Review: The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution
By David La Piana
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I recently read *The Nonprofit Strategy Revolution* by David La Piana after a Facebook friend raved about it.

The book, first published in 2008, is broken into three parts. Part One makes the case for a "Strategy Revolution" in which nonprofits ditch "traditional strategic planning" processes in favor of what the author suggests is a more nimble, ongoing process of strategic thinking. Part Two consists of a series of 10 tools that organizations can use to implement the book's suggested processes. Part Three (which is available either as an accompanying CD or online) consists of a series of guides organizations can use in facilitating La Piana's suggested processes.

The inclusion of practical tools as Part 2 and 3 for organizations is worth applauding at the outset. Too many nonprofit books focus on theory, but leave it to the reader to reinvent the wheel in figuring out how to implement. The tools seemed uneven to me, particularly those that attempt to be templates that can be used by a wide variety of nonprofits of all sorts and sizes. Nonetheless, the tools will give a significant leg up to organizations as long as they recognize they are time-savers that they must further adapt to their circumstances rather than use uncritically. More books aimed at nonprofits should follow the lead of including practical tools.

Of course, the best, most useful tools are worthless if the underlying process the author suggests is flawed. Which brings us to the heart of the matter.

La Piana argues that traditional strategic planning is broken. Because of the flawed processes used, it leads organizations to create laundry lists of goals, to shoe-horn strategies into artificial timelines, to confuse planning with consensus building, and to forecast the future from a single snapshot in time. Because of the long timeline for traditional strategic planning processes, organizations are "put on hold," frustrating staff and volunteers. The net result is long, written plans that are rarely implemented and quickly outdated.

I found this initial chapter of the book both familiar and frustrating. I have personally experienced every flaw La Piana noted, though rarely to the extent suggested. I felt reading it as if he was caricaturing bad strategic planning and treating that as the norm.

Admittedly, I am biased in that I facilitate processes that on the surface resemble those La Piana pans. But there are solutions for the problems La Piana raises -- solutions that he makes no effort to acknowledge.

With that said, even after reading the opening Chapter and coming away unconvinced a revolution was necessary, I was open to exploring whether a very different process could yield better strategic decision-making.

Chapters 2 through 9 represent La PIana's "revolution." Chapter 2 introduces the concept of the strategy pyramid, with organizational strategies on top, programmatic strategies in the middle, and operational strategies on the bottom. These distinctions made sense to me, as well as his prioritization of them (the top of the pyramid must be determined first, then work downward).

Chapter 3 and 4 focus on organizational strategy – defining what it is and what it looks like. I liked and may well adopt some of the language and concepts La Piana introduces. I particularly appreciated La Piana's emphasis on organizations connecting their financing directly to their mission as part of one overall "business model" rather than as two separate, disconnected decisions. I also appreciated his emphasis on being aware of an organization's competition and thinking through its "competitive advantage." I've personally been part of a planning process that went awry specifically because it planned for the organization without accounting for its allies and how they'd react to strategic change.

Chapters 5 and 6 then detour (from my perspective) to focus on "Strategy Screens" and "Big Questions." The former left me unconvinced. La Piana argues for organizations to identify a predetermined set of criteria (e.g. "Strategy Screen") that the organization will then apply over the subsequent time period to determine whether to pursue a new strategy idea or opportunity that emerges. In theory, this sounds great. But in practice, I found the examples he provided to be highly simplistic and unlikely to actually save time for the organization when the time actually comes to make a decision. In the real world, the range of potential strategies and opportunities is so varied that trying to use a single strategy screen strikes me as hopeless, as well as potentially counterproductive.

Chapter 6 ("Big Questions") was more compelling to me. Big Questions represent forks in the road for an organization when something new has happened that represents a fundamental challenge (or opportunity) that could impact a nonprofit's "Organizational Strategy." Rather than confront these once every few years as part of a long planning retreat, La Piana suggests Big Questions should be identified and grappled with separately as they come up – after a retreat has first developed an Organizational Strategy (and strategy screen). I like the idea of boards grappling with strategy outside of traditional planning retreats. I also like presenting boards questions and not just topics.

Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 cover the development of Programmatic and Operational Strategies. Chapter 7 is chock full of useful tips about logic models and program evaluation that should be valuable to an organization even if doing a more traditional planning process. Of course, La Piana argues that programmatic strategies should be launched, updated, and/or abandoned on an ongoing basis, rather than only once every few years as part of a strategic planning process.

Chapter 8 (operational strategies) was unfortunately short. While acknowledging that operations take up "much of a nonprofit manager's time," the chapter itself seemed like a hodge-podge of thoughts instead of a coherent system by which organizations could do operational planning.

Chapter 9 is entitled "Putting it All Together" and aims to explain how the processes suggested can fit together as a continuous cycle.

Upon finishing Chapter 9 for the second time, my reaction was "that's nice."

Had the author provided useful concepts and tools for thinking about strategic planning? Absolutely.

Should organizations consider developing an "Organizational Strategy" at a planning retreat, while dealing with other elements of a strategic plan in subsequent meetings? Many times that will make sense.

Am I glad I read it? Definitely.

Should organizations with success doing traditional strategic planning throw out processes that have worked for them? Hardly.

And is the process suggested a "revolution." I think not.

In the end, leadership matters. With skilled facilitation and disciplined organizational leadership, you are likely to have success with a traditional process or the process La Piana recommends. Conversely, if you have poor facilitation and undisciplined leadership, no process will save you.

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