

# Nonprofit Strategies



*SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION*

## *LISTEN TO OTHERS, THEN PLAN FOR SUCCESS*

*Barry VanderKelen*

Most **nonprofit** organizations conduct strategic planning at big moments in their lives: when they're founded, considering a new initiative or in need of funding.

But it's important to have a strategic plan regardless of whether you're facing such challenges. The plan is essentially a road map that details where you want to go over the next few years, and it includes benchmarks to determine if you're achieving your goals. It enables your organization to reaffirm its mission and review its strengths and weaknesses, as well as identify opportunities to offer programs and resources to respond to community needs, and identify threats to its mission, goals and objectives. Long or short, these plans reflect your organization's values. Because of that, they help your group stay focused and avoid spreading

itself too thin. Saying no to a community request is not easy, especially if funding is available for it.

Vince Corsaro, an organizational development consultant based in Laguna Niguel, argues that strategic planning must be based on feedback from clients, donors, volunteers and staff.

The long-term plans will not be valuable if the organization is not regularly seeking feedback from everyone connected to it, he says.

"It's important to get outside of ourselves, our thoughts, biases and experiences, to listen to other people's observations about the organization," Corsaro said recently while helping the YMCA of San Luis Obispo County with its planning process.

Corsaro defines two groups of stakeholders: internal, such as staff and volunteers, and external, such as donors, clients and civic leaders. While it's easier to

seek feedback from those who know you well, your organization can learn more about community needs and how it's perceived by talking with donors, clients and civic leaders.

The organization must truly listen to the feedback; if it does, then those who took the time to be candid will become more engaged with your group. Superficiality will turn people away and reduce the number of engaged stakeholders.

When soliciting feedback, an organization should develop questions, drawn from its mission and goals, that board members and staff can use with everyone. Both positive and negative comments can help refine your organization's plans and activities.

"It is incumbent upon leadership to engage stakeholders and bring the information back to the organization," Corsaro said. "Stakeholder engagement is an ongoing process."

### Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

### Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at [barry@slocf.org](mailto:barry@slocf.org).