



21st Century Strategic Planning: Design Thinking as a Supplemental Process

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Abstract: *Nonprofits are faced with several distinct challenges. They encounter competition for resources and they face increasing demands for program effectiveness. Additionally, nonprofits must frame their focus within a wider and more globalized sphere where new patterns of employment and philanthropic global organizations are defining the third sector's role in the world in new and complex ways. Many suggest that as nonprofits attempt to manage these emerging trends, creativity and focus are the necessary and vital tools for growth and sustainability. Most relevant to nonprofit success is the strategic planning process that allows an organization to flow and adapt to these emerging changes. Design thinking, a relatively new term and concept, is changing the way products are designed and businesses achieve success. At its core, design thinking utilizes "prototyping" through multidisciplinary team research. Proponents of design thinking advocate that organizations cannot successfully plan without going "into the field" to engage with customers and stakeholders to understand their responses to a product or service. As nonprofits need to remain relevant and effective in the future, the strategic planning process aids in anticipating future needs. This paper will reveal how design thinking, as a concept or system, can assist nonprofits with the long range strategic planning.*

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The 21st Century Landscape:

Salamon (2010) identifies four types of challenges facing nonprofits in the future. They include: finance, competition, effectiveness, and technology. Most pertinent to the subject of this paper are the two challenges of competition and effectiveness. Nonprofits face the challenge of competition in various ways. There is competition with for-profit agencies, for example, that compounds the problem that already exists as numerous nonprofits compete with each other to allocate grants and funding. Additionally, with economic changes, work-life issues continue to challenge most American families, and the growth of the sector must be able to “compete for attention, credibility, and business as they jockey for the opportunity to provide services” (Renz, 2010, p. 794). In a media-saturated, technology-driven, and high stress society, nonprofits must compete with other pressing factors including problems with the government, stagnant wages, and the force of the entertainment industry in an attempt to secure funding and public support for programs.

The second distinct challenge facing nonprofits, and interrelated to the challenge of competition, is the issue of effectiveness. As nonprofits continue to gain relevance in today’s society amidst the various scandals that have brought negative attention toward the sector, there is a greater call for nonprofits to prove that they are fulfilling their missions in performance-based ways (Renz, 2010). To that end, various watchdog groups have formed to challenge the ways in which nonprofits operate. Ebrahim (2010) defines this accountability as centering “on the relationships among various actors, with some giving accounts of their behavior and others receiving and judging those accounts” (p. 102). Most problematic to this definition of accountability is the fact that “it skews organizational attention toward the interests of those who control critical resources” (p.117). These external forces provide valuable standard creation at times, and at others, place undue pressure on nonprofits to prove their effectiveness and accountability to their mission (Ebrahim, 2010).

In addition to these unique challenges, Salamon (2010) urges that significant opportunities for nonprofits also exist. Social shifts add to a nuanced landscape in which nonprofits, while struggling under difficult odds, still have unique opportunities to further the public good. In an age of globalization, the shift of ethnic groups is constantly reshaping the demographic trends of the United States. These distinct ethnic groups bring unique needs and help to reshape communities and public policy. Furthermore, boomer generation retirements and the doubling of seniors also press new needs for healthcare (Salamon, 2010). Nonprofits will have many new communities to serve and assist.

Finally, the focus on “new” philanthropy is shaping the ways that nonprofits operate. For example, the Gates Foundation is altering the landscape of philanthropy as it differs from the institutional norm in almost every way. The organization is changing expectations and the policy environment of philanthropy by its very existence through developing new operational strategies (Ogden, 2011). By creating their foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates are forging a new path towards solving community and global problems and are inspiring public and private partnerships in accelerated ways. How people give, why people give, and what causes are important are questions that foundations like the Gates are helping to shape and solve.

As these challenges and opportunities will continue to alter the course of nonprofits in this country, Renz (2010) provides a useful outlook for nonprofits thriving in the 21st century. He notes:

Nonprofit organizations play increasingly significant and diverse roles in the development and the maintenance of civil society throughout the world. Thus, the demand for sophistication and skill in leading and managing these organizations is growing. Leaders from across the globe are asking more and more of nonprofit organizations – more with regard to creativity, more with regard to responsiveness, more with regard to impact and results (p. 802).

