



# ACTION PLANNING



Through action planning, your Not-for-Profit Organization (NPO) develops a detailed road map of how you are going to accomplish your most important tasks. Action Planning is also known as *Program Planning* or *Operational Planning*.

Often, action planning comes after strategic planning:

- Through the strategic planning process, your NPO defines its vision, mission, strategies, and objectives.
- Through the action planning process, your NPO determines *how* it is going to implement your strategies so that your objectives are achieved.

Even if your NPO does not have a strategic plan, action planning is still important. You can use action planning to make sure that any major initiative is carried out effectively and on-time.

The action plan answers the following questions:

- What are major initiatives or projects that our NPO will carry out this year?
- What are the tasks associated with each initiative or project?
- Who will be responsible for carrying out each task?
- When will each task be started? When must it be complete?
- In addition to the lead staff person, what people (inside and outside your NPO) will be involved in carrying out the task?
- What special resources—computers, money for hiring specialists, special equipment—will you need to carry out the task?

Action plans typically cover a 1-year period. They are prepared near the end of a year for the upcoming year.

#### Why is action planning important?

An action plan helps assure that your NPO focuses on the most important work priorities and that the work is done in an efficient and coordinated manner. Without an action plan, it is more likely that important steps will be skipped, that assignments will be unclear, or that time deadlines will be missed. These problems lead to poor results. Many NPOs with good mission statements and strategic plans fail to meet their objectives because they do not have a good action plan for assuring that the work actually gets done.

Good action planning has major benefits for your NPO:

- It helps you plan how to use your staff and financial resources most effectively
- It helps you to be proactive, and to avoid “management by crisis”
- It helps assure that your work gets done on time
- It increases staff satisfaction, since assignments and expectations are clear
- It establishes who will be accountable for achieving specific results

# PART I: MAJOR STEPS OF THE ACTION PLANNING PROCESS

STEP	WHAT IT INCLUDES	SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING YOUR ACTION PLANNING PROCESS	WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT
<b>PRIOR TO BEGINNING THE ACTION PLANNING PROCESS</b>			
1. Determine who should participate in the action planning process.	People who have lead responsibility for your NPO's operations should participate in the Action Planning process	Always include the following people in your Action Planning process: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NPO Director</li> <li>• Managers and employees who will have major roles in carrying out your programs.</li> <li>• Skilled volunteers who have major roles in carrying out your programs.</li> </ul>	It is important that the plan have the understanding and support of people who are responsible for carrying it out. Involving these people will also help assure that the actions and timelines set out in the plan are obtainable.

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<p>2. Determine your approach for developing the action plan.</p>	<p><b>Start-up or Developing NPOs:</b></p> <p>Start-up or developing NPOs with few programs may be able to develop their action plans in one or two meetings of the planning team.</p> <p><b>Established NPOs:</b></p> <p>Established NPOs with multiple programs and larger staff will generally need a longer process to develop their action plan. The process will include meetings of the full planning team, as well as between-meeting work by individual managers or small groups.</p>	<p><b>Start-up or Developing NPOs:</b></p> <p>Schedule one longer meeting, or two shorter meetings for developing the action plan. The NPO director should lead the action planning process (see step3 below). Designate a staff member to take detailed notes.</p> <p><b>Established NPOs:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generally, there will be a full team meeting at the beginning of the action planning process. At this meeting, a list of initiatives/programs to include in the action plan will be developed (see step 7).</li> <li>• Individual managers will be assigned responsibility for one or more items on the list, identifying steps, making assignments and setting due dates for their assigned items (see steps 8 and 9)</li> <li>• When the individual managers have completed their work, the full planning team comes back together to put the individual work products together into a cohesive action plan.</li> <li>• NPO director should lead the process (see step3, below) and a staff member should be designated to take careful notes during group meetings.</li> </ul>	<p>Determining ahead of time how you will approach action planning lets team members know what to expect. They are able to schedule their time appropriately.</p>

