

# Strategic Planning for Arts and Culture Organizations: A Roadmap to Sustainability and Impact

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In the ever-evolving landscape of the arts and culture sector, strategic planning is not merely a beneficial exercise but an essential framework for organizations striving for sustainability, relevance, and growth. As arts and culture organizations navigate the complexities of fluctuating funding sources, shifting audience demographics, and rapidly changing cultural contexts, a meticulously crafted strategic plan, along with its parallel community engagement process, is vital to ensure both long-term viability and a meaningful approach to the emotional and intellectual engagement with the community the organization serves.

Strategic planning acts as a navigational compass, guiding arts and culture organizations through challenges while enabling them to capitalize on emerging opportunities. Research suggests that organizations engaged in formal strategic planning and community engagement report enhanced clarity regarding their mission and vision, improved decision-making processes, and a heightened ability to adapt to external changes. Harvard Business School cites that engaging in strategic planning helps create a united and focused organizational vision that can align staff and stakeholders.[1]

Engaging in strategic planning guides the process of financial goal setting, budget planning, and resource maximization.[2] This focus on financial efficiency is crucial in an environment where traditional funding models are increasingly under pressure. Furthermore, the planning process fosters stakeholder engagement, cultivating a sense of ownership and alignment among board members, staff, artists, funders, audiences, and community members. Not only does this process heighten engagement overall, but it also improves the vitality and success of the plan by creating greater buy-in.[3]

## Key Considerations in the Planning Process

**Define or Refine the Mission and Vision:** A compelling mission statement is the cornerstone of any strategic plan. It articulates the organization's purpose, values, and aspirations. Effective mission statements are specific, inspirational, and actionable and answer the core question of "Who are we and why do we exist?"<sup>2</sup> Periodic reviews of the mission are essential to ensure alignment with contemporary goals and community needs.

**Conduct a Thorough SWOT Analysis:** A comprehensive strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis is fundamental for understanding both internal capabilities and external challenges. Conducting periodic SWOT analyses also allow organizations to continually

reflect on internal strengths that can be maximized, internal weaknesses to be addressed, uncover potential external threats, and explore new opportunities not previously identified. SWOT analyses empower organizations with an opportunity to take a big-picture overview of organizational operations with far less bias, especially when a variety of stakeholders are involved in the process.<sup>2</sup>

### **Engage Stakeholders at All Levels:**

Strategic planning is most effective when it involves input from all key stakeholders, including staff, board members, artists, funders, and community members. Engaging diverse voices ensures that the plan reflects various perspectives. Inclusive planning also fosters buy-in from those who will execute the strategy and those who will benefit from it so that the organization can remain responsive to the needs and aspirations of its community. Additionally, effective stakeholder engagement helps build momentum, sustained enthusiasm, and support, all of which are critical for achieving long-term strategic goals. [4]

**Communicate consistently:** Clear and consistent communication is vital during the planning process, particularly in nonprofit arts organizations. By maintaining open lines of communication, organizations foster transparency and ensure everyone understands the process objectives and progress. It helps to clarify expectations, address concerns, and create a sense of shared responsibility. It is critical to building a solid foundation for the plan's implementation once the planning process is over. [5]

**Set Clear, Measurable Goals:** Goal setting is crucial for focusing organizational efforts and resources. Goals should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). For instance, an organization might aim to increase audience attendance by 20% over the next three years or diversify its funding sources to include at least three new streams. SMART goal setting is essential to achieving strategic objectives as these goals direct organizations towards a unified vision, increase engagement amongst employees in actively executing these goals, and create metrics to quantify success in achieving these goals.[6]

**Develop an Action Plan:** The action plan is the operational blueprint that outlines the steps necessary to achieve the strategic goals set out. This action plan should detail actionable steps, who is responsible for executing those steps, timelines, and resource requirements. This action plan can indicate a commitment to implementing strategies to relevant stakeholders and ensure that no plan elements are overlooked after launching the strategic plan.[7]

**Evaluate and Adapt:** Strategic planning is an iterative process. Regular evaluation of the strategic plan allows organizations to assess progress, identify areas for improvement, and make necessary adjustments, especially during challenging times. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as an important example; companies that were able to weather the storm were those that were able to adapt to the external forces at play quickly. Those companies who did not have the ability or willingness to adapt saw immense impacts to their revenue.[8] The

importance of remaining agile and flexible, including executing an organization's strategic plan, cannot be understated.

## Conclusion

Strategic planning is not an optional exercise for arts and culture organizations — it is a fundamental necessity for navigating the complexities of the cultural landscape while maximizing impact, cultivating relationships, and preparing for a sustainable future. As the arts and culture sector continues to evolve, an unwavering commitment to strategic planning will empower organizations to adapt, thrive, and remain integral to the cultural fabric of society.

[1] Harvard Business School. (2020). "Why is Strategic Planning Important?".

<https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/why-is-strategic-planning-important>

[2] Forbes (2018). "The Top 6 Steps of Strategic Planning".

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgedeerb/2018/12/04/the-top-6-steps-of-strategic-planning/?sh=3051793635b2>

[3] Harvard Business School. (2023). "How to Get Employee Buy-In to Execute Your Strategic Initiatives". <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/employee-buy-in>

[4] Thibodeau, B. D., & Rüling, C. C. (2018). Overcoming Project Inertia and Gaining Project Momentum: Strategic Adaptation in Cultural Facilities Planning. *International Journal of Arts Management*, Volume 21, Number 1, Pages 28-46

[5] Thibodeau, B. D., & Rüling, C. C. (2015). Nonprofit Organizations, Community, and Shared Urgency: Lessons from the Arts and Culture Sector. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 45(3), 156-177

[6] University of Massachusetts Global. "How to measure organizational performance: The secret to effective goal setting". <https://www.umassglobal.edu/news-and-events/blog/how-to-measure-organizational-performance>

[7] North Carolina Center for Nonprofits. "How Strategic Planning Affects the Success of Your Nonprofit". <https://ncnonprofits.org/blog/how-strategic-planning-affects-success-your-nonprofit>

[8] Harvard Business Review. (2022). "In Uncertain Times, the Best Strategy is Adaptability". <https://hbr.org/2022/08/in-uncertain-times-the-best-strategy-is-adaptability>