can draft a framework for how goals can be met. This framework is often the roadmap for a new program. (For more information about strategic planning, see Strategic Planning.)

Involve the Board

A major responsibility of boards is to set strategic direction for non-profits. The non-profit's board should be highly involved in authorizing and guiding initial direction for programs. Therefore, boards should be involved in strategic planning of programs. (Admittedly, many experienced executive directors might argue that they actually drive the board to conduct strategic planning. Many experienced practitioners believe that ultimately, it's the working relationship of the board and executive director that determines the success of a non-profit.)

Conduct Program Planning as a Team

The chief executive, key planners on the board, relevant middle managers and major clients should be involved in program planning. "Relevant middle managers" are those who lead programs or other departments that will integrate or coordinate with the new program being planned. Often, initial plans for a program are suggested to the board by the chief executive and sometimes the program managers. Program planning is often initiated as part of the organization's overall strategic planning process and so is conducted by the strategic planning team, which should be comprised of board, the chief executive, staff and key clients, as much as possible.

Program Planning Should Involve Potential Clients as Much as Possible

One can embark on a wonderful program planning process with all the right parts, but if key clients aren't involved to provide perspectives from the program user's point of view, the organization may build a beautiful ladder -- on the wrong roof. Involve clients in initial ideas about a program, discuss your perceived unmet need among those clients, ask how they would like the need to be met. You might run a final draft of your program plan past a couple of key clients. This involvement of clients is a critical aspect of the marketing process as well, because the clients are key to the program's successful implementation and use.

Don't Worry About Developing a Perfect Program Plan

If the organization involves the right people, and if everyone participates wholeheartedly and reflects on their experiences, then the organization will develop the "perfect" plan. The organization remains the only real "expert" on their own planning. Outside consultants and facilitators can be brought in, but each planning decision is ultimately up to the organization members. The "perfect" program plan will meet the nature and needs of the organization.

■ **8 Guidelines to Keep Program Planning on Track** Planning is taking one's best shot at working up a "tree" of decisions that must be made at some time, and the earlier the better, to propose developing a program. Your plan doesn't have to be perfect and, like any plan, it isn't a rule. Rather, it's a set of guidelines that serve as reference for the future. You can change your plans -- just know why and be able to explain (e.g., to your board and funder) why you changed the plans. This planning effort is almost always more than non-profit personnel want to undertake, but is almost always less than they fear. Regardless, this planning effort is required if the non-profit plans to pursue funding in the form of grants.

The following guidelines will help ensure the program planning process points in the right direction and will help ensure the resulting program is run effectively and efficiently.

- Focus on Outcomes
- Examine Your Intended Outcomes - Conduct Some Basic Marketing
- Coordinate the New Program with Other Current Programs
- Explore if Client Services Can Be Delivered More Effectively via Collaboration
- Plan Key Indicators of Program Success
- Include Short-Range Focus in a Long-Range Plan
- Learn by "Testing the Waters"?
- Plan Program Reviews

Focus on Outcomes

Outcomes are benefits to clients from participation in the program. Outcomes are usually in terms of enhanced learning (knowledge, perceptions/attitudes or skills) or conditions, e.g., increased literacy, self-reliance, etc. Outcomes are often confused with program outputs or units of services, e.g., the number of clients who went through a program. (For more information about outcomes, see Program Evaluation.)

Examine Your Intended Outcomes - Conduct Some Basic Marketing

We've noted that the intended outcomes are the guiding light for a system. Therefore, it's critical to verify that these planned outcomes are indeed useful to someone in your community. Many people mistakenly believe that marketing is selling a product or idea -- selling is only part of marketing. Sound marketing includes researching a market to identify its needs or to assess if an idea you already have is really needed by that market. (A market is a group of people or organizations that may buy or need your program services). Basically, you're verifying there's a group of clients who are interested in, or even better, really need your planned service or product. Marketing also includes working with clients to identify how they prefer to have the service delivered. Marketing gives a strong impression of how much they're willing to pay for this service -- or what to set the price at for the service.

Non-profits typically don't place the same high priority on setting prices that for-profits do. However, funders won't support a program indefinitely. The non-profit is always wise to explore what revenue can be generated from a service to offset its operating costs. Non-profits that relied on federal funding would be wise to plan programs that recover costs through the use of fees because the federal government is substantially reducing its contributions to non-profits.

Coordinate the New Program with Other Current Programs So often, in the excitement of the birth of a new program, we ignore precious resources that already exist. The new program is but part of an overall organization, an overall system. Pay particular attention to how the new program will coordinate with other programs in the organization. What inputs are needed from other managers and other programs? What ongoing feedback is needed among members of the new program and other programs? How can the new program benefit other programs?

Explore if Client Services Can Be Delivered More Effectively via Collaboration

Successful collaboration brings two or more organizations together to work in synergy, in an effort that is "more than the sum of its parts." That is, if both organizations worked apart, both would serve clients and produce some benefits -- but not as many and as well as if both organizations worked together. In working together, there's an economy of scale, or sharing of resources, that lowers costs and focuses more resources on serving clients.

An increasing number of funders are requiring evidence of collaboration planning from non-profits applying for funding. Many non-profit leaders naturally struggle with the notion of collaboration, of sharing resources and control with other organizations. Collaboration can be quite frustrating for non-profit leaders. This dilemma invites leaders to carefully consider whom it is that they really want to serve. If collaboration will better serve clients (and it usually will) and better serving clients is the overall goal, then collaboration should be attempted.

