

Strategic Plan Readiness Assessment Tool

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Introduction

1. Are you thinking about strategic planning for your organization?
2. Is your current strategic plan reaching its end-date?
3. Has the end-date passed on your strategic plan?
4. Does your organization not have a strategic plan?

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, this document will be a guide to when and how to start your strategic planning process. This document offers an overview of:

- Why we do strategic planning;
- What a strategic plan entails;
- The ‘strategy’ part of strategic planning;
- The general process that can be followed when doing strategic planning.

The document also provides a [Readiness Assessment Checklist](#) that will help you to determine if your AIDS Serving Organization (ASO) is ready to begin a strategic planning process, or if there are things you need to do before you start so you can ensure it is a success.

An Overview of Strategic Planning

Why Develop a Strategic Plan?

Many funders and donors will ask to see your strategic plan. Beyond that fact, strategic planning is a chance to reconnect with the vision of your ASO. It should be an **inspirational exercise that allows you to imagine the future you want for your service communities and your ASO**. It is a chance to examine how your ASO may be replicating the very systems of inequity it exists to disrupt. It can ensure that your ASO is focused on your mission and help you define the impact that you want to have on your community. This is especially important given that the ecosystem – the social, economic, demographic, political and funding landscape - in which ASOs operate frequently shift. Strategic plans help you adapt and be responsive to what your communities need. They help ASOs be **proactive**, instead of having to **react** to trends and events that effect your work.

Strategic plans anchor your organization when it encounters rough waters and propels your impact forward when the way is clear.

Laridae. (2025). "Strategic Planning for Non-Profits: A Guide for Future Success".

In order to be meaningful, it's essential that **'strategy'** is a central part of your strategic plan! A strategic plan is more than a workplan that lists goals and activities to be implemented over the next few years. The invitation is to tackle the provocative and challenging questions that should arise and be ready to look strategically at the big picture.

What is Strategic Planning?

At its core, strategic planning is a tool that helps ASOs:

- Ensure you are meeting evolving community needs in meaningful ways;
- Focus your resources and energy;
- Ensure that members of your ASO are working in the same direction to achieve its vision and mission;
- Remain accountable by keeping the people you serve and those who support your work informed as to where you are going and why.

Strategic planning is a **systematic process through which your ASO agrees on and builds commitment to priorities** that are essential to your mission and to meeting community needs. It **involves intentionally setting directions, developing goals that outline how you will achieve those strategic directions** and planning for how you will acquire and allocate resources to ensure success.¹

Strategic planning needs to be an ongoing exercise. You need to regularly revisit priorities, track their progress and adjust their plans as community needs, resources and the external environment changes.

Your strategic planning process should **reflect the connection between your values and the impact you are trying to achieve.** ASOs need to be able to “ask the difficult questions about your identity and your commitment to equity. They should probe how their strategy reflects how they want to show up in the world.”² This means being thoughtful about the processes you use, and considering whose voices are in the room and who may be excluded. It also means filtering your decisions through the lens of your core values, and ensuring alignment with your vision, your “why”.

What Strategic Planning Is Not

- A predictor of the future.
- A substitute for the exercise of judgment by an organization’s leadership.
- An automatic cure for a challenging financial situation.
- An operational or work plan that focuses on the day-to-day implementation of strategic decisions.

What Does It Mean to Think ‘Strategically’?

Thinking strategically means looking beyond the everyday and **centering the organization’s mission to make intentional choices about where to focus your limited resources** for the greatest long-term impact. It requires looking ahead capacity and changing community needs

¹ Allison, Michael and Jude Kaye. *Strategic Planning for the Non-Profit Organization*, Third Edition. Wiley and Sons. 2015.

² Ibe, Onuka. (2018, Dec 12). *Strategic Planning for Small Nonprofits. Blog: Strategic Planning.* La Piana Consulting. <https://www.lapiana.org/strategic-planning-for-small-nonprofits/>

and organizational capacity, and being willing to prioritize so you can remain effective and sustainable over time.

