Shape Your Strategy: Program, Organization, Neighborhood

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Our learning guides offer questions, exercises, and other tools to help you apply ideas in the briefs and other items on our website to your own work. Most of the items identified here, with the exception of "Further reading," are available on the website; just follow the links. While the text refers to "your community" or organization, you may substitute "client" or "target" community or project as well.

Overview and scope. Strategies, unlike goals, include a "how to" recipe for action. *Strategies are smart ideas for pursuing your goals in light of the resources you have or can acquire, as well as the barriers and constraints you face.* Most community developers—and their supporters, too—need smart strategies at three (3) levels: *programs* that help advance specific objectives, such as increasing youth employment or providing more affordable housing; capable *organizations* that perform, self-assess, learn, and adapt over time; and the *neighborhood* level, where broad changes take place that individual programs and healthy organizations might miss unless there's a "scan" of the wider environment, including the region in which the neighborhood(s) is embedded, from time to time.

It's important to know what a strategy is and what it isn't. Building family assets in a neighborhood, for example, is a goal. Doing so through a matched savings program is a strategy. In this case, the strategy is in the form of a program, and that strategy might include an array of *tactics* for accomplishing particular tasks, such as *enrolling clients* or *securing more external funds.* (The give-away is that tactics are operational, while strategies are broader ideas about how to make the most of what you have to work with.) But protecting assets is also a form of "building" them, and preventing asset loss could actually make a bigger impact in the near term than small-scale asset building efforts that affect a handful of families. (Maybe not, but the possibility is worth considering, and it represents a *strategic choice*.) For its part, asset protection might involve an array of strategies, from *public education* (making consumers more aware of the threats) to *counseling* (making consumers more capable of selecting the right financing for their needs) and citywide or statewide policy *advocacy* for stronger protection from

predatory lenders. That's three strategies: the first sounds like a campaign; the second is a program, which would need to be structured as such (with the right training staff, marketing and enrollment, schedule of sessions, assessment, etc.); the last strategy is probably a campaign and/or a sustained coalition of advocates, not a program.

The point of this quick example is that the distinctions among goals, strategies, tactics, and so on aren't just academic. Those distinctions help us recognize importance choices for what they are and make those choices more effectively—if only because they highlight, from time to time, what we don't know but need to learn before acting.

The resources below are under four headings: general, program-level, organization-level, and neighborhood-level. Following the resource list are questions and exercises to help you apply the ideas.

Resources:

General:

1. Briggs-3, "Networks, Power, and a Dual Agenda: New Lessons About Old Community Building Dilemmas," WSCD Brief 07-3 (2007). On this website.

2. Avis Vidal, "Can Community Development Re-Invent Itself?: The Challenges of Strengthening Neighborhoods in the 21st Century," *Journal of the American Planning Association* (1997). Available on this website.

Designing and implementing program-level strategies:

3. Community Toolbox, "Analyzing Problems and Goals" and "Developing a Model of Change" and "Developing an Intervention," University of Kansas: Author.

4. ActKnowledge and Aspen Roundtable on Community Change, "Theory of Change: Online Suite," www.theoryofchange.org

5. Pathways Mapping Initiative (Review background and sample pathways: *School readiness* and *family economic success*).

Developing and implementing organization-level strategies

6. Glickman and Servon, "More than Bricks and Sticks: Five Components of Community Development Corporation Capacity," *Housing Policy Debate* (1998).

7. World Bank, "Building Community Capacity," Participation Sourcebook.

8. Briggs-4, "Perfect Fit or Shotgun Marriage: The Power and Pitfalls in Partnerships," The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT (2003).

Further reading (not online):

9. Mark Moore, *Creating Public Value*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1995). Se especially pp.57-76, on using the "strategic triangle" framework to develop an organizational strategy that responds to the organization's mission, its capacity to act on that mission, and the environment around the organization.

10. Robert Kaplan and David Norton, *The Strategy-Focused Organization*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press (2000). From the inventors of the "balanced scorecard" for assessing organizational performance, this book details how you can link strategy to different dimensions of organizational excellence and use measurement to make better decisions. See, in particular, chapters 1, 3, and 5.

Developing and implementing neighborhood-level strategies

11. Pp.10-12 (Principle #2) in Briggs-2, "Stocks, Flows, and Dreams: Shaping and Measuring Neighborhood Change in Community Development," Working Smarter in Community Development, Knowledge in Action Brief 07-2 (2007). On this website.

12. Briggs-5, "Planning Together: How (and How Not) to Engage Stakeholders in Charting a Course," The Community Problem-Solving Project @ MIT (2003).

Questions to consider and discuss:

1. According to **Briggs-3**, what is the potential relationship between "building community" and changing social outcomes? What are the risks when the links are taken for granted and there is *no* strategy to link them? Using the community health or employment or other examples in Briggs-3, outline a few tangible outcomes you want to change in your community.

2. Why did community development win support as an "industry" in the 1980s, according to **Vidal**? And *how* was it able to do so (through what steps by community development corporations and their backers)? What strategic choices do community developers face, according to Vidal, in an environment of tighter government dollars, developments in policing, education, workforce development, and other fields that need "community-based partners," and other important changes?

3. **Program strategies:** Using the "developing an intervention" and "theory of change" resources online, identify the theory of change behind a key program you already have in place or one you wish to develop. Is there a theory of change (even an implicit one)? What information, for example about causes and effects, do you need to complete one?

4. **Organizational strategies:** Does your organization *have* a strategy to guide its performance and development? How about a strategy for continuous learning? (Remember: A strategy is not a good intention or a lofty mission statement; it is a smart recipe for accomplishing something valuable given practical constraints and resources available.) Does that strategy match the program-level strategies now in use? (That is, is the organization set up to function strategically as a platform for program, campaign or other activities that "create value"?) Does the organizational strategy fit with the strategy(ies) for the neighborhood as a whole? Does the organizational strategy align with the capacity of your organization or its partners?

5. **Neighborhood strategies:** The excerpt of Briggs-2 is focused on how neighborhoods and their change trends are linked to the wider regions around the neighborhood. Is your neighborhood "trending" in parallel to the regional trends? Does this suggest strategies for using regionwide changes to accomplish goals at the neighborhood level? Remember: The focus here is on how to accomplish goals, not what the goals should be. But insights on strategy can lead to a useful rethinking of goals (see Learning Guide 1-1: Define Your Goals). How much do neighborhood stakeholders understand and agree on the changes taking place and the potential to use wider trends or address them more wisely? According to Briggs-5, what are the three main options for "charting a course" with broader stakeholder engagement, and which of these, if any, have you carried out?

Exercise (putting the ideas to work):

1. Using the theoryofchange.org guide, prepare and discuss a program design based on a step-by-step theory of change. Or rethink a program you want to improve.

2. Revisit your organizational strategy, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and find a group of stakeholders—whether internal ones such as staff, residents, and board members or external ones, such as funders and partners—to act as a planning group or test audience for sharpening your strategy.

3. Develop a list of the top 3 regional trends that your neighborhood should "piggy-back" (or take advantage of) and the top 3 trends that your neighborhood must confront (counteract) in order to reach your community development goals. Identify a concrete strategy or two for each trend. Do you have specific programs or other interventions in place for acting on those strategies? What additional information do you need, and where can you get it? Identify funders, board members or informal advisors, local universities, or other potential sources of advice and planning support.