

1. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ESSENTIAL PLANNING PROCESS

As indicated by Illustration 1, the Essential Planning approach delineated in this guide begins with a systematic assessment of the library's current reality, known as a Situational Analysis. Following the completion of the Situational Analysis, including making sense of the information gathered, the next step is to imagine a compelling vision of the future where the library is successful and effective; through to the setting of three to five strategic directions, with corresponding objectives and tasks that will close the gap between where the library is and where it wants to be; into implementation of the plan, and a monitoring of progress.

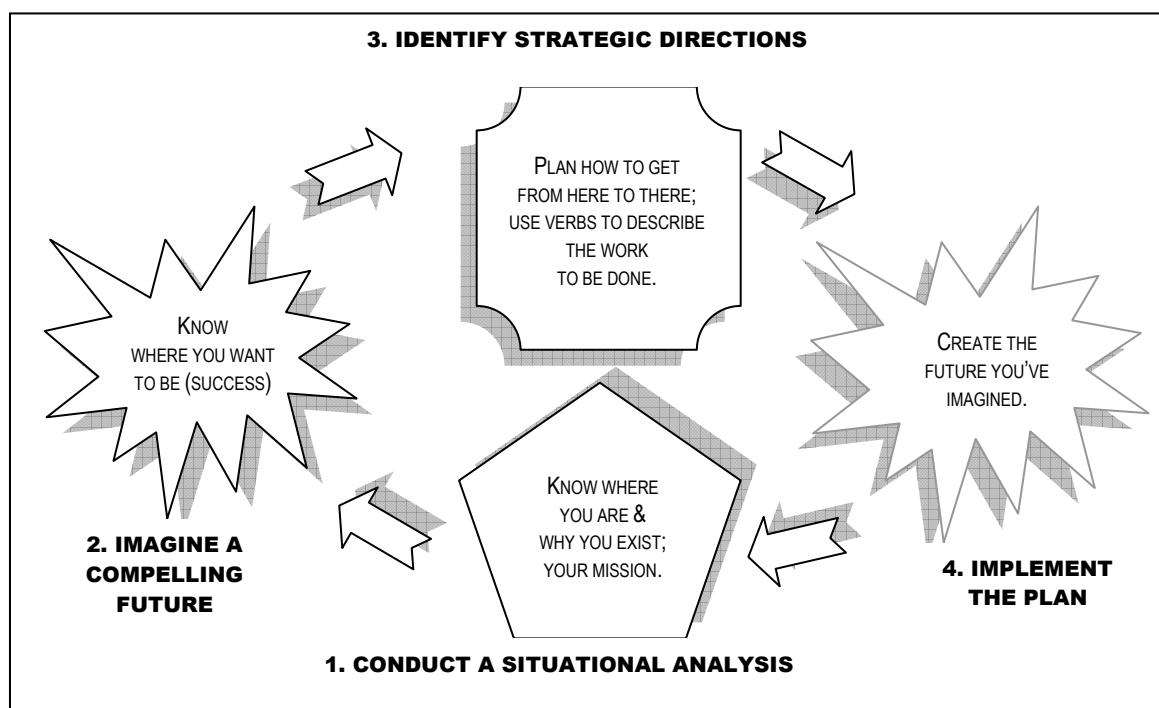


ILLUSTRATION 1: AN ESSENTIAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK FOR PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Finally, the cycle will begin again, with a new Situational Analysis, including a revisiting of mission and values, a new vision, and the establishment of new strategic directions. It is an ongoing process, flexible and open to changes in the community or the environment, while staying true to the course of improving library service to the community in pursuit of a vision of success. Simply put, it is a commitment to ask and answer four essential questions over time, on a rotating basis:

- Where is the library right now?
- Where do we want the library to be?
- What will it take to get there?
- Are we there yet?

While it is a library board responsibility to ensure that planning takes place, it is vital that board and staff embark upon the process jointly, freely sharing and exchanging views and information. For Essential Planning to be successful and useful, board and staff need each other in order to, first, appreciate the context in which they collectively plan and deliver library service, and second, make informed choices about a successful future for the library, and the appropriate strategies to achieve that future.

