How to Develop and Implement a Strategic Plan

The most successful organizations—whether national associations, private industries, or association sections—have strong, well-established strategic planning programs. A strategic plan includes an organization’s mission, goals, and priorities, and the actions needed to accomplish the mission. The plan helps an organization allocate human and financial resources efficiently.

If your section does not have a formalized planning process, how does it plan for the future? Have your members expressed effective ideas that were not implemented due to the lack of a planning process? How do you involve as many members as possible in the planning process? The strategic planning process can resolve these issues and more. Section strategic planning is also an essential ingredient for the success of the Association as a whole.

This guide offers guidance to section boards and strategic planning committee chairs, as well as to members, on how to establish a strategic planning committee and how to plan and carry out the work of the committee during the time between planning meetings.

The strategic planning process can be separated into eight stages. The actions that should be taken in each stage follow.

**Stage One: Establish a Strategic Planning Committee**

If your section doesn’t already have a strategic planning committee, you will need to establish one. Don’t give this job to another standing committee, such as the financial or executive committee. Strategic planning requires a diverse and ingenious approach to problem solving. If a committee has a dual role, strategic planning may not receive the full attention and creativity it needs.

The membership of the strategic planning committee should include past section leaders in order to take advantage of their experience and expertise. More important, however, members should include future leaders of the section, such as newly elected trustees and members of other committees. As future leaders become more active they will implement the strategic plans they have helped shape.

In addition to the past committee chairs and future leaders, voting members of the committee should include a trustee who is involved with section bylaws, the section director, and the section secretary-treasurer, committee members who are not section officers or committee chairs also could offer important insights to this group. The strategic planning committee will ideally have 6 to 10 members.

The committee will function best by using the following four management approaches:

- **Make your meetings highly participatory.** Strategic planning meetings will be more successful if committee members are able to focus on creativity rather than follow a formal format, for example, parliamentary procedure. The chair or the appointed meeting facilitator should draw out ideas from all committee members. An outside facilitator may be useful if the committee is having difficulty reaching consensus or narrowing objectives.

- **Focus on the future.** Although past section planning and AWWA’s strategic plan may contain elements that remain valuable, every part of the plan should be examined as if it is brand new. The committee should focus on new ideas and concepts and not simply redo last year’s activities in a new way.
• **Change the planning stage order.** If the committee is having difficulty completing one of the eight stages, then move to a different stage. Come back to the problem stage later with a fresh perspective.

• **Publicize your plan.** Publish a copy of the strategic plan in your section newsletter. To be successful, your section members need to buy into the plan as quickly as possible, so be sure to solicit comments on the plan.

**Stage Two: Review Existing Plans**

Although the committee will be building a new plan from the bottom up, there are several reasons why all committee members should be familiar with existing plans. First, they offer useful examples of how plans might be written, ready-made formats, and perhaps even useful subject headings. Existing plans also represent the results of a lot of thought and effort by their creators. They may trigger new ideas about how your section might approach issues.

By reviewing existing plans, the committee members will approach their task with increased confidence, more ideas, and a sense of what has been successful in the past. Be aware, however, that existing plans can be dangerous if you let them dampen the creativity of your committee. Put them away when it comes time to move on to Stage Three.

**Stage Three: Define the Mission**

The committee needs to define the mission of the section in one or two tightly written sentences. This provides a clear statement of the overall purpose of your section activities. The statement should be written with thought and consideration for the future and, thus, should not change from year to year. However, your committee should reevaluate this statement every three to five years to ensure that it still reflects the mission of the section.

Although your section’s mission statement need not be the same as AWWA’s, you can use AWWA’s statement as an example:

AWWA unites the full spectrum of the water community to protect public health and to provide safe and sufficient water for all. Through collective leadership, AWWA advances technology, education, science, management, and government policies.

Your section can tailor its mission statement to meet regional needs as the following statement from the Florida Section reflects:

The AWWA Florida Section provides its members with a forum and an opportunity to address drinking water issues to assure the present and future generations of Florida with a sufficient supply of high-quality drinking water.

If you are having trouble defining the mission of your section, you may find the next section—Define the Issues—to be helpful.

**Stage Four: Define the Issues**

The most important step in strategic planning is to find out which issues are important to your members. Both current and future issues affecting your members should be identified. The committee can use the following methods to help define the issues.

**Note-card Method**

At any section committee meeting (not only the strategic planning committee meeting), distribute three blank note-cards to each member. Ask the committee members to answer the following three questions, writing the answer to each question on a separate note-card:

- What is the single most important issue facing the section?
- What will be the most important issue in five years?
- What is the best way for the section to be involved in these issues?

Place the cards with similar answers in piles, and then count how many are in each pile. List the similar answers in order of highest number of responses. Use this list for further discussion.