Nonprofits must become more adaptable to sudden changes as they enter a new era of competition and experience calls for accountability while adjusting to the force of globalization. Nonprofits must remain creative in their offerings and missions, and be poised to solve these issues and take advantage of these emerging opportunities in ever changing and exciting ways. A very useful concept for this changing landscape comes from a very unlikely source. Headquartered in Palo Alto, California, the design firm IDEO is challenging the world with its focus on improving the quality of human existence and connection with what they call “design thinking.” The founders of IDEO are credited with creating the first mouse for Apple, the Palm V personal digital assistant, high-tech Oral-B toothbrushes and many other sophisticated devices (Brown and Watt, 2010, SSIR). Over time, IDEO branched out beyond mere product design. They helped a health-care company restructure their organization and aided a university in creating alternative classroom environments among many other innovative projects (Hall, 2011).

Soon enough, IDEO was being contracted by governments across the world to help restructure the public sector. The government of Singapore and the Social Security Administration, for example, utilized IDEO’s talents to improve how they deliver their services such as issuing visas and getting more retirees to file their application for services online. All of these projects reveal IDEO’s focus on designing better products for humans and transferred this skill to other sectors that also have the need to connect with and provide services for people and communities (Hall, 2011). The company utilizes a staff of over 400 people who come from various disciplines including design, engineering, human factors, business experts, and anthropology who work in multidisciplinary teams to produce plans, proposals, and projects that are creative, innovative, and support the role of empathy in building innovation. The basic premise of design thinking, and the reason why it has become so popular for businesses and even nonprofits to utilize, rests on a basic principle. At the crux of design thinking is the belief that programs, products, and initiatives falter simply because client or customer needs have never been truly “prototyped” for feedback. This is not to say that companies and nonprofits do not go into the field to assess user and client experience. It is that when they do go into the field, they are unaware of their own preconceived notions about their client/customer needs. When these issues are not discussed or accepted consciously, a necessary connection between creator and client fails to develop (Brown and Watt, 2011). Furthermore, the developers at IDEO have found success due to the fact that they are teaching a way of thinking that has often been overlooked. Their system has allowed for organizations to embrace:

design thinking because it helps them be more innovative, better differentiate their brands, and bring their products and services to market faster. Nonprofits are beginning to use design thinking as well to develop better solutions to social problems. Design thinking crosses the traditional boundaries between public, for-profit, and nonprofit sectors. By working closely with the clients and consumers, design thinking allows high-

impact solutions to bubble up from below rather than being imposed from the top. (Brown and Watt, 2010)

As nonprofits continue to face new challenges and opportunities, they rely on the strategic planning process to help them anticipate their needs. Mittenhall (2002) describes the process as one that “provides guidance in fulfilling a mission with maximum efficiency and impact” (p. 2). The strategic plan is the roadmap for the organization as it anticipates changes in the external environment, identifies the major issues of the organization, takes into account the needs of key stakeholders, and provides clear solutions to these issues (Bryson, 2010; Mittenhall, 2002). Organizations in the strategic planning process set out to clarify their mission by identifying issues that need to be assessed and solved to increase the future growth of the organization (Bryson, 2010). Strategic issues require emotionally intelligent questions to help drive the process. These questions should have more than one answer as too many organizations “jump to conclusions without fully understanding what else might be possible, and without learning more about the issue by understanding more about the possible range of answers”. (p. 242). It is in this stage of the strategic planning process that a system like design thinking becomes useful. Indeed, it is easy for an organization to jump to conclusions about key issues that impact the mission and fail to really assess and interpret strategic issues appropriately and meaningfully to secure the future viability of the organization.

A system such as design thinking is supplemental to the strategic planning process in that it allows for a balance between the typical analytical aspects of the strategic planning process. Design thinking moves the minds of key decision makers toward intuitive insights and pattern recognition as a way to search deeply and looks for the right questions to attack strategic issues. It is with this patterned and intuitive development that an organization can subsequently arrive at useful answers to move an organization forward in support of its mission (Brown and Watt, 2010).

This paper will reveal how design thinking, as a concept or system, can assist nonprofits with long-range strategic planning. As nonprofits need to remain relevant and effective in the future, the strategic planning process aids in anticipating future needs. This paper will explain the process of design thinking and how it can be used successfully to aid the strategic planning process.

Understanding the Process

In his book, *The Design of Business: Why Design Thinking is the Next Competitive Advantage*, Roger Martin (2009), lays out a compelling framework for understanding the nature of design thinking. He asserts that many of the processes by which businesses currently establish goals fall under the category of analytical thinking. That is to say deductive and inductive reasoning, which utilize logic and quantitative analysis, are the primary ways in which value is created within organizations. Martin then asserts a new way of thinking, one that is opposed to analytical thinking. Defined as intuitive thinking, it is where the seeds of innovation emerge. Those who hold to this philosophy believe that “the creative instinct – the unanalyzed flash of insight – is venerated as the source of true innovation” (p.6). Martin’s thesis urges that instead of an organization choosing between the analytical or intuitive thinking successful organizations *use both types of thinking*. The combination of the two forms of thinking is the essence of design thinking.

