CALDWELL

The Strategic Agency

Planning for Growth, Sustainability, and Community Impact

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Google spent 2 years studying 180 of its own teams across 250 attributes to answer one question: what makes a team effective? What mattered most?

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- Clear goals and clearly defined roles
- Whether people felt safe speaking up

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The top 5:

1. Psychological safety
2. Dependability
3. Structure and clarity
4. Meaning
5. Impact

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- Four
- Two
- Zero

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- Four
- Two
- **Zero – Strategic planning is the cornerstone of strong organizations. But, unfortunately, it is often the most underutilized tool.**

6 goals
38 initiatives

A real community action agency. Not a bad one. A good one, with committed leadership and a board that cared.

38.8%

38.8%

progress to date against target

Thirty-eight good ideas is not a strategy. It is a wish list with a cover page.

Where is your strategic plan, physically, right now?

When did it last change a budget decision?

I am not here to make you feel bad about that. I am here to tell you why it happens, and it is almost never because you did not care.

ROADMAP

What you will discover.

1 Why plans fail at implementation, not at development

2 What Category 6 actually requires

3 The four data inputs that should feed every CAA strategic plan

4 How to build goals that lead to the outcomes instead of activities

5 A one-page restart you build before you leave this room

Less is more.

A plan that gets implemented beats a plan that impresses.

A plan that is too big does not just move slowly. It becomes intimidating, and intimidating plans get avoided.

If this is your first real plan, cut it in half. Then cut it again.

WHAT I BELIEVE

Five things about planning.

1 **Less is more.**

Complexity is the enemy of implementation.

2 **Planning sets the pace of the organization.**

It sets leaders up to lead, aligns the team toward a shared vision, and in doing that, it builds your culture.

3 **Every level of the organization belongs in the process.**

Buy-in and ownership are not created at the top and distributed downward.

4 **Compliance is the floor, not the point.**

You are required to plan. Use it to get to excellence anyway.

5 **Good data in, good plan out.**

A plan built on opinion is just a plan built on the loudest person in the room.

TURN TO YOUR NEIGHBOR · 90 SECONDS EACH

What is one thing in your current plan that actually got done?

Why that one?

Everybody stand up.

Stay standing if your board or advisory body has received an update on progress toward your strategic plan goals in the last twelve months.

That was not a rhetorical question. That is Standard 6.5.

Category 6: Strategic Planning.

	Private nonprofit	Public agency
6.1	Agency-wide strategic plan approved by the governing board within the past 5 years	Plan, or comparable planning document, reviewed and accepted by the tripartite board/advisory body within 5 years. If the department does not have a plan, the advisory body will develop it.
6.2	Addresses poverty reduction, community revitalization, and/or empowerment toward self-sufficiency	Same
6.3	Contains family, agency, and/or community goals	Same
6.4	Customer satisfaction data and customer input from the community assessment is included in the process	Same
6.5	Governing board has received an update on progress within the past 12 months	Advisory body has received an update within the past 12 months

Five standards. Five obligations. Nobody gets a pass.

Where public agencies get relief, and where they do not.

	What the Standards give a public agency
Fundraising	A different starting line. Governance is the real constraint.
Human resources **Category 7**	Eight of nine standards deferred to local government policy.
Strategic planning **Category 6**	**None. Zero.**

Strategic planning is the one place where a county department and a private nonprofit carry exactly the same weight. Which makes it the highest-leverage thing on your desk, because there is nobody to hand it to.

Compliance is the floor.

COMPLIANCE
Minimum level of performance

EXCELLENCE
Maximum level of performance

Everybody falls somewhere on that line, for every standard. You are where you are. The journey starts from there.

NCAP Pathways to Excellence

Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum. 35 Standards of Excellence across seven categories, modeled on the Baldrige framework. Gold Tier requires a full self-study with at least half the Standards met or exceeded.

If your plan is written to satisfy Category 6, you will get a plan that satisfies Category 6, and nothing more.

Before you can plan where you are going,

be honest about where you are today.

A ROMA-aligned planning framework.

You already run this cycle. Strategic planning is phase two, but a good plan touches all six.

1	2	3	4	5
Assessment	**Planning**	**Implementation**	**Achievement of Results**	**Evaluation**
The community needs assessment. Where the plan starts.	Strategic issues, goals, and the multi-year plan. Standard 6.1.	Named owners, timelines, and the annual operating plan underneath.	Family, agency, and community outcomes. Standard 6.3.	Quarterly review, board update, and adjustment. Standard 6.5.

