



## II. Research and Analysis before the Planning: A Toolkit for Reality

**Guidance and ten worksheets for research tasks to assure your plans are based in reality**

1. History
2. Lessons Learned from Reports and Evaluations
3. Survey Findings from Various Stakeholder Groups
4. Competitor Research – Short format
5. Current Donors Assessment – Preliminary
6. Department Director Reports
7. Confidential Interviews
8. Last Strategic Plan
9. Competitors Research – Long format
10. Preparation

This set of the worksheets will guide you through the research and preparation for the planning. It is imperative that an organization have a clear and correct understanding of its internal and external realities before it engages in planning for the future. A strategic plan built on incomplete or inaccurate statements or beliefs will most assuredly fail. Good research is needed to be ready for a successful planning process and results.

Worksheets for research are numbered R1 to R 14.





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### 2. Lessons Learned. Please report on significant lessons from recent evaluations and reports.

Most organizations have numerous reports and evaluations. As preparation for strategic planning, you should assemble all such reports and evaluations that have been done over the past three to five years. I recommend assigning several staff members with the task of reviewing the reports and evaluations and then preparing a brief summary of key successes, major obstacles encountered, and lessons learned. Any important internal assessments conducted in the last few years should be included as well.

Use the Lessons Learned worksheet and make sure summaries are short and candid: just one page for a major report or evaluation, with key points and lessons learned in simple bullet format. Honest analysis will help make sure organizational strengths and successes are reinforced and organizational weaknesses and failures are identified, so they can be addressed and corrected.

#### **R2 WORKSHEET: LESSONS LEARNED – Summary of findings**

**Lessons learned from the evaluation of Project:** \_\_\_\_\_

Funded by \_\_\_\_\_ and operated during \_\_\_\_\_

Total funding was: \_\_\_\_\_

**Prepared by (name) and (date)** \_\_\_\_\_ *One page maximum*

1. The objectives were:
  
2. The results were:
  
3. What we did well
  
4. What we need to improve
  
5. Other observations for consideration



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### 4. Competitor Research (Short format). Please report on research about our competitors and what we can learn from them.

Many people like to think nonprofits do not compete with each other. The reality, however, is that all nonprofits are in competition with each other to attract attention, funding, volunteers, and other resources. Donors and grant makers can give their support to you or to other nonprofits. Why yours? You need to know how to stand out and be more appealing than other organizations. Donors and other stakeholders want to see a “value added” from your use of their funds. You need to provide it!

What can you learn from your competitors and partners? In addition to understanding how to position yourself in comparison with them, you can learn much from nonprofit competitors, because they have experience in the same work you do. Use a separate worksheet for each important competitor.

#### **R4 WORKSHEET: COMPETITOR RESEARCH – Short format**

**One of our closest competitors** \_\_\_\_\_ *One page maximum each report*  
**Prepared by (name) and (date)** \_\_\_\_\_

Total income for this NGO: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What we can learn from this NGO
2. What we should avoid that they do
3. How we can differentiate our NGO from them
4. Strategies they use that we should consider
5. Other observations for consideration



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### 6. Department Director Reports. Please report on significant findings, identify key issues, and make important recommendations.

These separate, internal reports should be prepared by the directors of program, fundraising, and finance/administration regarding their respective area of responsibility. If your organization has other departments and functions – such as volunteer management, monitoring and evaluation, or education and advocacy – those directors should prepare reports as well. Insights from recent surveys should be included.

The main purpose of these reports is to enable the director of each department to share his or her views on important issues and concerns and to provide a common understanding of the challenges and opportunities in each functional area for all participants in their planning. Use a separate worksheet for each department.

#### **R6 WORKSHEET FOR ANALYSIS BY DEPARTMENT DIRECTORS**

**Director's report on \_\_\_\_\_ functional area (program, fundraising, finance and administration, or other function) prepared by/date \_\_\_\_\_**

*One page maximum for each report, including survey results*

1. What were our achievements and why?
2. What were our shortfalls and why?
3. What did we miss in the process?
4. How can we do better?