Martin then asserts that the path to reconciling and working between the two models require processing along a “knowledge funnel” (p.7). The three stages of the funnel include mystery, heuristics, and algorithm. To begin at the stage of mystery requires an organization to ask questions that are not readily answerable and speak to a sense of exploration. These questions should evoke curiosity and wonder with the notion of “what could be.” For example, as part of the planning process an organization may decide that it wants to have a greater conversation about issues of community engagement. In the mystery stage, stakeholders can ask questions that inspire curiosity and may include: “How can we tell when a community is really engaged?” Or, “what happens when a community is fully engaged?” The funnel’s second stage, heuristics, then requires an organization to take those questions of mystery and to develop a “rule of thumb that helps narrow the field of inquiry and work the mystery down to a manageable size” (p.8). A simple heuristic might include the fact that a group of diverse individuals who are provided with the right types of questions can produce innovative answers to difficult questions, for example. The developed heuristic represents “an incomplete yet distinctly advanced understanding of what was previously a mystery” (p.12). The final stage in the knowledge funnel is the creation of an algorithm based on the originally formed heuristic. In this stage, the heuristic develops into a system which provides

a step-by-step procedure for solving a problem. Algorithms take the loose, unregimented heuristics –which take considerable thought and nuance to employ – and simplify, structuralize, and codify them to the degree that anyone with access to the algorithm can deploy it with more or less equal efficiency. (p.12)

An example of a heuristic developed into an algorithm may be the structure of a new program offering services.

Finally, Martin (2009) uses the theory of management expert James March to explain two ways in which organizations move along the knowledge funnel. March suggests that organizations either move in a way that is “exploratory which values the search for new knowledge or exploitative which values the maximization of payoffs from existing knowledge” (p. 18). Martin suggests that organizations that successfully utilize both exploratory and exploitative knowledge are deemed as successful design thinking organizations.

Issues of competition will continue to be a factor related to the sustainability of a specific nonprofit. Nonprofits must have the awareness then that new organizations focus on exploration. Once they have developed into more mature organizations, there is the need to focus on exploration (Naylor, 2010). Organizations must prepare to support validity as well as reliability in moving the organization forward. Reliability is repeating the process of the algorithm in the knowledge funnel. Issues of validity require organizations to continually return back to the mystery and heuristic stage of development to find new ideas that can also work (Martin, 2009; Naylor, 2010).

A key founder of the design firm IDEO, Tim Brown, calls the three key stages in the knowledge funnel “inspiration,” “ideation,” and “implementation” (Brown and Watt, 2010). Brown defines the process as “iterative”. That is, the cycle of the three steps requires constant refinement and must be revisited, balancing the analytical or intuitive stages of thinking utilized in the process. He notes specifically that design thinking is not meant to be a chaotic process but requires constant exploration and “done right it will invariably make unexpected discoveries along the way, and it would be foolish not to find out where they lead” (p. 16).

Brown (2010) further notes that the key starting point of design thinking begins with the creation of the brief. The brief is a written process that highlights the framework from which a team can begin the design process. The brief moves a team towards asking questions and continuously returning to those questions to assess issues of validity, desirability, and feasibility (Brown, 2009). The brief highlights the issues, the needs of the clients or customers, and refines what is possible in achieving a created set of goals that can advance the particular cause, mission, or goal of a given organization. Brown and Watt (2010) cite a specific example of the fluid nature of the brief process:

Earlier this year, Kara Pecknold, a student at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver, British Columbia, took an internship with a women's cooperative in Rwanda. Her task was to develop a Web site to connect rural Rwandan weavers with the world. Pecknold soon discovered that the weavers had little or no access to computers and the Internet. Rather than ask them to maintain a Web site, she reframed the brief, broadening it to ask what services could be provided to the community to help them improve their livelihoods. Pecknold used various design thinking techniques, drawing partly from her training and partly from IDEO's Human Centered Design toolkit, to understand the women's aspirations (34).

The brief provides the general framework of the problem and then begins to ask a series of broad questions about how might the organization might begin to think about solving those problems.

