



A Library Board's
Practical Guide
To Strategic Planning

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PREFACE

No library can continue to meet changing community needs let alone experience continuous improvement without committing to strategic planning on a regular basis. From setting a vision for the library to articulating its mission to establishing a set of goals for achieving that mission, the board can and should be involved. The board, after all, represents the community the library serves so who better to play a significant role in imagining the future for the library?

Though some people would just as soon avoid the planning process – it does take time and effort – it really can be very exciting. During the planning process, everyone involved has a chance to learn even more about the library, the community in which it operates, and the environment for libraries at the local, state, and national levels. In addition, the planning process allows the participants to imagine library services in a perfect world (visioning), articulate the value and role of the library to the community (mission), and design a blueprint for bringing the library closer to that perfect vision in alignment with the mission (goals). Really, what could be more exciting than that for people who love and support the library?

GETTING STARTED: THE PLAN TO PLAN

Before the planning process even begins, there will be questions about the process, the timeline for planning, any costs associated with it, and knowing the extent of Trustee involvement. Once the board has decided to embark on the planning process, it should ask the director to submit a report that will answer these basic questions and ensure that the process gets off to a good start. Following are points that should be covered in a preliminary report from the library's director.

What will be achieved in the planning process?

This might sound a little like putting the cart before the horse – after all, isn't the plan supposed to dictate what will be achieved? Actually, it's a very good idea to understand exactly why you are engaging in this process in the first place. As a board, you may have decided to undergo planning simply because it hasn't been done in a while and you understand that it's part of your responsibility to initiate this process from time to time.

By stepping back from the notion that planning is inherently good, you might see that your library is lively, well used, has a wonderful collection and a well-attended variety of programs. Why mess with success, right?

However well your staff is doing in delivering services, it is always helpful to scrutinize what is working as well as what *isn't* happening to reach out to more of your community that isn't using the library. Also, though the programs may be well attended, they may be only scratching the surface of what's possible and it may be that though well attended, those coming are the same 25 people. Are there ways to create more diversity? Are their underserved or un-served populations out there?

It is a good idea to have the director articulate in what ways the library might expand upon its mission given additional resources or by redistributing the resources you have. By understanding what you hope to achieve, you will have a better idea of how to frame the process and who should be included in the plan's design.

Importantly, the timeline for the process itself should be considered and recommendations should be made. Will it take a year to design the plan? Will this then be a five year plan? A three year? Without a timeline for the process, it is likely to languish. Without a determination for the length of time the plan will be in place, it will be hard to measure achievement and evaluate success.

What resources will be needed to implement a thorough planning process?

There will be costs in terms of staff time – that's a given – but it should be estimated along with an idea of what areas of existing services will be impacted by this use of staff time. Understand that the staff – very likely already working at capacity – will need to be relieved of other duties during this process to make planning time available. The director will, for example, determine if there will be a hiatus of adult programming, or if there will be an acceptable lag time for the ordering and processing of materials that won't get high demand and are not of immediate importance. The director will make a decision about whether staff meetings become planning meetings only during the process.

In addition to staff time, there may be costs of promotion to engage the community in the process. There will be refreshments necessary for meetings and focus groups (the Friends can help with this). A larger library system with many branches may decide to hire a planning consultant for the process. In this case, an estimate should be provided for this cost along with suggestions for funding it. If the plan will be published, there will be costs

attendant to this as well – though serious consideration should be given to electronic only publishing of the plan.

How much time will be needed by Trustees in the process? Will the entire board be involved beyond board meetings? If not, how many board members should be involved and in what ways? The Trustees need to understand that they should be engaged in the process – not in implementing it or administrating it, but in providing their own perspective about the vision and goals for the library.

Overview of existing services and recent accomplishments

Though, of course, the board should be well versed on both existing services and recent accomplishments, this overview is a good way to bring the information together and if these services and accomplishments are a result of a former planning process, that is good information to have. This “inventory” may well spark new ideas as the process progresses, and it will give those who aren’t as familiar with all the library’s services a better understanding of what’s already in place.

Roles and responsibilities during the process

Even though the board often initiates the process, what is their role beyond that? Who will comprise the planning team and what will be their responsibilities? How often will they be expected to meet and how much authority will this team have to hire a planning consultant? How will they assess the achievement of the goals?

What is the staff’s role? Design of strategies and implementation of the plan will be in the staff’s hands. They will write and conduct the surveys, design and bring together various focus groups, schedule meetings for various task forces to convene and develop strategies for various service initiatives. They will be attaching timelines for achieving the goals and methods for assuring the outcomes you want. Finally, they will ultimately put the plan together for board approval.

