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Strategic Planning: What It Is — and Isn't

More than a few strategic planning efforts have run aground because they were based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what a strategic plan is. Sometimes strategic planning is confused with other planning modalities, each valid in its own right but geared toward a different end result. To put it simply, not every plan is a strategic plan.

A **strategic plan** is a tool that provides guidance in fulfilling a mission with maximum efficiency and impact. If it is to be effective and useful, it should articulate specific goals and describe the action steps and resources needed to accomplish them. As a rule, most strategic plans should be reviewed and revamped every three to five years.

An **operating plan** is a coordinated set of tasks for carrying out the goals delineated in a strategic plan. It thus goes into greater detail than the strategic plan from which it is derived, spelling out time frames and the roles of individual staff and board members, for example. It also has a shorter horizon than a strategic plan — usually one fiscal year.

A **business plan** is typically focused on the actions and investment necessary to generate income from a specific program or service. A business plan includes information about an organization's products, competitive environment and revenue assumptions.

A **case statement** is geared toward marketing and fundraising rather than planning. It describes the organization's goals, capabilities and strengths and the benefits it provides. Its purpose is to secure contributions and grants from individuals, foundations, corporate giving programs and other philanthropic entities