Essential Planning affords participants an important opportunity to take a collective step back from the day-to-day busyness of running a library, and spend time pondering and discussing what the library does, for whom, what difference it makes in the lives of individuals and/or the community, and what values it embodies. For the plan to lead to meaningful change, the mission, vision and values articulated cannot be borrowed from other libraries, or otherwise quickly thrown together. The wording, and more importantly, the ideas and concepts behind the wording, must be deliberate and strategic for this particular library, at this particular time in its evolution. Such meaning can only be created through conversation, consensus and shared ownership of the mission, values, and vision that will form the framework of the plan.

3.1 Getting Ready to Plan

While it may seem redundant, it is very important to do some planning and preparation before embarking upon Essential Planning. The first order of business is to secure each board member's support for the undertaking, and a willingness to participate and contribute to the process. There also needs to be a commitment on everyone's part to make the plan meaningful and workable, and to implement it to the fullest extent possible. There is no point in planning if everyone, or even half the board, is wed to the status quo. There has to be a willingness to change and do things differently, or do different things, on the part of board and staff. See Appendix 1 for a checklist aimed at gauging board readiness to undertake Essential Planning.

It is equally important not to be too ambitious or unrealistic in what you expect to change or achieve as a result of your planning efforts. Essential Planning is not a magic formula or recipe for success, but rather, it serves as an invaluable navigational tool. As with a road map, you still have to travel every mile, one way or other, but you do so with a sense of where you are headed, and pace yourself and your resources accordingly.

3.1.1 Establishing a Planning Committee

Once the board has decided to embark upon Essential Planning, it is time to establish a Planning Committee. Ideally, the committee consists of three to five individuals, including the CEO and possibly a second staff member, as well as two or three board members. Some libraries decide to also include a library patron and/or municipal manager on the Planning Committee. It is this small group who will oversee the process, clarify the board's expectations regarding the outcomes of planning, work with any outside consultants involved, and serve as the conduit between the board and the planning process, ensuring the board as a whole gets involved at the appropriate times, and in the appropriate ways. This may also be the group charged with the writing of the plan, once the mission, vision, and strategic directions have been determined by the board.

3.1.2 Setting Parameters and Allocating Resources

It is a good practice to establish ahead of time what you want out of planning, and name any specific questions or issues you would like addressed. The nature of information you are seeking, as well as any outcomes your particular situation requires, often determine certain pieces of the planning process. This includes not only what steps are important, but the extent and method of user and/or public consultation appropriate to your circumstances. It may also influence whether a consultant with planning expertise will be needed, and for what parts of the process.

From the Files

In the case of East Gwillimbury Public Library, expectations of an astounding rate of growth and development for the community were a driving force throughout the planning process. While everyone involved was committed to gathering feedback from current library users, and a number of focus groups were conducted to achieve this, there was strong agreement that information about the community-at-large and the potential community-at-large was more important at this time in the evolution of East Gwillimbury. Thus board members involved themselves in the gathering of community information and it was given more weight in the Situational Analysis.

An issue related to the extent of information gathering you intend to undertake, and the kind of information you need to gather, is that of allocating resources to the planning process. At this point, we are not talking about funding new initiatives that arise out of the plan, but funding the process itself, making sure that there is the staff time and money required to complete the work of planning. Typical expenses include:

- staff heavily involved in the planning may need to be replaced in their other duties, eg. public service, or be relieved of work that can wait;
- additional staff hours may be needed for some work, eg. data entry for survey responses, administering in-person exit surveys, bringing staff in at a special time for a focus group, etc.;
- a consultant's fee for advice and/or assistance with certain pieces of the planning process;
- a facilitator's fee for conducting key sessions, eg. Situational Analysis summary; visioning, focus groups, etc.
- a fee for running the survey data, if using someone other than staff;
- publicity related to the library's planning process, possibly soliciting feedback or input;
- refreshments offered during focus groups and other consultation methods that involve gathering people together;
- printing costs for reproducing survey instruments and/or other documents related to planning.