**Member Survey**

A member survey is an ideal way to determine what your membership considers the most important issues. Don’t try to survey your whole membership. A good cross section of your membership is sufficient. An easy way to obtain a random sample for mailing is to select about every 10th name on your membership list. Try to get a 30-35 percent response rate to the survey. Include committee chairs in your survey because they will eventually implement the plan.

Survey questions will help you determine issues, member satisfaction, public awareness, and professional trends. Design questions so that the response given will assist in preparing the strategic plan. Structure questions to eliminate “yes” or “no” responses. A scale from 1 to 5 is a good range for responses.
**Section Board Brainstorming Session**

Ask your section board to devote some of their meetings to defining the issues. A separate meeting works best, because current problems should not be allowed to interfere with the brainstorming session. The note-card method can be used to stimulate discussion.

**New-Member Information Forms**

When new members join, they are often asked to fill out an information form. Work with your membership committee to include a question on the form asking new members to list and prioritize important issues.

**Stage Five: Establish Objectives**

By this time, you will have a good understanding of the issues your section members feel are important. Based on these issues, the next stage in the planning process is to establish about 5 to 10 goals. Goals are general statements that indicate future outcomes of end points, but do not indicate why or how to get there. Your goals will help you achieve your section’s mission. Keep the mission statement in mind during the process to help your committee stay focused.

Consider if the current section structure—your board, committees, and budget—can accommodate these goals. Will new committees need to be formed or will existing committees be able to work on meeting the objectives? Try to work within the existing structure as much as possible, but don’t hesitate to recommend change. Changes that may occur in the section or in the drinking water community often require that such issues as new regulations come to the forefront for immediate attention.

**Stage Six: Develop Implementation Plans**

After goals have been defined, the strategic planning committee should develop the detailed objectives, strategies, and tasks that will help to accomplish the goals. At this point, planning becomes specific and action-oriented, detailing concrete steps to take. Implementation plans may include one-year tasks as well as long-term tasks. As you develop your plans, determine which resources are necessary to achieve each objective. Can section members provide the resources or will you need to look elsewhere for help? The following questions should be asked about each task:

- What support is needed from the section board to carry out this plan? If a new concept is being discussed, how will established members respond? Do all goals and proposed tasks conform to section bylaws?
- How will this plan be communicated to members? Should committee chairs have a final chance to make comments? Will any of the tasks create openings for new-member participation, including women and minorities?
- How much will this plan cost to implement? Are there price tags attached to each objective? Will any of these objectives generate revenue? Are there alternative ways to support this plan? For example, are there grants available? Are retirees available to help? Does the AWWA staff already do this? What support can AWWA staff provide?

It is often useful to identify each committee involved in accomplishing each task. The committee chairs or members of the strategic planning committee can help other committee members identify where they will be involved. List all tasks that concern each section committee. The committee should provide follow-up to the section. The following are examples of goals and their corresponding tasks:

**Goal:** Establish a greater understanding of the drinking water community and current issues by means of various educational programs.

**Task:**

- Involve university faculty and students to present research papers at technical conferences and meetings.
- Appoint a member of the section education committee to serve on the section technical committee each year.
- Strive to have the section conduct at least one AWWA seminar each year.
- Appoint a member of the education committee to serve as an ex-officio member of the small systems committee.

**Goal:** Serve as a liaison between the AWWA organization and the community.

**Task:**

- Continue to support the Science Fair Award Program.
- Develop community programs for National Drinking Water Week.
**Stage Seven: Implement the Plans and Evaluate Your Success**

The strategic plan should have final board approval before it is implemented. Committee assignments are based on this approval. The committee chairs should know the goal they are trying to achieve, the tasks, and budget considerations. Section committee chairs should be held accountable for implementing their part of the strategic plan. Request quarterly progress reports from committee chairs on assigned tasks. Report the findings to your membership at large. Keep the lines of communication open between section officers and committee chairs. Keep in mind that the strategic plan is a flexible guide, not a rigid doctrine.

The tasks should be evaluated as they are completed. For example, how successful was your conservation program? How many people attended public meetings or received a flyer? How many schools were visited?

**Stage Eight: Start Next Year’s Planning**

The strategic planning committee should keep in mind that rarely will all of the year’s plans for implementing tasks be accomplished. This should be considered during your planning sessions for next year. Section strategic plans may not need to be updated annually, although implementation plans should. What were member responses to the plan? As the section is implementing the tasks, the strategic planning committee members should stay alert for new issues. Planning is never complete. Remember that AWWA can offer assistance at any stage during your strategic planning process. Contact the Section Services Department, (303) 347-6202, for more information.

**Resources**

- Following on the next three pages are three forms to help implement the strategic planning process in your section:
  - Member Survey Form
  - Committee Chair’s Quarterly Progress Report
  - Future Plans for Strategic Planning Committee Agenda Topics