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### 7. Confidential Interviews. Please report on confidential interviews of the most important stakeholders.

When I am a consultant for an organization's strategic planning process, one of my most important tasks is to conduct interviews with ten to fifteen of the most important stakeholders. I prefer to do interviews in person when feasible or by telephone or virtually. The client and I select the people to be interviewed.

I always open an interview with the confirmation that everything they say is confidential and that I will take notes and may use some quotations in my report, but that no quotations would be attributed. I stress we must have their honest input in order to build a strong plan. I do not provide the interviewees with the questions ahead of time, because I don't want people to think too much about the issues until we talk. One of the most important questions is the last question I always ask: "What else should I have asked you?" See the book for **Sample questions for key stakeholders**.

If you do these interviews yourself (very difficult to do) or through an internal consultant, you need to remember that it is challenging to get stakeholders to be honest during a personal interview conducted by someone involved in the organization. Whoever conducts the interviews should confirm the confidentiality of the discussion and repeat several times

#### **R7 WORKSHEET: LESSONS FROM CONFIDENTIAL INTERVIEWS**

**Interview with** \_\_\_\_\_ **Interviewer** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

1. What were our organization's main achievements and why?
2. What were our main shortfalls and why?
3. What new strategies should we consider?
4. What are the main internal issues?
5. What are other changes we should consider?
6. Other issues?



**8. Our Current Strategic Plan. Please report on lessons learned about process and implementation.**

Please identify what worked well and any faults in the planning process and problems during implementation and make recommendations for this cycle. Preparation for the strategic planning retreat should include an assessment of your last strategic plan including the process used to draft the plan, its implementation, and its results (an objective assessment of hits and misses). The goal is to determine what you should continue doing and what you should do differently to create your new strategic plan. It is very important to improve the planning process each time around. You can use the worksheet below to review your previous or current strategic plan.

**R8 WORKSHEET: LESSONS FROM OUR CURRENT STRATEGIC PLAN**

**Lessons about our last strategic planning process and implementation**

Completed by \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ *One page maximum*

1. How did the planning process work?
2. What were our achievements and why?
3. What were our shortfalls and why?
4. What did we miss in the process?
5. How can we do better this time around?

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### 9. Competitor worksheet (long format). Please report on more detailed research about our competitors and what we can learn from them.

I am revisiting the issue of competitor research here, because it is such an important learning step. To do competitor research, I suggest you first list the five to seven organizations that are doing the most similar or comparable work to your own. Then assign one or two of these organizations to a likely member of the planning group to conduct research and come back with a report and recommendations. Completing this task should take less than a day or two.

The net result of this research is a two-page report on how each of your close competitors works and, specifically, what you might learn from them either by copying their efforts or by jumping ahead of them. You can more clearly understand your unique added value and how to differentiate yourself from your closest competitors. You may identify issues of common interest where you might join together for more effective advocacy or lobbying.

#### **R9 WORKSHEET: COMPETITOR RESEARCH – Long format**

Completed by \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Name of organization and contact information
2. The vision, mission, and core values statement
3. Services offered and population served
4. Fundraising, financial, and staffing information
5. Strengths – What can we learn from them?
6. Weaknesses – What should we avoid and where can we excel?
7. Uniqueness – How can we stand out?
8. Possibilities for cooperation
9. Recommendations for setting new benchmarks for our organization – innovation

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### **10. Preparation worksheet. Please share a summary of steps to be addressed in preparing for the planning session.**

With these research findings, you will be prepared to provide everyone with a good grounding in reality for the strategic planning retreat.

#### **R10 WORKSHEET: PREPARATION FOR THE PLANNING**

Completed by \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Issues to be addressed:
2. Board support confirmed:
3. Organizing team members:
4. Facilitation and reporting assignments:
5. Participants in the planning sessions:
6. Research completed:
7. Dates, locations, and details for the sessions:
8. Agenda prepared:
9. Processes confirmed:
10. Worksheets downloaded:
11. Other issues: