

Top 10 Strategic Planning Best Practices

Pull together a diverse, yet appropriate, group of people to make up your planning team. Diversity leads to a better strategy. Bring together a small core team — between six and ten people — of leaders and managers who represent every area of the company.

Allow time for big picture and strategic thinking. We tend to try to squeeze strategic planning discussions in between putting out fires and going on a much needed vacation. But to create a strategic plan, your team needs time to think big. Do whatever it takes to allow that time for big-picture thinking (including taking your team off-site).

Get full commitment from key people in your organization. You can't do it alone. If your team doesn't buy into the planning process and the resulting strategic plan, you're dead in the water.

Allow for open and free discussion regardless of each person's position within the organization. (This tip includes you — the CEO.) Don't lead the planning sessions. Hire an outside facilitator, someone who doesn't have any stake in your success. When you do, people wonder whether you're trying to lead them down the path you wanted all along. Encourage active participation, but don't let any one person dominate the session.

Think about execution before you start. It doesn't matter how good the plan is if it isn't executed.

Use a facilitator, if your budget allows. Hire a trained professional who has no emotional investment in the outcome of the plan. An impartial third party can concentrate on the process instead of the end result and can ask the tough questions that others may fear to ask.

Make your plan actionable. To have any chance at implementation, the plan must clearly articulate goals, action steps, responsibilities, accountability, and specific deadlines. And everyone must understand the plan and their role in it.

Don't write your plan in stone. Good strategic plans are fluid, not rigid and unbending. They allow you to adapt to changes in the marketplace. Don't be afraid to change your plan as necessary.

Clearly articulate next steps after every session. Before closing the strategic planning session, clearly explain what comes next and who's responsible for what. When you walk out of the room, everyone must fully understand what they're responsible for and when to meet deadlines.

Make strategy a habit, not just a retreat. Review the strategic plan for performance achievement no less than quarterly and as often as monthly or weekly. Focus on accountability for results and have clear and compelling consequences for unapproved missed deadlines.