Strategic Gain and Fail

As nonprofits need to think strategically to assess changes that impact the structure and operation of their organizations, the strategic planning process is viewed as a vital aspect in assessing and managing these changes. The process of thinking strategically allows the organization then to "achieve some sense of alignment and coherence and to understand external market opportunities and challenges and weave together service delivery systems to address the needs of multiple stakeholders that are affected by the actions of the organization" (Brown, 2010, p. 206). This process of thinking and planning strategically allows organizations to move forward. However, the design thinking process if implemented in conjunction with strategic management can move organizations toward a more innovative and adaptable future.

Henry Mintzberg, noted management expert and writer, provides some key flaws in the strategic planning process that prove ways in which design thinking can be included to enhance the planning process. Several key issues with the strategic management process suggested by Mintzberg include:

- The Issue of Inflexibility

The goal of strategic planning is to plan. As organizations plan, they must act rationally. The goal of acting rationally in the planning process is, according to Mintzberg (1994), not to encourage flexibility but to "reduce it, that is, to establish clear direction within which resources can be committed in a coordinated way" (p. 173). If the organization establishes planning as directing energies in a certain direction, then a consequence is that this process will produce a high rate of acceptance rather than critical scrutiny.

- The Issue of Incremental and Generic Planning

Mintzberg urges that planning requires “sharply defined sets of categories” (p. 176). The planning process, as a result, does not invent new categories; rather it works within the existing framework of categories. As planning cannot proceed without using the old categories, only incremental change occurs as opposed to full innovation.

- The Bias of Objectivity

Many people assume that their assumptions and beliefs are value-free. It is fair to suggest that as the planning process evolves, the many stakeholders involved with planning are not always aware of the underlying assumptions about the choices or categories that they decide are relevant and important in assessing the organization. Mintzberg notes that “the unfortunate fact is that some things are more easily written down than others – numbers for example, as opposed to impressions. As a result, planning systematically favors those kinds of information” (p. 191). Furthermore, the planning process, Mintzberg notes, treats people as mere objects – they are to be helped and served. This is problematic in that planning “can discourage the commitment of those subjected to it” (p. 191). Mintzberg strikes a very relevant chord when he finally notes that planning in its most conventional sense prohibits the power of intuition because “it cannot be explicated – formally written down – and so it cannot be decomposed, ordered, controlled” (p. 191).

- Planning and Control

Mintzberg notes that the planning process seeks to establish control over key issues and cannot fully anticipate the turbulence of the external environment. A major goal of the planning process is to reduce uncertainty. Mintzberg questions this process as planning leads to “an aversion to risk which means a reluctance to consider creative ideas and quantum changes, both of which whose effects are unpredictable and so beyond formal planning” (p. 203).

Lest one think that Mintzberg is totally opposed to the planning process, he finally offers a solution of strategic vision as a useful tool for avoiding some pitfalls of the planning process. With strategic vision organizations can quickly adapt and change formal plans because the vision guides the process rather than the plans. He notes, “thus, changes that appear turbulent to organizations that rely heavily on planning may appear normal to, or even welcomed by those, that prefer more of a visionary or learning approach” (p. 210).

Despite the fact that Bryson (2010) characterizes Mintzberg’s critique of the planning process as a caricature of strategic planning, Mintzberg’s claims merely suggest what could occur if the strategic planning process does not begin with a strategic vision. As Bryson (2010) notes, the strategic planning process should be viewed as a “deliberative pathway to promote usual persuasion and learning among stakeholders about what to do, how, and why in order to fulfill an organization’s mission and meet its mandates (p. 234). The pathway requires both planning and flexibility.

Putting it All Together

Design thinking is not a rejection of analytical thinking. It supports analytical thinking while including the act of synthesis to better understand problems and issues. Synthesis is a creative act. It requires that data be analyzed but also synthesized into a compelling narrative. By blending analysis and synthesis, design thinking includes both convergent (moving toward a single answer) and divergent (producing options) methods of arriving at a solution (Brown, 2009). Brown (2010) calls design thinking “a dance among mental states” (p. 66). Design thinking takes the planning process that traditionally looks for clear evidence, data, and outcomes and includes the intuitive, the possible, the mysterious or unknown.

Undoubtedly, design thinking, once used, takes a longer time than the analytical strategic planning process to implement. The act of collecting interviews, notes, and other key pieces of evidence and analyzing and synthesizing this information is a time-consuming process. Analytical thinking, while providing efficiency, reliability, and time savings, does not sufficiently provide for real insight, observation, and empathy (Brown, 2009). The design thinking process accounts for what is unsaid as well as what is explicitly stated. Design thinking harnesses imagination in the process of understanding growth.