Engaging the community

Beyond the Trustees, who represent the community at large, there are other groups that should be recruited to participate. These various groups include, for example, the leadership of the Friends group, leaders or staff from other city departments with whom you might partner or who can provide their perspectives during the environmental scan, local government leaders, other civic organization staff members, those who *don’t* currently use the library (if you wish to serve them, you need to find out what they want!), and new populations in town such as new ethnic populations, a growing family community, an aging population.

You won’t get a plan that addresses what’s missing in your services if you don’t reach beyond your current “usual suspects.” This plan to plan should identify the types of groups that will be included to ensure a very diverse set of perceptions and ideas.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Our world is changing rapidly – there’s no doubt about that. You can barely buy a new cell phone that seemingly does everything before the next new edition with even more applications becomes available. You take pride in the fact that your library has something for everyone in the community, and then a new industry opens in your community bringing new Americans, many of whom are just learning English. You install a wonderful (and expensive) state-of-the-art video learning center and a year later, distance learning becomes computer based with webcams. How on earth can a library reasonably keep up with the changing environment within which it operates?

The truth is, you won’t be able to predict the future 100% of the time, but you can make reasonable guesses about what trends will have an impact. The plan, after all, won’t be dictating what software vendor to choose when your automated catalog needs an update, but it will help illuminate what kinds of applications the system might require based on what changes you anticipate (both in use and in technology) for the future.

Following are descriptions of what an environmental scan should include followed by ways to gather the information you want and ways to make sense of it.

Your Community

Everyone has a perception about his or her community – it’s rural, it’s urban, it’s poor, it’s a wealthy bedroom community to a major metropolitan area. The community is very well educated or heavily composed of blue-collar workers. The community is aging and young families are moving out, or they are moving in. The culture supports and values lifelong learning of all types or they don’t and all cultural institutions struggle to engage the community.

The best way to assess your community and its support (or probable support) for your library is to gather both quantitative data and qualitative data. In the environmental scan for assessing the community, you’ll want to look at:

Demographics. What is the population of your community? What is the breakdown of the population? Has this been stable for a number of years? Are there changes in population density and distribution, age, gender, socio-economic status, ethnic status? All this information is readily available through census information and through your town or city’s own planning data. It will be important for you to see how the demographics of your community are changing (if they are) because this information will be important as you determine the types of materials and services you’ll want to provide in the coming years.

The tax issue. The scan should include an assessment of how your community views the financial support of various institutions – particularly your library. Taxes are a dirty word for many, but the truth is, libraries (and roads, bridges, schools, sewers, parks, etc.) can’t live without them. A review of the success or failure of recent tax based initiatives along with surveys and focus groups will help you figure out whether or not your plan needs a heavy public awareness component, or, on the other hand, a stronger programming component to engage those who value community service.

Competition. The community scan should look at the various providers of the same (ostensibly) types of services your library provides – is there a comprehensive Head Start program? Do you have a lot of bookstores and do they offer programs – are they free? Is there a strong writer’s community in town, do they provide author programs open to the

public? How about a Reading is Fundamental (RIF) program available to children in your community – who is providing the service?

In truth, you'll probably find that those services that *seem* to offer similar programs and services do have fundamental differences such as that they aren't free, they aren't available to everyone in the community, and/or they have singular agendas and audiences.

There is probably little actual competition from others in your community, but taking an inventory will allow you to either, 1) articulate the differences in a public awareness plan, and/or 2) highlight possible partnership opportunities with others who have similar missions.

In addition to making a list of possible "competitors" in your community, you should use your focus groups to find out if people see them as viable alternatives to library service. By the way, focus groups are *not* the time to make the case for the library – good focus group results will reveal to you both strengths and weakness in your library's services and perceptions about the strengths and weakness of your service. It's as important to know what people think about the library even (especially!) if it isn't true. More on focus groups later.

Your Library

Though you look at library use statistics quite often, for the environmental scan you'll want to look at how the use of various services are changing. For example, is the book circulation down but computer use up? How are patrons using your public access terminals – for job search, entertainment, research (including how much they use subscription databases and which ones)? Are the types of books being checked out changing? Is the circulation of "how to" books on the decline? Just what information should you be looking at to assess your library?

In addition to use statistics, you should look at a summary of public comments that the library has received over the past several years – in the media, at public library meetings, and through the library's suggestion box or via online comments. While you'll have some good strong quantitative data in use and attendance statistics, a qualitative assessment that can come from those who use the library will be valuable.

