



# Tom Romito

## FACILITATOR

### FACILITATION AND STRATEGIC PLANNING

I'm Tom Romito. I'm a facilitator and I work with organizations that want to improve themselves. This short paper explains how I, as a facilitator, help them do that through a process called strategic planning.

When I meet with a group for the first time, I ask them what they want to accomplish. Usually, they don't know exactly what they want to do. They complain, however, that their efforts are fragmented and unfocused because they don't have any money, their board and officers are burned out, and they don't have a plan for the future. I explain that I can offer three ways to help them. They are action planning, strategic planning, and team building. All three have the objective of improving internal management, but they differ in their approach and intensity. I decide on the right approach to use based on my assessment of the group's health, size, and interest. Sometimes, the organization I'm going to work with is a start-up, or they can't agree on what their mission is. I know right away that it's ripe for a strategic planning process. If the organization is already seasoned and high-performing and just wants a "tune-up," team building or action planning may be appropriate.



If strategic planning is the right prescription for an organization that's new or struggling, I take them through a process that includes 12 steps. I borrowed this process from a book entitled "Strategic Planning for Non-profit Organizations" by Michael Allison and Jude Kaye and adapted it to fit my own facilitative style. The following graphic and paragraphs describe the steps in my process.

An important thing to note about my process is that I help the group achieve clarity on terms. Many groups use the terms of strategic planning interchangeably, and I think this is detrimental to building consensus on anything. The terms I'm talking about are goal, strategy, objective, and action. As I go through the

steps of my process in this paper, I explain how I apply these terms.

**Conduct a desk top briefing.** This is an approach I use to orient the organization's leader and board on the big picture of my strategic planning process so they can decide if they want to undertake it. The desk top briefing actually is a briefing that I give alongside someone's desk or from one end of a table around which people are sitting. I borrowed this idea from the U.S. Army. I use a small wooden board that props up a binder turned inside out. The binder contains sheets of paper in document protectors. Each sheet shows a different aspect of my process. The brief takes about 30 minutes, depending on questions and comments the people I'm briefing have. By the end of the briefing, the leader or the board usually says, "Let's go for it!" or they want to mull it over and get back to me. If the group decides they want go through a strategic planning process, we select a place and schedule to meet.

**Create a goal statement.** The first step in my process is to get the group to define the goal of their organization. The goal is why it exists. Most groups feel they have to have many goals. I submit that any organization, entity, or movement can only have one goal. All other endeavors are subordinate to a single goal. For example, in the world of martial arts, there are many styles. All of them are different paths to the same goal, which is the unification of mind, body, and spirit. I try to get the group to agree on what the single goal of their organization is. I explain that everything else we do during the strategic planning process will support that goal.

**Identify barriers to achieving the goal.** Then I help the group list barriers or issues that impede them from achieving their goal. These barriers might be internal, such as staffing, funding, or leadership. They might also be external to the organization, such as customers, community relations, or elected officials. Then we look at what causes these barriers and what would be the consequences if we did not remove them.

**Review previous and current strategies for removing the barriers.** The idea of listing strategies the group previously or once used, and is currently using, is to acknowledge the group's efforts to achieve the goal on its own. We will also review why past strategies were discontinued, how successful current strategies are, and whether or not we want to keep using them.

**Create a mission statement.** As opposed to the goal, which is what the organization wants, the mission is what the organization does. Based on the group's assumptions and methods, we develop a compelling mission statement that supports the goal. We also come up with a powerful tag line or slogan to help brand the organization. I stress to the group that its mission must support its goal.

**Create a vision statement.** The purpose of developing a vision statement is to get the group to agree on how it sees itself, now and in the future. This is based on the values the group members have in interacting with each other and with everyone who has a vested interest in the organization, such as customers, partners, funders, and elected officials. The vision, too, must support the goal.

**Develop an information-gathering plan.** I explain to the group members that what their “stakeholders” (customers, partners, funders, and elected officials) have to say about the organization will help us to develop potential strategies for removing the barriers that impede us from achieving the goal. Toward this end, we develop a plan to gather this information. We develop lists of what information we think we need, where we are going to get it, and how we are going to do so. Typically, with my help, the group decides that we need to conduct a survey and focus groups. These are the two most powerful tools we can use to gather information. I typically take the lead on developing and running a survey and assembling and conducting focus groups. Look for my separate white papers on these two subjects.

**Conduct a SWOT analysis.** This is where everyone works. I take the information we gathered from the survey and focus groups and construct a SWOT matrix. This lays out the information in four quadrants. The four quadrants are Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. They describe what they think about the organization. Then we relate these quadrants to each other so the group can see potential strategies emerge. Breakout groups lend themselves well to this step. Following this exercise, we bring forward the previous and current strategies noted before and list them along with the potential strategies that emerged from the SWOT analysis.

**Derive core strategies and related objectives.** Here, we take all of the potential strategies from the last step and visualize three to five core strategies that will guide the organization for the next three years. We do this combining, adding, or eliminating potential strategies as necessary to arrive at the core strategies. Core strategies are overarching statements that describe how the organization plans to achieve its goal. The potential strategies that do not become core strategies will be subordinate to the core strategies and support them. These are called objectives. Each core strategy will typically have three to five objectives associated with it.

**Create an action plan.** This is where the rubber meets the road. If everyone worked before, they are really working now. The action plan is another matrix I construct that show what the group is going to do, who is going to do it, and when they are going to do it. The action plan lists the specific actions the group intends to do to achieve the objectives of the core strategies. The beauty of the action plan is that everyone, or almost everyone, in the group, signs up to do something, and they are accountable for accomplishing the action plan. Without these metrics, the following statement prevails: “If everyone is accountable, no one is accountable.” Here is a sample of an action plan matrix:

ACTION	WHO	WHEN

**Develop a companion fund-raising strategy, if appropriate.** In my white paper on developing a fund-raising strategy, I discuss the key steps of how an organization can survive and thrive in hard times. Many organizations do not want to take this into account when they undergo a strategic planning process, for reasons that are not readily apparent. This is why it’s important to get a group to “discuss the undiscussable.” A skilled facilitator can ferret out these reasons.

- **Write the strategic planning document.** Someone has to write a document that captures all of this thinking and talking about the organization's future. I typically prepare a ten-page draft and give it to the organization for consideration. At this point, my role is essentially over. Some organizations will publish the document and some will rewrite it.

So this is my strategic planning process. I have conducted seven full processes like this since 2006 with organizations in Greater Cleveland. All of these organizations state that they are better for the experience because they have a road map for the future.