Strategic planning **helps you take a critical look at your ASO and the ecosystem in which your ASO operates**. A frequently used method to look at your environment is through a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats). In fact, there are many other ways to look at your environment. Whatever method you choose, it only helps you understand your internal and external operating context, not what you need to do. For that, you need to ask questions that stretch your thinking. With regular planning questions we ask, “*what will we do?*”, whereas with strategic questions we ask, “*why does this matter for us and what do we need to prioritize?*” Below are examples that illustrate the difference in the questions you need to ask when you are trying to think strategically:

Examples of strategic questions (compared to operational ones)

Focus Area	Operational Planning Questions	Strategic Questions
Mission & Direction	What programs will we run next year?	Which programs most advance our mission, and which should we scale back or end?
Community Needs	How many clients can we serve this year?	Which unmet community needs are most critical for us to address now, and why are we best positioned to do so?
Financial Planning	How much funding do we need next year?	How does our funding model support, or limit our long-term mission and capacity?
Partnerships	Who can we partner with on this project?	Which partnerships are essential to achieving our long-term goals, and which add complexity without sufficient value?
Time Frame	What do we need to do this year?	What must we do now to be successful 3 – 5 years from now?

Strategic planning also requires being uncomfortable at times, asking hard, provocative questions. Some examples of such questions include:

- At what point does HIV exceptionalism hinder, rather than support, public health goals like stigma reduction and universal testing access?
- What would it mean to actually prioritize people who are hardest to reach, even if it hurts our metrics?
- How much power do people with lived experience of HIV actually hold in our ASO?
- Has our organization lost trust with Black, Indigenous, racialized people and/or people who use drugs—and if yes, why?
- Are we willing to sunset programs that perform well but no longer advance equity or impact?
- Are we burning out staff in the name of mission while calling it “commitment”?
- What role should we play in an ecosystem that includes Ontario Health Teams, community health centres, grassroots outreach groups, public education services?
- What do we *really* do better, differently or more credibly than others?
- Are there areas where we should let others lead?

What Is the Process for Strategic Planning?

1. *Getting Ready* – assessing your readiness, determining the right time to engage in a strategic planning process, creating a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) that is diverse, designing the process and identifying key questions or issues to be explored.
2. *Assessing the Environment* – analyzing your internal and external operating environment. Engaging in meaningful dialogue with service users, the broader community, staff, Board funders and partners. Ensuring that your community consultation and engagement activities centre diverse and marginalized voices, including Black, racialized and Indigenous communities, and also centres People Living with HIV/AIDS (PHAs).
3. *Agreeing on Priorities* – identifying your ASO’s strategic directions and defining the broad goals that will support achievement of those strategic directions.
4. *Writing the Strategic Plan* – writing the strategic plan and receiving Board approval for the strategic plan.
5. *Planning Action* – setting measurable goals, mapping out who will be responsible for what by when, and determining what resources are needed for implementation.
6. *Monitoring the Plan* – putting monitoring mechanisms and processes in place for the Board to be able to monitor the implementation of the strategic plan and planning to be accountable back to service communities and other collaborators about your progress.

Strategic Planning Readiness Assessment Checklist

Understanding the purpose of a strategic plan and how it can help your ASO achieve its mission and have greater impact is an important starting point. It's also important to determine if your ASO is ready to embark on the development of a strategic plan. There are a number of conditions that are helpful to have in place to increase the likelihood of a successful strategic planning process. The **table below outlines the conditions that, if present, will set the stage for a positive planning process.** As you go through the table, **after reading each statement, ask yourself 'Is this present in our ASO?'**