Bryson (2010) suggests a ten-step strategic planning process. These steps include:

1. Initiate and agree on a strategic planning process.
2. Identify organizational mandates.
3. Clarify organizational mission and values.
4. Assess the external and internal environments to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats.
5. Identify the strategic issue facing the organization.
6. Formulate strategies to manage the issues.
7. Review and adopt the strategic plan or plans,
8. Establish an effective organization vision.
9. Develop an effective implementation process.
10. Reassess strategies and the strategic planning process. (p. 232).

Design thinking can be used along the process to establish the following:

- After an organization has agreed on the strategic planning process and before it identifies organizational mandates, the organization could utilize design thinking as it:

Mystery or Inspiration Phase:

1. Defines the Challenge:
 - 1.1 Understands the challenge(s):
 - 1.2 Defines the audience:
 - 1.3 Build a team

How can we successfully advance our mission?
What is the successful advancement of our mission?
Who really benefits from our mission?
How do we know what their needs are?
How are we imposing our beliefs over their individual needs?
How do we know when we are imposing our opinions on their needs?
How can we form a multidisciplinary and

	diverse group to assess these questions?
2. Prepare Research	
2.1 Make a plan	
2.2 Identify sources of inspiration	What is possible beyond our current practice that could help us to advance our mission?
➤ After the design thinking process of building and understanding mystery or inspiration, the organization can begin to clarify organizational mission and values. In the process of the organization assessing the external and internal environments to identify strengths weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and identifying the strategic issues facing the organization, design thinking can be used to:	
Heuristic or Ideation Stage:	
2.3 Invite research participants	Derive various stories, snapshots of people that interact with the mission. How do they perceive the success of the mission?
2.5 Prepare for fieldwork	
3. Gather Inspiration	
3.1 Immerse yourself in context	Move beyond data gathering in focus groups, go out into the field. Practice observation which includes what is stated and what is not.
3.2 Learn from individuals	
3.3 Learn from groups	
3.4 Learn from experts	
3.5 Learn from peers observing peers	How do internal stakeholders explain the success of the mission?
3.6 Learn from peoples' self-documentation	
3.7 Seek inspiration in new places	Are there any places where one might not usually look to understand how the mission impacts the external and internal environment?
5. Search for Meaning	Use synthesis to assess all of the fieldwork and inspirational insights.
5.1 Find themes	
5.2 Make sense of findings	
6. Frame Opportunities	
➤ As the organization begins to identify the strategic issues facing the organization and then begins to formulate strategies to manage the issues, the organizations can then enter the algorithm or implementation stage:	
7. Generate Ideas	By using the fullness of analytic and intuitive thinking, the organization is set to use a fuller range of insights into the success of the mission,

the issues facing the mission and can begin to establish strategies to address the issues.

- 7.1 Prepare for brainstorming
- 7.2 Facilitate brainstorming
- 7.3 Select promising ideas

8. Refine Ideas

8.1 Do a reality check

- The organization is now set to establish an effective organizational vision and can begin to develop an effective implementation process. The design thinking process urges that a reassessment of strategies and the strategic planning process should take place. Design thinking can be used to:

Algorithm or Implementation Process

9. Make Prototypes

Establish trial answers to strategic issues.

9.1 Create a prototype

10. Get Feedback

Test whether the prototypes or answers to strategic issues provides an honest and innovative advancement of the success of the organization.

10.2 Identify sources for feedback

**Perhaps return to the initial research participants and of course the multidisciplinary planning group.
How do inspirational ideas help to solve strategic issues?**

10.6 Capture feedback learning²

While the future landscape where nonprofits will operate is uncertain, strategic planning is an essential tool for organizations to anticipate the challenges that a nonprofit organization may face in the future. Design thinking is a useful addition to the process of strategic planning. It does not negate the current structure of the strategic plan cycle, it merely adds to it. By using both analytical and intuitive thinking, the design thinking process can give a fuller and more nuanced perspective on external needs as well as authentic opportunities that allow nonprofits to face these shifting and changes with a bolder vision for sustainability and success.

Tim Brown (2009) notes that as many social enterprises have begun to use design thinking, they move beyond conventional problem solving. Design thinking has proven itself to improve the viability of organizations. Design thinking enhances the development of ideas and prompts real time and real world solutions based on stakeholder opinions, observations, and aspirations. Nonprofits are moving into a future where accountability and clarity of mission is vital. Design thinking can provide the strategic planning process with a more robust understanding and appreciation of how the organization can continue to enhance its mission with new and holistic insights for future endeavors.

² Design Thinking Steps credited from: *Design Thinking for Educators*, April, 2011
http://designthinkingforeducators.com/DTtoolkit_v1_062711.pdf. All added steps in bold print are my own.

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