Every strategic goal you write should be traceable backward to a documented need and forward to a measurable outcome.

If you cannot draw that line, you have a wish list. And Standard 4.3 requires you to document using a ROMA-certified trainer or equivalent to help implement it, so this is not optional for public or private.

Four inputs, minimum.

1 **Your community needs assessment**

The plan starts here, not at a whiteboard. Standard 6.4 requires customer satisfaction data and customer input from the assessment to be in the process.

2 **Honest progress against your current plan**

What got done, what did not, and why. This is the one agencies skip because it is uncomfortable.

3 **Your CSBG Organizational Standards status**

All 58 for private agencies, 50 for public.

4 **Your position against the 35 NCAP Standards of Excellence**

Almost nobody does this one. It is what separates a compliance plan from an excellence plan.

Walk into a retreat without these on the table and you will spend two days collecting opinions.

Internal and external.

Strengths and weaknesses

INTERNAL

Work through categories one at a time so nothing hides:

- Leadership
- Staffing
- Programs and services
- Finance
- Facilities
- Technology
- Communications
- Governance

Opportunities and threats

EXTERNAL · PESTLE

- Political
- Economic
- Social
- Technological
- Legal
- Environmental

Do not ask a room what our strengths are. You will get four answers and they will all be about staff dedication. Break it into categories and go one at a time.

EXERCISE · SILENT, ON YOUR OWN

Data Readiness Check.

For each input, mark: Have it / Stale / Do not have it

- Current community needs assessment
- Honest progress data on your current plan
- Organizational Standards self-assessment
- Your position against the 35 Standards of Excellence
- Customer satisfaction and customer input data

Then: when does your current strategic plan expire?

Top half of your handout.

THE FILTER

What makes an issue strategic.

A strategic issue is a critical challenge or opportunity you must address to achieve your mission.

- What is the issue?
- What makes it strategic rather than operational?
- How does it connect to our mission and vision?
- What happens if we do not address it?
- What makes it a priority now?
- What is the benefit of addressing it?

Question two is the filter

Most of what comes out of a retreat is operational. Real problems, but they belong on somebody's work plan, not in your strategic plan. Putting them there is how the plan gets too big to implement.

If a director can fix it inside their own budget and authority this year, it is not a strategic issue.

Great goals lead to outcomes, not activities.

NOT THIS

Create increased access in low-income communities to healthy and nutritious food, and educate low-income people about food budgeting, preparation, and healthy eating habits.

THIS

Improve the health of area residents through improved nutrition.

A strategic goal describes what you want to achieve, not what you want to do.

The first one is not a bad sentence. It is a good sentence. It is a to-do list wearing a goal costume. The second one is a goal because you can ask whether it happened, and it can be proven by the outcomes you create.

Why six goals became thirty-eight initiatives.

5	× 3	15	× 3	45
goals		objectives		action steps

A strategic plan multiplies at every level. Whatever number you pick at the top, you will live with a much larger number at the bottom.

Six goals felt reasonable to that agency. Thirty-eight initiatives is what six goals actually cost.

Five or fewer. For most agencies, three is better.

THE TEST

When a goal earns its place.

- It directly addresses your identified needs, with the most impact
- It most effectively leverages the assets you already have
- It aligns with your mission and vision
- It moves you toward your long-term vision
- It connects to a strategic priority you actually identified

And every goal that survives gets a name and a date attached, or it will not happen. SMART is not a formality.

WHO IS IN THE ROOM

Buy-in is not distributed downward.

1 **Board and advisory body**

Direction, oversight, and resources.

2 **Executive and senior team**

Prioritization and the hard choices.

3 **Program managers and frontline staff**

What will actually work.

4 **Community and customers**

Standard 6.4 requires their input, and they know things you do not.

West Texas Opportunities

50 to 75 employees

- Six emerging leaders appointed to monthly strategic planning leadership meetings
- They contributed to developing the plan and led implementation of the community needs assessment
- That same group now runs the agency's leadership development, a mentorship program, and internal communications

Cheapest leadership development you will ever do.

LEARNING OUTCOMES THREE AND FIVE

Your board, and your community.

The board as strategic partner

NOT A COMPLIANCE OBSERVER

- Three jobs: set direction, ensure resources, provide oversight
- Bring them in at the strategic issue stage, not at the approval stage
- A board handed a finished plan can only say yes or no. A board that helped name the issues will defend it.
- Public agencies: your advisory body is not fiduciary, but under 6.1 it is on the hook to develop the plan if you do not
- Standard 6.5 is a floor, not a cadence. Quarterly beats annual.