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<p>3. Arrange for leadership and facilitation of the action planning process.</p>	<p>In most cases, the NPO director should lead the action planning process. The director may be assisted by a facilitator, who focuses on making sure that the process is taking place directly.</p>	<p>For most NPOs, it is important that the NPO director provide leadership in developing the action plan, since the director is accountable for making sure that all of the activities in the plan are carried out.</p> <p>Some NPOs may have a “director of operations” or a similar senior level manager. In those cases, that person might lead the Action Planning process.</p> <p><b>Start-up or Developing NPOs:</b></p> <p>Start-up NPOs that have not done action planning before may want to have an experienced facilitator guide them through the process. It may be possible to find volunteer facilitators to assist with this.</p> <p><b>Established NPOs:</b></p> <p>Established NPOs with multiple programs may wish to use a consultant who specializes in action planning facilitation. This will help ensure a well-organized, productive planning process and will free the director to focus on content of the plan rather than managing the process.</p>	<p>The NPO director will be accountable for the success or failure of the action plan. Therefore the director must be engaged in plan development, working with senior managers to make sure that the action plan includes everything that the NPO needs to do, and that it makes assignments and sets timelines in a way that is achievable.</p> <p>Using a facilitator can help assure that the action planning process goes smoothly.</p>

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<b>DURING THE ACTION PLANNING PROCESS</b>			
4. Identify strategies and SMART objectives from your strategic plan.	If your NPO has a strategic plan, have all members of the action planning team review the strategic plan.	In reviewing the strategic plan, look especially at the identified strategies and SMART objectives that must be achieved in the coming year. Through the action planning process, you will develop the detailed approach for implementing the strategies outlined in the plan, so that the SMART objective will be achieved.	If you have a strategic plan, the Action Plan will describe the detailed steps for carrying out the strategies identified in the strategic plan, so that the SMART objectives in the strategic plan will be achieved.
5. Identify other major initiatives that your NPO will be working on.	<p>If your NPO <u>does not</u> have a strategic plan, list the major initiatives that you will be working on during the coming year.</p> <p>If your NPO <u>has</u> a strategic plan, determine if there are major initiatives that are not in the strategic plan that you will need to implement during the coming year.</p>	<p>Major initiatives could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carrying out your NPO’s programs</li> <li>• Complying with laws or regulations</li> <li>• Developing your NPO’s internal capacity, such as hiring, staff training, IT system development, etc.</li> <li>• Changing your physical space (office moves, repairs, etc.)</li> </ul>	The Action Plan should take into account all of the major initiatives that your NPO will need to carry out in the coming year.

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6. Always include “getting stakeholder feedback” in your action plan.	Part of your action plan each year should be getting stakeholder feedback through a beneficiary survey and possibly other means.	<p>All NPOs should administer an annual beneficiary survey. The action plan should identify steps for carrying out the survey. It should assign staff who will be responsible for developing and administering the survey and for analyzing results. It should set timelines for when the survey will be done.</p> <p>Other approaches for getting stakeholder feedback, such as stakeholder interviews or focus groups, can also be included in the action plan. Interviews are a good approach for new NPOs to use, since they can take the form of simple discussions to get feedback from stakeholders about the NPO’s services.</p>	Routinely gathering stakeholder input will help you evaluate the effectiveness of your services. By understanding how your services are viewed by beneficiaries and others, you can make improvements in your programs.
7. Compile a list of “action items” consisting of major strategies and initiatives for the coming year.	<p>For NPOs with a strategic plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>List all the strategies included in your strategic plan.</li> <li>List any other major initiatives that are not included in the strategic plan.</li> </ul> <p>For NPOs without a strategic plan:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>List all major initiatives you will need to carry out this year.</li> </ul>	<p>If your list of action items is very long, prioritize it so that you focus on the strategies and initiatives that are the most important to accomplish.</p> <p>It may be possible to defer some lower priority items to the following year (or in some cases, they may not need to be done.)</p> <p>See <b>Attachment 1</b>—Action Item List Example</p> <p><b>Attachment 2</b>—Action Item List Template</p>	<p>It is important to start the action planning process with a clear list of the most important things that you need to do in the coming year.</p> <p>The Action Item list should be realistic and focused on high priority activities. It should not include activities that are low priority and that you do not have the staff or resources to accomplish.</p>

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8. Identify steps for carrying out each action item on your list.	Identify specific tasks that will be required to implement each action item. What specifically will be done?	<p>For each action item on the list:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the current status of your work on this action item?</li> <li>• What do you want to have accomplished by the end of the year?</li> <li>• What are the specific tasks you will need to complete to get from where you are now to where you want to be at the end of the year?</li> </ul> <p>See <b>Attachment 3</b>—Task Planning example and <b>Attachment 4</b>—Task Planning template</p>	<p>Most action items require a lot of work to complete, with many tasks involved in carrying them out.</p> <p>By identifying needed tasks to carry out each action item, you can plan your work to make sure that you complete each action item on a timely basis.</p>
9. Make assignments and establish due dates for each task.	<p>For each task, determine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who is responsible for carrying out the task?</li> <li>• When will each task start? By when should it be complete?</li> <li>• What resources are needed to carry out the task?</li> <li>• Who will be involved in addition to the person with lead responsibility?</li> </ul>	<p>In assigning people to each task, consider who has the appropriate skills and authority to carry out the task. Make sure that people are not assigned too many tasks at the same time, or they might not be able to get everything done.</p> <p>Think about how long it should take to carry out each task, and assign reasonable start and end dates for each task.</p> <p>Some tasks require more than one person to do, or they require specialized equipment, vehicles, etc. Think</p>	<p>This is a very important step in the process. It assures that the right people are assigned to carry out the tasks, and that tasks are completed in the correct timeframe.</p>