	The following conditions for successful planning are in place:	Yes	No	Unsure	Reasons for Your Answer <i>(Use bullet points)</i>
Resources (time, human, financial)					
1.	Our Board is sufficiently engaged in their governance work to meaningfully participate in strategic planning.				
2.	There is commitment and support from the Board, especially the Board Chair, for the entire process.				
3.	There is commitment and support from senior staff, especially the Executive Director, for the entire process.				
4.	We have the right mix of individuals on the Strategic Planning Committee - this includes the right complement of Board members, staff and community members and also includes diversity of voices in terms of lived and living experience of HIV/AIDS, identity, social location and potential experiences of marginalization (e.g., for people who use drugs).				
5.	Our Board is willing and able to find adequate organizational resources to complete the planning process (e.g., staff time, Board time, dollars for community consultation and engagement, consulting support, etc.), including adequately resourcing service user and community engagement from an equity and accessibility lens (e.g., honorariums, child care, travel, refreshments)				

	The following conditions for successful planning are in place:	Yes	No	Unsure	Reasons for Your Answer <i>(Use bullet points)</i>
Understanding of Purpose					
6.	We have a Board and staff that understand the purpose of strategic planning, recognize what it is, acknowledge what it can't accomplish, and have support to articulate the key questions to explore.				
Openness					
7.	There is clear and open communication between the Executive Director and the Board.				
8.	Our Board usually works towards consensus, and conflict among Board members and with the ED is dealt with in an open and collaborative manner.				
9.	We are willing to question the status quo, look at who currently benefits most from our programs, who benefits least, and why. We are willing to look at what structural barriers prevent equitable access to our ASO, including racism, anti-Black racism, homo/bi/transphobia and other forms of oppression.				
10	We are willing to ask the hard questions, face difficult choices and make decisions that are best for our ASO and the people we serve, and are willing to support organizational change as a result of the planning efforts, including looking at how our ASO perpetuates racism and other forms of oppression.				
11.	Board and management are committed to carefully considering recommendations made during the planning process rather than disregarding decisions in favour of their intuitive decisions.				

	The following conditions for successful planning are in place:	Yes	No	Unsure	Reasons for Your Answer (Use bullet points)
Understanding of Process					
12.	Our Board and management understand that this process is about thinking <i>strategically</i> and <i>critically</i> about options to move the ASO forward.				
13.	Our Board and management are willing and able to articulate constraints and non-negotiables upfront.				
14.	We will seek community input using Anti-racism, Anti-Black racism, Anti-oppression and GIPA-MEPA lenses and encourage co-ownership of and broad participation in the process. We will not create harm for participants who may experience marginalization due to power differences in the room.				
15.	We commit to applying an anti-racist and anti-oppression lens in our process by examining who benefits, who is burdened, how power is shared and who we are accountable to.				
16.	We commit to tie the strategic planning process to our annual planning and budgeting process—to create a detailed annual operating plan, and monitor/revise the plan as needed.				
Stability					
17.	We have the financial capacity to sustain itself for the immediate future without a financial crisis appearing to detract from strategic planning.				
18.	There is no serious conflict between key players within our ASO (note that this is different from disagreement and perhaps heated discussions).				
19.	There are no high-impact decisions to be made in the next six months by an external source (e.g., announcement of reduction in funding for a frequently used program).				

	The following conditions for successful planning are in place:	Yes	No	Unsure	Reasons for Your Answer (Use bullet points)
20.	There is no merger or other major strategic partnership effort currently under way (i.e., separate strategic planning conversations are not taking place while strategic restructuring negotiations are taking place).				

21. Are there other issues/ concerns that are on your mind? Please note them here.

While it is ideal to have most of these conditions present in your ASO, answering 'no' or 'unsure' to some of these statements, doesn't necessarily mean you should put off developing a strategic planning. It does mean that you need to be aware of the conditions that aren't present and make sure they don't create barriers in your process.

Now reflecting on your responses above and the number of times your answer was 'yes', does this seem like the appropriate time for your organization to initiate a strategic planning process? If not, what action steps do you need to take? Be specific.

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