Plan Key Indicators of Program Success

These planned indicators will help you establish whether the program is successful or not, and will help you avoid doing a program for the sake of a program. Consider planning indicators associated with intended outcomes, e.g., "increased self-reliance (an outcome) for 70% of adult, African American women living in the inner city of Minneapolis as evidenced by the following measures (indicators) ...". An outcomes-based evaluation will help you ascertain if you've reached this indicator or not. You can also resort to indicators in terms of outputs (tangible results), e.g., amount of clients served, money made, milestones accomplished, measures of satisfaction among clients per questionnaires, etc. (Note that many evaluators will assert that measuring outputs is not a valid determination of whether outcomes have been reached or not.)

If you struggle with identifying key indicators of success, then imagine the program operating in a highly successful manner at some time in the future. Then describe what features of the program indicate that the program is successful.

Include Short-Range Focus in a Long-Range Plan

Getting the program off on the right foot includes not falling over your own feet because you were looking far off into the distance. Many non-profit strategic plans are usually three years in scope, with particular planning focus on the first year of the three years. Follow this format for the program planning as well. Don't worry about exhaustive detail even in the first year of the plan. Plans are guidelines, not rules. Plans can be changed -- but understand why you changed them.

Learn by "Testing the Waters"?

Consider planning a six-month or one-year pilot effort. The pilot will be a sort of mini-program that will reflect many of the aspects of a full-blown program. However, planning and operations regarding the pilot will include numerous reviews and assessments from which to learn from experiences around the pilot program. This learning will go into planning for the full-blown program. Note that funders are often highly cooperative in funding pilots as an approach to research or verify the non-profit's proposed plans.

Plan Program Reviews

Program reviews are regular examinations of the program's activities to assess how the program is doing. A program review team should probably include the chief executive, the head of the new program and one or two other program directors, particularly those from programs that closely coordinate with the new program. A board planner should be involved, if possible. Examine if the program seems to be following the original plan. If it's not, the deviation is not as important as understanding why and assessing if the deviation was necessary. Take a look at the key indicators as noted in the plan. What is the progress toward the key indicators? What major problems exist and what is needed to address them? How are the actual costs comparing to the planned costs? Are any actions needed to avoid financial problems? What would you do differently about the program if you could do anything? What limitations are holding you back from what you would ideally do if you could? What are you learning from the program implementation so far?

■Program Direction: Goals and Objectives Program Goals

Program goal(s) should come from and be closely associated with the organization's outcomes. Think about what, e.g., three to five major accomplishments must be reached to attain each outcome. Goals are an overall status to be reached through continued efforts in the program. Goals should be described such that the organization can assess whether it's reached the goal or not. The goal should establish clear direction for the organization and portray that direction to others. The program's goal may be to fix a problem or meet a need among your constituents -- not to fix a problem in your organization.

For example, if you are just starting out to develop a new program, typical overall goals might include: develop staff, pilot services to one group of clients, evaluate the program process and finalize program process based on evaluation results.

Program Objectives

Think about each goal and what sub-goals, or objectives, you need to accomplish to reach that goal. (Depending on your nature, it may work to instead think of how the program process will carry out and then identify specific milestones, or objectives, along this process.) Objectives should be worded such that one can rather easily discern if it's been reached or not. They should specify who is going to do what to whom and when and how much.

For example, referring to the above goals, associated objectives might be: recruit new staff, train staff, obtain facilities and equipment, install the equipment, develop advertising materials, distribute the materials, recruit 50 clients for the pilot, develop procedures for delivery of services to clients in the pilot, deliver services to clients over a fixed period of time, conduct evaluation of the process and outcomes, generate recommendations from the evaluation, update policies and procedures in the program's process, and update the overall program plan.

■Program Process (Process, Resources and Budget) Program Process

By now, establishing the program's process should be quite straightforward and depends mostly on the nature of the service provided by the non-profits. Program planners' thoughts about the processes needed to reach each of the program objectives (above) often culminate in the overall program process as well. After documenting the planned general process for the program, take time to reflect on whether that process will really accomplish the outcomes you set out to accomplish for your clients.

Program Resources and Budget

Examine the program's process to the extent that you can associate what resources are needed to carry out that process. Consider: personnel costs (salaries and wages, fringe benefits, consultants), training, space, equipment purchase or rental, travel, copier, telephone, general office supplies, etc. Develop a program budget by estimating the cost for each resource identified above. Note that this budgeting activity is almost always required in a proposal if the non-profit wants to pursue funding for the new program.

■Program Evaluation Programs should be evaluated on a yearly basis to discern if the programs are reaching their goals, achieving their outcomes and if they are doing so in an efficient manner. Small non-profits seldom have the resources to conduct evaluations of a program's goals, outcomes and process. However, they can think about where they have the most concerns about a program and then gear an evaluation to look at that aspect of the program.

Program evaluation holds numerous advantages. It can verify or increase the impact (or outcomes) on constituents. It can fine tune delivery of program services, which, in turn, saves costs and time. Evaluations often provide wonderful client testimonials that can be used for public relations and credibility when applying for funding. In fact, evaluations are often used by program planners to ensure that the program is indeed carrying out the original process planned for the program in the first place. Often, non-profit leaders develop a program plan which ends up changing dramatically over time as program staff are overcome by events. Program processes can naturally deviate from the original plan because program plans were flawed in the first place, the program's environment changed a great deal or program staff simply found a much better way to deliver services to clients.



LINCS

Aspire

◆ Return to the Top

Fast Facts on Literacy (*Refresh to see another fact*)

There is a close association between the amount of television watched and academic proficiency. States with a lower proportion of students who watch a lot of television have, on average, higher math scores.

*(Barton, P. E., & Coley, R. J. (1992). America's smallest school: The family. Princeton, NJ: Education Testing Service. (ERIC Document
Reproduction Service No. ED349320))*



This page <http://literacy.kent.edu/Oasis/grants/overviewprogplan.html>
Last Updated: 02/22/2018 07:16:02 and is maintained by the OLRC WWW [Development Team](#).