Use statistics. This is a concrete way to see just exactly how much your library is being used and in what ways. You will want to look at the numbers for:

- Circulation – is it up or down over the past years? What types of materials are circulating well – children's, DVDs, CDs, biographies, self-help, for example?
- Library card registration – how many are registered and what is the age break down for registration. Is registration increasing each year? Staying about the same? Declining?
- Gate count – how many people come into your library each year? What days and times tend to be the busiest?
- Program attendance - how many attend adult programs? How many attend children's? Are these numbers changing over time and in what way?
- Reference - how many reference questions are answered each year and when is reference service busiest? What types of questions are being asked? Is the number of questions on the decline? On the rise?
- Computer Use - how many patrons log on to public access computers each year and for how many hours of total use? What are they accessing? Job search databases, in-house databases, reader's advisory databases, homework helper databases?
- Outreach services – in what ways is the library taking services to those outside of the library's walls and how many are these services reaching?

- Meeting room use - how many groups are using your meeting room each year? How many are turned away because of unavailability?

The public's perception. While use statistics give you answers as to what services the patrons are using and how much they are using them, it is also very important to find out why they use certain services, what they value most about services, and importantly, why they are *not* using the library's services.

The best way to try to get a handle on how the public sees your library and its services is to communicate with them. There are a variety of ways to do this including:

- **Focus groups.** Focus groups are an excellent way to become a “fly on the wall” and to hear what people really think about the library. The notion of being a fly on the wall means that you are, basically, invisible. Therefore, it is important that focus groups are led by people not associated with the library. You really want honest answers and discussions within the group. Folks may be reluctant to talk about unfriendly service or unfavorable hours with a library representative in the room.

If your library has the resources, it might be a good idea to hire someone who has experience in leading focus groups. This person will work with the planning team to determine what kinds of information the team hopes to garner from the groups. For example, how aware are users and non-users of the various services you offer? What services are highly valued? Of those who don't use the library, why don't they? In what other ways do people get the information and reading materials they need?

An experienced consultant will be able to advise your team on the number and make up of focus groups that will work best for you. You may be satisfied with one group of both users and nonusers that represents a variety of ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities. On the other hand, you might want to separate groups by user versus nonuser or teens versus adults.

In order to capture the nature of the conversations and to ensure that all opinions go into the record, the group leader will capture the comments and themes to put together an executive summary of what was said to become part of the environmental scan. The notes themselves should be available throughout the process but in an effort to avoid information overload, the executive summary will be a welcome and satisfactory report.

- **Surveys.** Conducting surveys of your library users and nonusers is a good way to get the opinions of a lot of people in your community. The real effort in conducting a survey should be the design of the survey itself. You want to carefully consider your questions so that they are clear and elicit the information you really want.

Good surveys should be as short as possible so people will take the time to complete them. A survey can include simple yes or no questions, questions that ask people to rate the quality of library services, questions that ask respondents to prioritize services, and questions that require a check-off response such as “how

do you learn about library programs?” with sample choices of: the media, in the library, word of mouth, on the radio, flyers posted downtown, at school, etc.

It’s also a good idea to include a space in the survey for comments. You may not have asked a question about which the respondent wishes to comment. Sometimes you can learn the most from a response about something you didn’t ask!

The trick with surveys is getting those who don’t use the library to fill them out. In this case, there will probably be a second survey designed especially for nonusers. The questions on this survey will ask such questions as “what are the reasons you don’t use the library?” Asking respondents to prioritize such answers as: the library hours don’t work for me, I don’t have time, I buy my books, I’ve had unfriendly service there in the past, the library doesn’t have anything I want.

In a nonuser survey you can take the opportunity to educate as well. For example, a question such as “Which of the following did you know the library offers (check all that apply).” Then you can list ten services you think nonusers might be unaware of. This is both a chance to educate them about what you do have and a chance for you to see which services need more marketing.

In conducting nonuser surveys, the approach for getting responses will need to be a bit more aggressive – if a person doesn’t use the library, why would he or she bother to fill out a library survey? Consider asking members of the planning team or Friends group to take nonuser surveys to other organizations that they belong to asking those who seldom or never use the library to fill them out. Consider having a drawing and prize among those who fill out the survey.

Paper surveys are still a good way to get a lot of responses, but they will have to be tabulated and this can take time. Consider asking your Friends group to set up a task force for the distribution and tabulation of surveys and be sure to make the surveys available at the library.

Another way to survey community members is electronically. This makes it easy to tabulate responses, but the number of responses you get will likely be less unless you are able to get the electronic survey placed on a number of Web sites in addition to the library’s site. Look into using such tools as SurveyMonkey.com and other similar online polling services.

- **Tabulating online and suggestion box comments** (and/or other avenues you provide on a regular basis for public input).

