



Strategic Thinking in Corona Days – Planning the Future NOW

By Michael J. Weil

While still in the midst of a global pandemic, it is critical to consider and plan for the now different long term future. The damage and the long term implications of the Corona pandemic with the extensive disruption of human life will clearly reverberate for many years to come and most sectors of activity will have to alter course dramatically.

Not-for-profits and communal organizations that survive will at best emerge damaged and shrunk. Yet they are already facing both extensive new needs and heightened existing needs. Hopefully they will survive and be able to recover. Indeed the temptation is to try and do just that. Recover what was lost and rebuild what was. But that would be a shame. Many planners understand that disasters and crises also bring opportunity; and there will be many new opportunities and some significant gains.

Rather than simply trying to survive and recover, the ideal is to rebuild and reinvent. Losses and gains should be analyzed, new needs considered, and threats and opportunities studied carefully. This is the essence of strategic planning and now is the time to think of a strategic planning process designed for post Corona times.

As I have described elsewhere[1], there are *three phases* to rebuilding after disaster. The first is **Survival**, namely – just about managing. The second is **Recovery** whereby one attempts to achieve some level of normalcy. But the third phase of **Rebuilding and Renewal** is the most critical as it sets the course of the organization towards a renewed vision and mission.

In normal times, organizations undergo a strategic planning process once every 7-10 years but a major crisis resets that clock. Now is certainly the time for not-for-profits to consider the future long term. It is also the time for funders and philanthropists to encourage strategic planning and provide funding for such processes.

Thinking long term about the future is a sign of health of an organization, that can bring reassurance to staff and employees, raise morale, and inspire lay leaders, stakeholders and funders to strengthen their support. While a normal strategic planning horizon would for 5-10 years ahead, the post Corona horizon should be shorter of the range of 3-5 years.

What will a post Corona strategic planning process look like?

Most strategic planning processes tend to be lengthy (six to twelve months), drawn out and linear. Today we cannot afford that privilege and such processes need to be **much shorter and probably short-cut**. Two months or so is as about as much as can be afforded[2].

The temptation as we consider planning after a crisis is to rebuild and go back to what was. That should not be an option. Indeed, we should understand that what was, isn't what we need today and maybe what was, wasn't that good either before Corona.

The time to embark on a post crisis strategic plan is now already during the first phase of Survival and before the second phase of Recovery begins.

One effective way of shortening the process is **implementing as you go along**. If a good idea emerges from the process and there is consensus about its effectiveness, then there is no need to wait for the whole process to take its course.

What is paramount is to ask the right questions and consider the real issues. These might take the following forms:

- As we look at the landscape, **we must take stock in an honest way** and ask. Before the pandemic, were we on the road to achieving our goals and objectives? Are we now closer or further away? Has our target population changed? What is our renewed vision of what we want to achieve? Also, what did we do wrong? What did we do right?
- Maybe that means **to change trajectory** and reach for different more relevant goals? How does that get translated into a revised mission statement?
- As the landscape and directions have changed, so too must the operation. The products, services and programs offered may no longer be relevant, while others may have become new priorities. What are **the outputs, products and services that are now needed?**

- While it might be tempting to completely start afresh and throw out the old and what was; we should **still retain what was good and is still relevant** today.
- The basic SWOT[3] analysis is still a useful tool; we need to assess what our **current strengths and weaknesses** are and how these have changed. No doubt there are new threats but also different and new opportunities. How we relate to these in total is the crux of a strategic planning process.
- We need to look at our staffing, assets and resources and judge their relevance. And also at our tool box. Do we have the right skills and tools to overcome this crisis and develop for the years to come? Technology has made significant advances during this crisis. Are we up to date? What can we do more and **better with new tech tools?**
- This is also a time to look at the organizational environment. After all, most communal organizations are going through the same crises. And in so doing, there is a lot of community empathy that we can build on. So we should **consider how we work together with others**. We should consider collaborations and possible mergers.
- Relationships with lay leaders and board members have changed. The lines delineating responsibilities have blurred and the way we communicate has changed. We should consider whether in the future we should **switch in part or in whole to virtual boards**.
- We have learned to operate staff remotely and on a flexible schedule yet keep an organization going. How well has this worked and what have we lost in the process? Is this going to be **the new mode of working?**
- One of the positives of this crisis has been the availability of marketing and communication tools and their use has blossomed. We should look at these closely and consider how our **outreach, communication and marketing** has, will and should change.
- Geography too has changed. Organizations always defined the space and boundaries in which they operated. Local, regional, national or global organizations were defined as such. But today **space and borders mean less**. We have learnt to operate, communicate and provide services to folks everywhere. A global reach is possible, but is it advisable in relation to the revised mission of the organization?
- Finally, **are we prepared for the next crisis or disaster?** We should prepare a crisis playbook?

There are neither simple answers nor just one direction. As part of the planning process, it is important to consider different scenarios, to consider alternative strategies and finally to choose a direction that will take advantage of the new situation, has good chances of implementation and has achieved consensus of stakeholders.

Some might simply wish to just perform a brief critical post Corona assessment. But if we want take advantage effectively of the crisis and its opportunities, we need rigorous thinking and should employ a systematic methodology in the albeit shortened strategic planning process.

The proposals herewith are not only directed at service providers, advocacy organizations or other not-for-profits but at funders too. It is incumbent on funders and philanthropists to do their part. Already many have stepped up and are providing emergency funding. But these are mostly funds to keep the organizations going. Philanthropists and foundations should also help provide the funds for the critically necessary post Corona strategic planning. It is in their interests and critical to thriving.

This is a disaster nobody was prepared for and few could have imagined. But we as humanity will ultimately come out stronger from it. For communal organizations and not-for-profits, those that will survive and thrive will be those that invest in taking stock, thinking about and reshaping the future.

“There are no problems, only opportunities for growth.” – Rebbetzin Dena Weinberg

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[1] “The Story of the Jewish Community of New Orleans after Katrina – It doesn’t have to take a hurricane,” Michael J. Weil, *The Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Volume 88, Nos. 1/2, Winter/Spring 2013 .

[2] The cut in length should not be at the expense of the initial environment assessment process, the identification of critical issues, the scenario building or the visioning. Rather I would propose that the data gathering at the early stages be more limited and the detailed planning of ideas and programs resulting be short cut too.

[3] A systematic assessment of Strengths and Weaknesses; followed by an analysis of Opportunities and Threats.

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