Keeping Your Strategic Plan Alive

Why Board Approval Is Only the Beginning

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Every organization celebrates the approval of a new strategic plan.

Months of environmental scanning, stakeholder engagement, facilitated workshops, Board discussions, and careful drafting culminate in a single moment: the Board votes to approve the strategy. The document is published on the organization's website, shared with staff and stakeholders, and presented as the roadmap for the years ahead.

It feels like the finish line. In reality, it is only the starting line. The real value of a strategic plan is not created when it is approved. It is created over the next four or five years, as the organization uses it to guide decisions, allocate resources, communicate priorities, and navigate inevitable change. Yet this is where many strategic plans begin to lose their influence. The strategy remains. The document gradually fades into the background.

The Challenge Isn't Writing the Plan—It's Living It

Strategic plans are expected to guide organizations through extended periods of change. During that time, Boards change. Executive leaders retire or move on. Staff assume new responsibilities. External expectations evolve. New risks emerge. Corporate memory gradually fades.

Unfortunately, many published strategic plans provide only a partial record of the thinking that shaped them. They clearly describe what the organization intends to accomplish but provide much less insight into why those priorities were selected, what assumptions informed them, or how implementation was expected to unfold.

Much of that information may have been presented to the Board during the planning process. Environmental scans, option papers, implementation discussions, and risk analyses often support Board approval. Yet much of that context disappears from the published strategic plan itself.

Several years later, future leaders may inherit a strategy without fully understanding the reasoning behind it. The consequences are rarely immediate. The strategic plan may continue to be referenced during annual planning or budget discussions, but gradually its original intent becomes less clear. New initiatives compete for attention, implementation priorities shift, and decisions are increasingly made without reference to the strategic direction that was originally approved.

Over time, different leaders may interpret the same strategic priorities in different ways because the rationale behind them is no longer evident. Important organizational capabilities may receive less attention than originally intended. Progress reporting may become inconsistent, making it difficult for Boards, staff, registrants, governments, and other stakeholders to determine whether the strategy remains on track.

Eventually, the strategic plan risks becoming a historical record of what the organization intended to accomplish rather than an active governance and change document that continues to shape organizational decisions.

What the Evidence Suggests

Our recently released **2026 ESAF Strategic Planning Benchmark**, which examined 50 publicly available strategic plans across Ontario's public-interest regulatory sector, identified several recurring patterns.

Organizations generally explained **what** they intended to accomplish more effectively than **why** those priorities were selected. Organizational readiness received increasing attention, while strategy execution and long-term governance remained significant opportunities for improvement. Perhaps most importantly, the benchmark demonstrated that stronger strategic plans are defined not by their length, but by the quality and completeness of the information they communicate.

The full benchmark explores these observations in greater detail. More importantly, however, it raises a broader question: **What information should every strategic plan provide if it is expected to remain useful throughout its life?**

The Four Cs of an Enduring Strategic Plan

In practical terms, four questions can help determine whether a strategic plan is likely to remain useful long after it has been published. A strong strategic plan should provide **Credibility, Choice, Capacity, and Commitment[1].**

Credibility explains why the strategy deserves confidence. It describes the evidence, environmental context, stakeholder engagement, and planning process that informed the organization's strategic direction.

Choice explains why particular priorities were selected. It preserves the rationale behind important strategic decisions so that future Boards and executive teams understand not only what the organization chose to do, but why those choices were made instead of other alternatives.

Capacity demonstrates that the organization is prepared to deliver the strategy. Governance, leadership, organizational capabilities, technology, partnerships, and resources are not

[1] The Four Cs are not intended to replace strategic planning frameworks or methodologies. Rather, they provide a practical way to think about whether a published strategic plan is likely to remain useful long after Board approval. The evidence behind these ideas is explored in greater detail in the 2026 ESAF Strategic Planning Benchmark Report.

implementation details—they are strategic considerations that deserve to be visible within the strategic plan itself.

Commitment ensures that the strategy remains active throughout its life. It describes how progress will be monitored, reported, communicated, reviewed, and adapted while encouraging Boards and executive leadership teams to continually reconnect organizational decisions to the strategy they approved. Regular communication with staff, registrants, governments, and other stakeholders reinforces strategic priorities and demonstrates that the strategy continues to guide organizational decisions rather than simply document past intentions.

Together, these four elements help transform a strategic plan from a static publication into a practical governance and change document.

Keeping the Strategy Alive

Organizations do not need to replace their strategic plan simply because opportunities for improvement become apparent. Instead, they can continually re-activate it. The strategic plan should become a regular point of reference during Board meetings, executive retreats, annual business planning, budget discussions, annual reports, staff meetings, and leadership onboarding. Revisiting the strategic rationale, implementation priorities, organizational capabilities, and expected outcomes throughout the life of the strategy helps preserve corporate memory while ensuring that day-to-day decisions remain connected to long-term direction.

The Beginning, Not the End

A strategic plan's greatest value is realized not when it is approved, but when it continues to guide organizational decisions over the years that follow. Board approval marks the beginning of a strategic plan's life—not its end. The organizations that will benefit most from strategic planning are those that continue to invest in the strategy after it has been published—by communicating it, revisiting it, learning from it, and using it to shape the decisions that matter most. Because ultimately, **a strategic plan's greatest value lies not in the day it is approved, but in every decision it continues to inform thereafter.**

Where does your strategic plan stand?

Whether your organization is preparing for its next planning cycle or is midway through implementing its current strategy, now is an ideal time to ask whether your published strategic plan continues to provide the guidance needed for effective governance, organizational continuity, and successful implementation.

Download the **2026 ESAF Strategic Planning Benchmark Report** or learn more about **ESAF** at https://www.upstreammanagesolutions.com/resources.