State and National Trends and Issues. It’s very easy to look no further than your own community when doing the environmental scan, but the truth is that what is happening on the state and national levels can, indeed, impact your library and its services. A good director will keep the board informed of these issues on an ongoing basis, but it’s also important to look a little more closely during the planning process. For example, the following are issues beyond your community that have and will impact your library:

- **State.** It’s important to know what’s going on with your state’s budget and how this will affect libraries. Even in good times, it’s possible that a governor or

legislator won't see the value in libraries and think that cutting funding to the state library – or direct funding to localities – would enable them to focus more money on areas that they believe are more important. And we all know what happens during tough economic times.

Typically, the state library provides funding for interlibrary loan and shared information databases – databases that are important to your library's patrons, but would be cost prohibitive if your library had to purchase them on its own. In addition, the state library provides continuing education opportunities – especially to support staff and this type of education and training is rarely available elsewhere.

- **National.** While your local library does not receive much, if any, direct operational funding from the federal government, it does receive some indirect support via the state library (see above), and may receive grants from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and/or through the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA). In addition, your library may receive e-rate funding that helps offset the costs of telecommunications for qualifying libraries. It's important to know whether these funds are threatened and how they could impact your planning.

Beyond funding, Congress does, from time to time, pass laws that have an impact on your library. For example, the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) essentially required either a) filtering of computer terminals used by children, or b) forfeiture of government e-rate funds. Both have philosophical as well as financial consequences for your library.

Though the board should be informed about national issues that affect the library throughout the year, during this planning process it is especially important to see what, if anything is coming down the pike that could change your plans once in place.

CREATING THE FUTURE – THE STRATEGIC PLAN

Because the board is charged with oversight and guidance of the overall direction the library takes in determining and delivering services, they should be involved in brainstorming the library's vision and mission statement. In addition, along with library administrative staff, they should be involved in coming up with three to four strategic areas for the plan to address (goals). Once this has been decided, the staff will work to design and implement strategies to meet the goals and that are in keeping with the overall vision and mission of the library.

The environmental scan should be a very illuminating process but once it is complete, it's time to start thinking of what your library would look like in a perfect world, and then design a plan that will bring you closer to this dream. This is the really fun part!

The Vision

During the visioning session, you describe the library and its services in the future. What would you like your library to look like in five years? Forget about budgetary constraints, space limitations, and unfriendly political climates. For a moment, think about your library as it would be if it were perfect. As you work through this process, you will create a vision that is ultimately realistic and achievable, but why not start from the top?

Yours should be a shared vision. Using the feedback from the focus groups and surveys, begin to assess how your community sees the library and what your community would like for library services. This is a good time for the entire board to be involved along with the staff. Working on a vision statement together will be a wonderful kick-off to the work of the plan itself. While not everyone involved will agree on the vision, as many people as possible should have a chance to share theirs.

Once the ideas and thoughts have been coalesced and condensed, the planning team or the board along with the library's director can work on a vision statement that captures the collective dream. The following are a few vision statements that do this.

- The Park Ridge Public Library will be a gathering place where all citizens are welcome to pursue their interests, expand their ideas, learn new skills, interact with other members of the community, and enhance their quality of life. (Park Ridge, Ill.)
- A world of information and ideas within reach of every Calgarian. (Calgary, Canada).
- Our community will discover library resources and programs that anticipate and satisfy their needs for everyday information, enjoyment, and enlightenment.

Our community will look to the library for accurate, thorough answers to their questions, guided by friendly, knowledgeable staff.

Our community will have library resources to support schoolwork and independent learning at every age, helping to build skills and interests needed for life-long success.

Champaign's children will grow up in an environment that is rich in stories and literature, where reading is valued and encouraged.

Our community will be drawn to welcoming, safe library environments that reflect the community's changing needs. (Champaign, Ill.)

As you can see from the examples above, the vision statement reflects the best of all possible worlds for their library in their community. These statements can range from the specific (Park Ridge, Ill.), to the lofty (Calgary, Canada), to the comprehensive (Champaign, Ill.).

The Mission

The mission statement is important because it articulates in just a few sentences the library's role in the community. A good mission statement can and should be used in marketing materials, in the newsletter's front page banner, and on the library's website to inform everyone about the role and the values of the library. The mission statement should inform the goals of the planning process and justify all of the library's services.

In truth, the mission of the public library has not changed radically over the years. You may find that yours is still an effective and complete statement of purpose. Because the mission statement can and should be widely shared, you might want to at least "tweak" it so that it is succinct and memorable.

