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# Anatomy of a high-functioning strategic plan for city success

Written by Mike Bell and Mike Funk 16th January 2024

As cities adapt to meet the needs of increasingly diverse populations and to reflect the ever-changing dynamics of our economy and political environment, the demand for well-structured, forward thinking strategic planning is more pronounced than ever. A high-functioning strategic plan is a framework that transcends routine operations and charts a course towards transformation and positive change for cities of all sizes.

For the city of Minnetonka, Minn., thoughtful and deliberate strategic planning is helping city leaders navigate challenges, deliver efficient services, foster sustainable growth and elevate the quality of life for residents.

In the “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” Minnetonka sits surrounded by forestry, trails, parks, and, yes, lakes. A suburb of the Twin Cities, the city is locally known for a long history of sound governance, driven by the city’s propensity for strategic planning, performance management and efforts to drive positive community outcomes. Minnetonka’s success in delivering high quality of life for residents is thanks to comprehensive, holistic, innovative community vision. Where Minnetonka stands apart is in their ability to execute against that vision.

### **Strong pillars lead to a strong foundation**

Like many high-performing local governments, Minnetonka’s success begins at the onset of their strategic planning process. Leaders in Minnetonka quickly understood the importance of being intentional about framing their strategic plan. Through deliberate review of the city’s vision, mission and values, city leaders and council members identified six central pillars:

1. Financial strength and operational excellence
2. Safe and healthy community
3. Sustainability and natural environment
4. Livable and well-planned development
5. Infrastructure and asset management
6. Community inclusiveness

### **A top down, bottom up, community-led approach**

The identification of Minnetonka’s six pillars and the creation of the top level of the city’s strategic plan are textbook examples of how leveraging external stakeholders and active leaders can be a make-or-break element of executing their plan.

We have seen firsthand the impact that high energy and focused engagement from leadership, staff and community stakeholders can have on the long-term success of a strategic plan. This holistic engagement can, and should, continue throughout the plan, after the initial conversations are had and the core pillars are outlined.

Minnetonka city leaders leaned heavily on input from city council when developing the secondary level of the plan, which included identifying 24 specific strategies to support the six core pillars.

But engagement and collaboration doesn’t stop at the top. Leaders within the city government also use community feedback surveys to help guide decision making, establish priorities and ensure tie-in to the city budget.

With the strategies in place, the city leadership team then collaborates with staff at all levels to develop realistic action steps, which make up the third level of Minnetonka’s high functioning strategic plan.

With 27 years of experience in local government, Minnetonka City Manager Mike Funk had seen many instances of local governments trying, and sometimes failing, when it comes to strategy execution. In Minnetonka, city leaders have built a well-oiled machine that sees council, community and staff working in tandem to identify priorities and work towards them.

While leadership buy-in is critical to successful strategic planning, completing action steps is essential to implementing that plan. To really execute and make progress, Funk recommends instilling a sense of ownership among staff members for each pillar and action step. For example, the *financial strength and operational excellence pillar* is owned by the finance director. Each pillar has a defined leader who is responsible for supporting a team of approximately 10 individuals who contribute to that pillar.

In many cities, a few people at the top create the plan and try to make it happen. For Minnetonka's leaders, the success of the plan relies on reaching more people on the front lines and ensuring they play a role in creating—and executing—action steps. For this reason, it's important that the people doing most of the work also have a say in creating the steps and defining the performance metrics.

For Minnetonka, it was critical to find a balance between the role of city council and the expertise of city staff. This meant ensuring council members offered input and high-level support at the 30,000-foot level, while allowing staff to organize tactics and steps for strategy execution. The secret to success? Implementing both a top down and bottom-up approach.

### **Visual progress moves the needle on accountability and strategy execution**

While laying a foundation that is thoughtful and inclusive is a central component of successful strategic planning, accountability and ongoing support of the plan are necessary for long-term success.

Minnetonka staff members update the plan's action steps every year, which generally includes between 85 and 95 deliverables. Recognizing the city council's role in identifying priorities and goals, and informed by community feedback, the staff's role is to make the plan come to life.

Creating a culture of accountability inside an organization isn't easy, but it's much easier when you have a champion on board, someone whose responsibilities include implementing the plan, educating others on how best to provide updates and managing the overall implementation of the city's chosen software for managing the plan's execution.

Minnetonka has implemented a performance management software platform that brings the plan to life visually and simplifies the process of staff providing regular updates. By leveraging color-coded progress bars, regular automated reporting delivered directly to contributors' inboxes, and the ability to copy in action items from previous years, staff members can readily see and understand the progress on both action items and larger strategic priorities. It's easy to identify action items that have not been completed, which keeps staff accountable and motivates them to submit updates regularly.

### **Measuring what matters**

Forming key performance metrics that are monitored and measured regularly is another essential part of successful strategy execution. Metrics tell the city's story of progress, transformation and even disruption.

Minnetonka currently has approximately 40 performance metrics, which the city uses in addition to data from its annual community survey, as part of the process for evaluating its successes. In addition to using this data to track progress, the team also uses it to identify opportunities for growth. While it's difficult to step back and take a deliberate look at the places where your team is falling short, it is vitally important in ensuring that goals are met, and priorities are correct.

Measuring performance and reporting on the strategic plan also provides greater focus and clarity for Minnetonka's city council. A public dashboard with visual representation provides a framework for council to remain focused on what is important, and to drive decisions and priorities.

### **A mindset of continuous improvement**

A high-functioning strategic plan does not have a finish line, and continuous improvement is a true motivator for Minnetonka's team.

Prior to the strategic plan's development in 2019, only a handful of people were involved in executing Minnetonka's strategy. Implementing performance management software has helped redefine the organization's relationship to strategy and now, strategy is something that everyone is responsible for.

Part of Minnetonka's goal for continuous improvement is to expand the reach of the strategic plan, and access to the software, so as many employees as possible are engaged in the process. Further integration of the strategic plan in all areas of the organization is a key priority for the team moving forward.

While the excitement of a new strategic plan results in a high number of stakeholders and staff engaging with the plan and completing action steps, time can make a once exciting plan feel stale. In the spirit of continuous improvement, leaders at Minnetonka recognize the need to constantly discuss ways to implement new ideas and improvements and keep team members engaged in the process.

One way to avoid stagnation has been to continually be thinking about and working towards the next phase of the plan. Each year, staff will once again collaborate to revisit and update the action steps (third level of the strategic plan). It's an opportunity to incorporate some of the new ideas that have been percolating, while also building on the successes of the current year. Plans tend to "age out" after three to four years, given how much change can occur in just a few years. That, combined with newly elected council members, has led to a planned "refresh" of the top two levels of the plan in 2024. (The current plan was first implemented in 2020).

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*Mike Funk has more than 25 years of city administration experience working in urban, suburban and rural communities. Before joining the city of Minnetonka, Funk served as the assistant city manager/HR director for the city of Maplewood, Minn., and city administrator for the communities of Minnetrista and Olivia, Minn.; and Gibbon, Neb.*

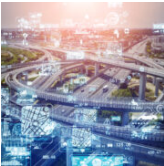
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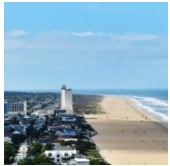
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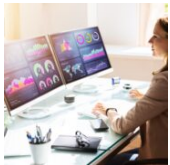
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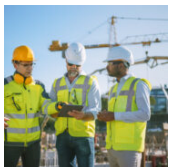
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