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		<p>about what resources will be needed for each task, so that you can plan to have needed people and resources available when it is time to carry out the task.</p> <p>See <b>Attachment 5</b>—Task assignment example and <b>Attachment 6</b>—Task assignment template</p>	
10. Compile the action plan	For each action item, you will have tasks, assignments and timelines. Compile these into a single Action Plan.	Review everything you plan to do during the coming year. Check to make sure that the work assigned to individual staff members is reasonable—that they are not assigned too many or too few tasks. Make sure that activities are spaced out over the year so you are not doing too much at once.	The action plan is your NPO’s comprehensive blueprint for its activities for the coming year. It is important that it be practical and achievable with the staff and other resources that your NPO has available.
11. Review the action plan and revise as needed	Review progress on the action plan on a regular basis.	For a 1-year plan, schedule reviews on a monthly or quarterly basis. Team members with responsibility for each item in the plan should report on progress. If the timeline is not being met or other barriers have been encountered, problems should be reviewed and needed changes made at this time.	By periodically reviewing progress in implementing the action plan, you will know whether or not you are on track. If you are falling behind, you can take necessary steps to make sure you successfully carry out the plan.

## PART II: LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

TOPIC	ATTACHMENT
<b>Step 7- Compile a list action items for the coming year</b>	Attachment 1—Action Item List Example
<b>Step 7-- Compile a list action items for the coming year</b>	Attachment 2—Action Item List Template
<b>Step 8-- Identify tasks for carrying out each action item on your list.</b>	Attachment 3—Task Planning example
<b>Step 8-- Identify tasks for carrying out each action item on your list.</b>	Attachment 4—Task Planning template
<b>Step 9-- Make assignments and establish due dates for each step.</b>	Attachment 5—Task assignment example
<b>Step 9-- Make assignments and establish due dates for each step.</b>	Attachment 6—Task assignment template

# PART III: HELPFUL REFERENCES ON ACTION PLANNING

AUTHOR AND TITLE	WHERE IT CAN BE FOUND	WHAT THIS REFERENCE COVERS
<b>Thomas Wolf <i>Managing a Nonprofit Organization</i>, Simon and Schuster 2012</b>		
<b>The Community Toolbox: Chapter 10</b>	<a href="http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1085.aspx">http://ctb.ku.edu/en/tablecontents/sub_section_main_1085.aspx</a>	This comprehensive website includes extensive capacity-building information for community organizations. Chapter 10 is called "Developing an Operational Plan"

# PART IV: NPO SELF-ASSESSMENT: ACTION PLANNING

Your NPO can use the following to identify areas where your Action Planning process works well and areas where it can be improved. For each part of the Action Planning Process, check the appropriate box to show whether the described standards are fully achieved, partially achieved, or not present in your NPO.

ACTION PLAANNING PROGRAM STEP	ACHIEVED	PARTIALLY ACHIEVED	NOT PRESENT	COMMENTS
1. Our NPO has an action plan				
2. If we have a strategic plan, our action plan describes how we will carry out the strategies identified in the strategic plan.				
3. Our NPO has a list of major strategies and initiatives that we will carry out in the next year.				
4. We include "getting stakeholder feedback" on our list of major strategies and initiatives.				
5. We know what tasks must be completed to implement each strategy and initiative on the list.				
6. People are assigned responsibility for each task that needs to be carried out.				
7. Timelines are set for each task that needs to be carried out.				
8. Needed resources are identified for each task that needs to be carried out.				
9. There are regular meetings to review progress on carrying out the tasks identified in the Action Plan.				
10. If it is found that the tasks identified in the Action Plan are not being carried out as intended, the reasons for problems are identified and needed changes are made.				

# PART V. SUMMARY OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS

<b>Parts of the action planning process where our NPO's performance is strong</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<b>Parts of the action planning process where our NPO needs to develop additional capacity.</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> <li>4.</li> </ol>
<b>Next steps—what actions will be taken to strengthen your NPO's action planning process?</b>	