- The Mission of the Sharon Public Library is to serve the informational, educational, cultural, and recreational needs of all members of the Sharon community by providing access to a professional staff; a state of the art facility, and quality materials, programs, and services. (Sharon, Mass.)
- Libraries were established to provide information to all who inquire. Librarians are dedicated to gathering, organizing, and disseminating the world's knowledge. No matter the format, be it print, media, microform, or electronic, the Glen Cove Public Library supports freedom of access to the broadest spectrum of ideas. For many users, the library is the last line of defense in the search for truth. (Glen Cove, N.Y.)
- The El Paso Public Library serves our diverse community through information access, cultural enrichment, and lifelong learning. (El Paso, Texas)

With the three examples, above, it's easy to see that mission statements can range from those that include qualities such as "state of the art" and "professional staff" (Sharon, Mass.), to the beautifully lofty (Glen Cove, N.Y.), to the short and succinct (El Paso, Texas). What they all have in common, however, is that they emphasize their roles – *education, culture, information, recreation* – and they emphasize that their services are available to *everyone* in the community.

The Goals

Setting goals will begin to create the blue print for achieving the library's vision and mission. Going back to the materials collected in the environmental scan, the planning team should begin to think about both its existing services and those that might be new and innovative. In addition, information from the surveys and focus groups might reveal that some services should be changed or improved to meet community needs.

Since goals reflect the big picture for accomplishment, they will state in broad terms what the library will work toward during the next three to five years. Because you want the plan to be both realistic and achievable, it makes sense to limit your plan to three to five goal areas. During the environmental scan, you may find, for example, that the following key issues have emerged:

- Many new Spanish speaking families are moving into the community.
- Many people aren't able to get to your library when it's open.
- There is a perception that the public service staff members are not friendly and helpful.
- More people are accessing the library remotely from their home or offices.

This kind of information could well form the basis for your goals. The following are examples of goal areas that are designed to respond to the issues (above) discovered in the environmental scan.

- The library will provide a comprehensive collection of materials in various formats, along with programs and outreach services to accommodate all the diverse needs of our changing community.
 - This goal area is designed to ensure that all the library's resources are available to everyone regardless of ethnicity, native language, or preferred format. It doesn't specifically address Spanish language speaking citizens but is broader to include all those who in former years might have been described as "nontraditional" library users.
- The library will develop a service schedule to maximize access by everyone, both on site and remotely.
 - While not specifically dictating that the library increase or change its open hours of operation, it does focus on the need to do the best so that everyone can get to the facility and it also takes into account that, increasingly, people are using their library's services remotely.
- The library will provide courteous, professional, and excellent service to every single library patron every time they use the library.
 - Whether by workshops, firings, and/or personal coaching, the end result will be that every single person who walks into the library will be greeted by a welcoming staff. Certainly a goal for every library!
- The library will provide a variety of services that will enhance the "library experience" of remote users.
 - This goal comes from the findings in the environmental scan that showed that more and more people wish to download books, do research, and ask reference questions from their home or office.

Once the plan, including the goals, has been completed, the board need only approve it and ensure that regular progress is being made in its attainment. No strategies for accomplishing these goals are listed because a) this is an area to be left strictly to staff, and b) strategies should be as flexible as possible. Never before has the library's environment been so dynamic. The goals remain consistent, but methods for achieving them will no doubt change over time.

Measuring Success

Setting goals without providing some criteria for evaluation would be like sending all your good work and intentions into a black hole. How will you know if what you've designed is being implemented and is working? It's important that the board ask the director to give an update report on the plan's progress regularly and that the update includes impacts.

To "measure" the results of your efforts, you can use many of the same tools you did during the environmental scan. Watching such trends as circulation, library visits, and computer use will show if you've made some good strides in increasing use. As with the environmental scan, however, some of the "qualitative" improvements will best be determined through surveys, comment boxes, and even focus groups re-convened after a year or two of the plan implementation.

At the end of the planning cycle (three to five years), you will have the satisfaction of seeing how your hard work has paid off to ensure that the library is, indeed, meeting the needs of the community. Now it is time to take a new look at your environment, look at the vision and mission statements you developed, and set some new goals for continuous improvement of your library's services.

CONCLUSION

Trustees have a valuable role to play in ensuring that the library engages in strategic planning every several years. In addition, the Trustees can help assess the environmental scan as background for setting goals for the future. While it is important to let the staff determine strategies for achieving the goals and for implementing the strategies, the Trustees should ensure that the plan is carried out and that the outcomes of the plan do, indeed, address the goals that have been set.

Strategic planning is both important and fun! Watching the library continue to grow and serve the community under your plan is so rewarding and will show you just how you can make a significant difference in your community.