

What do we mean by strategic planning in the nonprofit context?

In my mind, there are three key distinguishing characteristics.

First, it's long term. Certainly more than a year. It might be as short as 2 years. For most nonprofits, it generally runs 3-5 years, though I've heard of organizations with 10 year strategic plans.

Second, it embraces the entire organization, across functions. It covers your program (the ways you're trying to change the world) and your institutional capacity. One test to know if it's comprehensive: for any significant activity of the organization, you should be able to point to what part of the strategic plan that it fits within.

Third, it answers a series of big questions about the organization. Put in the simplest terms these questions are:

- Who we are?
- Where do we want to go?
- How do we get there?
- How will we know if we're successful?

That's it. I've seen strategic plans as short as 3 pages and as long as 50 that meet these tests. What's right for your organization, of course, depends on many factors.