



Forward-Focused: Moving from Reactive to Strategic Leadership

Room 052B



Learning Goals

- Explore how shared expectations, roles, and decision norms can influence the success of your plan
- Identify the agreements needed before debating goals and priorities
- Think about opportunities to use your strategic plan to guide meetings, budgets, staff development and accountability

Intros

Why Plans Stall



Why Strategic Plans Lose Impact



Meetings drift back
to urgent issues



Decisions are
revisited or
undermined



Budgets do not
clearly reflect
priorities



Leaders absorb
accountability instead
of the whole group

**Where does your strategic
plan lose traction?**

**This isn't about
individual capability.**

**It's about whether the
system supports
execution of the plan.**

Planning Under Uncertainty



Image Credit: Sheril Matthews

Two Elements of Strategic Planning

TECHNICAL CHALLENGE

- Schedule a planning session
- Review last year's plan and make updates
- Finalize plan
- Report progress on plan periodically

ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE

- Work through tradeoffs and disagreements
- Finalize the plan and demonstrate united support
- Align roles to support execution of the plan
- Incorporate goals of the plan into key functions of team

The Adaptive Challenge of Strategic Planning

- Leaders are not aligned on what problem the plan is meant to solve
- Stakeholders disagree on priorities
- Mix of authority (Town Mgr/Admin, Select Board)
- Progress requires behavior change not just decisions

Why Municipal Contexts are Challenging



Open Meeting Law
constraints



Political
accountability and
public scrutiny



Election cycles and
turnover



Limited ability to test
or pilot decisions

When Pressure Increases

- Everything becomes a priority
- Decisions default to habit and are revisited or undermined
- Disagreement goes underground and shows up later
- Urgency replaces strategy

Managing Pressure Productively



Commitment to Prioritization and Tradeoffs

Creates enough pressure to cook

Requires

- Willingness to surface real disagreements
- Clarity about tradeoffs and constraints
- Discipline to prioritize, not include everything
- Acceptance that not everyone will agree

Prevents

- Everything becoming a priority
- Plans that avoid hard choices
- False consensus that breaks down later

Clear Roles and Decision Rules

Keep the lid secure

Requires

- Clear roles and boundaries
- Agreed decision-making authority and process
- Shared understanding of who decides, who advises and how decisions are finalized

Prevents

- Decisions defaulting to power or personality
- Relitigating decisions after they're made
- Lack of clarity about how input is used

Agreed Ways to Surface Disagreement

Release pressure in a controlled way

Requires

- Clear norms for dissent and debate
- Shared expectations for when and how disagreements are raised
- Explicit permission to challenge ideas, not people

Prevents

- Disagreement going underground
- Passive resistance or delayed conflict

Monitoring and Adjustment

Allow you to ensure the food is cooking properly

Requires

- Regular check-ins on priorities and workload
- Clear places to raise concerns before they escalate
- Agreed moments to revisit decisions periodically

Prevents

- Plans that are less relevant as the context changes
- Urgency replacing strategy
- Crisis-driven decision-making

**Public service brings
constant pressure.**

**What leaders can control is
how pressure is handled
internally.**

What element(s) do you think your team could strengthen?

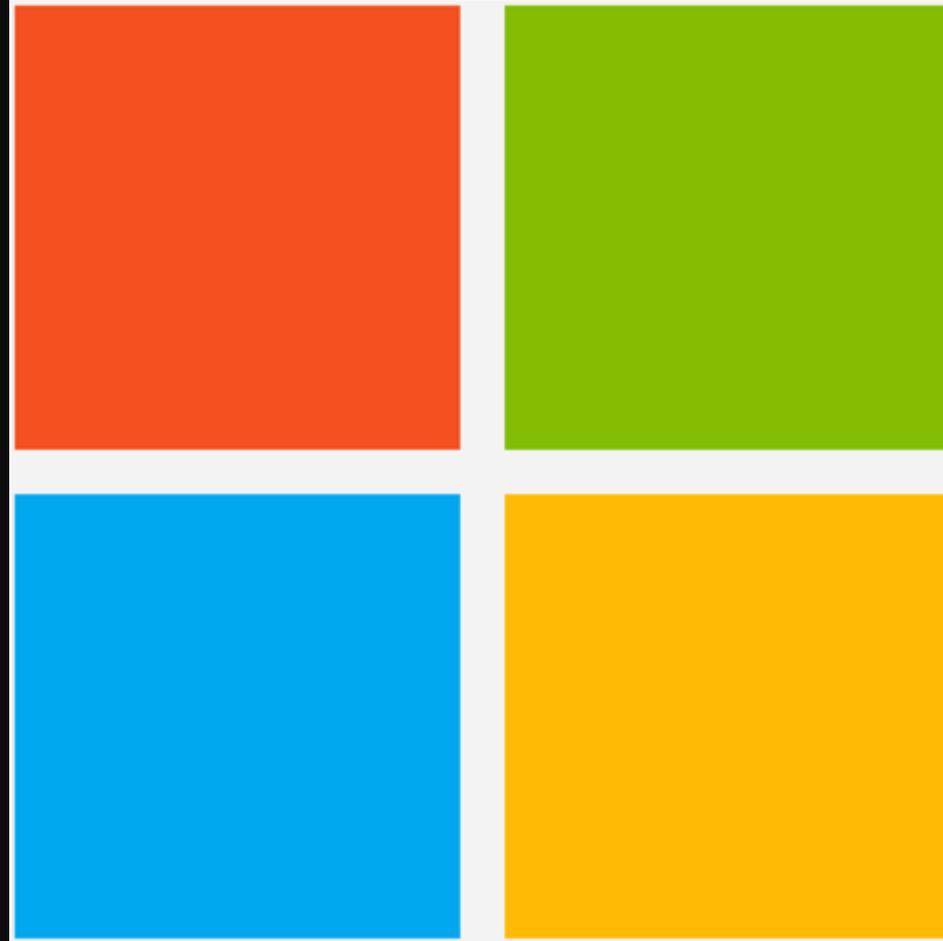
Commitment to Prioritization

Clear Roles and Decision Rules

Agreed Ways to Surface Disagreement

Monitoring and Adjustment

Your Plan is Your Operating System



A Strong Plan Should

- Guide budget development
- Guide team, board, committee work plans
- Shape meeting agendas across the year
- Anchor annual staff goals and performance evaluations

Alignment Test

- What strategic goal does this advance?
- Who owns progress?
- What evidence will tell us that it's working?

**How does your plan
guide your work?**

What gaps do you see?

If you fail to plan...
you plan to fail.

**What is your main
takeaway from today?**

Download Our Two-Page Guide





Thank you!