Community engagement

NOT A CHECKED BOX

- Standard 6.4 requires customer satisfaction data and customer input in the process
- A survey is input. A conversation is engagement. Do both.
- Go where people already are: partner staff meetings, faith communities, your own waiting room
- Ask what is missing, not whether they liked you
- Report back what you heard and what you did with it, or you will not get honest answers twice

The people closest to the problem are rarely in the room where the plan gets written. That is a choice, and it is reversible.

Four things. Skip any one and the plan dies.

1 **A named owner for every goal**

A person. Not a department, not a committee.

2 **A quarterly review on the calendar**

Scheduled a year out, with the plan on the screen.

3 **Select few metrics you actually watch**

Not thirty-eight.

4 **A board reporting date**

Standard 6.5 requires an update within twelve months. Put it on the calendar the day the plan is adopted.

Adoption is not the finish line. It is roughly the halfway point.

And a plan you cannot change is a plan you will abandon. Give yourself written permission to retire a goal at a quarterly review.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE OVER TIME

Two agencies, twelve years.

Panhandle Community Services

150 employees · Three planning cycles

- The 2019 planning process surfaced that 80% of agency leadership was retirement-eligible within five years. Nobody was looking for it.
- That finding became ImpactLaunch: five cohorts, 49 participants
- Today the agency has written succession plans with named successors for every key position
- The plan aimed at Pathways to Excellence, not at Category 6. Result: Gold Tier, now pursuing Platinum.

West Texas Opportunities

50 to 75 employees · Two planning cycles

- Emerging leaders were built into the planning process rather than briefed afterward
- Six of them now sit in monthly strategic planning leadership meetings
- They led implementation of the community needs assessment and multiple special projects
- The plan created a standing cadence instead of a five-year document

Planning is not a document you produce every five years. It is a cadence you build.

Let’s work together?

Tell me three things:

- Your agency, and whether you are public or private
- How many goals and how many initiatives are in your current plan
- When it expires

It is almost never what you think it is.

It is not a writing problem. **It is a prioritization problem.**

It is not a commitment problem. **It is an ownership problem.**

It is not a planning problem. **It is a cadence problem.**

Almost every plan on a shelf in this room is a good plan that was too big.

EXERCISE · 8 MINUTES · SILENT, ON YOUR OWN

Your one-page restart.

1. **My plan expires:**
2. **Goals I have now:** Goals I will carry forward:
3. **The data input that is missing or stale:**
4. **Who owns the plan.** One person. Name them.
5. **My four quarterly review dates:**
6. **My next board update date:** Standard 6.5

Write your 90-day date. An actual date, in your own handwriting.

JUST AS IMPORTANT

What not to do.

1 **Do not write a forty-page plan.**
Nobody reads it, including you.

2 **Do not set more than five goals.**
Three is better. Do the cascade math first.

3 **Do not let a consultant own your plan.**
Including me. If I write it and hand it to you, it dies on your shelf.

4 **Do not write goals that are activities.**
If you cannot ask whether it happened, it is not a goal.

5 **Do not treat adoption as the finish line.**
It is the halfway point.

6 **Do not plan without the people who have to implement it.**
They know what will actually work.

Less is more.

A plan that gets implemented beats a plan that impresses.

You are required to have a plan. That is the floor. Use it to set the pace of your agency instead.

Open the plan you already have. Count the goals. Cut the list. Put a name on each one that survives, and get four dates on a calendar. That is a two-hour job. You could do it before your next board meeting.

I want to know how it goes.

Scan it if you want me to check in at 30 days and see whether you cut the list.

No cost. No pitch.

- You will hear from me once, in about a month
- It will be a specific question about the plan you just wrote down
- If you want to keep talking after that, we will. If not, that is the end of it.

RECAP

Six things to take with you.

1 Plans fail at implementation, not development, and usually because they were too big

2 Category 6 gives public agencies no relief. Planning is fully yours.

3 Four inputs: needs assessment, honest progress data, Organizational Standards, Standards of Excellence

4 Goals are outcomes, not activities

5 Five goals or fewer. Do the cascade math.

6 A named owner, a quarterly date, five metrics, and a board update

BEFORE YOU GO

Session feedback for FACA.

Please take a minute to give FACA your feedback on this session.

It takes less than two minutes, and it is how the association decides what to program next year.

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Thank you.