3.1.3 Deciding if and How to Use a Consultant

Very few organizations choose to do planning completely in-house, without external assistance. A small number, on the other hand, choose to contribute as little staff and board time as possible, and hire an external consultant to oversee and even drive the entire planning process, up to and including the crafting of the planning document. Most organizations, including public libraries, opt for an approach that sits somewhere between these two extremes.

While the decision to hire outside expertise is often related to the library's budget for planning, it represents good management sense to opt for utilizing an external consultant for some assistance, while also investing significant staff and board time in the work of planning. It is, after all, the library board and staff who must own the contents and ramifications of the plan, not the consultant. And it is the act of engaging in the process of planning and strategizing, not the existence of a planning document, that will reap the greatest benefits for the library. The planning process affords board and staff valuable opportunities to learn and think and strategize together, resulting in more informed, more strategic, and ultimately, better decision-making with regards to the planning and development of library service.

Usually, the CEO, in consultation with the board, is able to determine where they will most benefit from external assistance. Libraries tend to hire consultants for one or more of the following stages of planning:

- the design and conducting of extensive public consultation as part of the Situational Analysis; this may include surveys, focus groups, public meetings, interviews, etc.
- the analysis and reporting of the data arising from public consultation; the nature of the reporting depends on whether it will be distributed as a public document or used in-house as background information
- the facilitation of key decision points in the planning process; these include the review or articulation of mission and values, the work of imagining a shared vision of future success, the identification of strategic directions to achieve the vision, and the development of objectives and tasks related to each strategic direction
- the development of a functional planning document that identifies the library's mission, vision, strategic directions, objectives and significant tasks; the consultant's role may be that of providing the framework for the document, advising in the development of objectives and tasks, assisting with active language, and/or actually writing the document
- the establishment of a mechanism for monitoring progress, including the identification of appropriate measures of success for stated objectives
- the formal presentation of the library's plan to Municipal Council and/or other key stakeholders; presentation of both the process and the plan by an 'outsider' is particularly appealing if the plan includes controversial or costly ventures, such as a branch closure, a new automation system, or a major building project.

Public libraries in southern Ontario vary in their approach to engaging a consultant to assist with planning. While SOLS has provided planning assistance

to all sizes of libraries, the trend is that smaller, more rural, libraries are more likely to use a SOLS consultant for ongoing advice and assistance throughout the process, as well as enter into contractual agreements for assistance with specific components, eg. conducting focus groups, facilitating the Situational Analysis summary and visioning session, leading a workshop on writing the plan. Larger libraries are more likely to use a planning consultant from the private sector. In some cases, libraries employ the services of both Southern Ontario Library Service and a private sector consultant to undertake different parts of the planning process.

Regardless of the approach taken by any public library of any size, it is crucial to make the distinction between the work of planning that can be done by others, and the decision-making, which can only be done by the library board. It is the library board's responsibility to develop and deliver library service that is relevant and responsive to the community it serves, and therefore, it is the library board's responsibility to make sense of the library's current situation, and decide on future directions that will serve the community well.

3.2 Customizing the Essential Planning Process

The Essential Planning framework presented at the beginning of section 3 (depicted visually in Illustration 1) translates into the following six steps, for purposes of identifying the work of planning:

1. Conduct a Situational Analysis:
 - a. Gather information about your current reality/ where you are right now, and why you exist (the ***situational*** half of Situational Analysis);
 - b. Collectively make sense of the information gathered; decide together what you've learned and what it means for the development of library service (the ***analysis*** part of Situational Analysis).
2. Imagine a compelling vision of future success for the library.
3. Identify 3-5 strategic directions that will achieve the compelling future.
4. Build the plan by adding objectives and tasks to each strategic direction.
5. Write the plan, highlighting the new activities identified.
6. Use the plan to create the future you've imagined.

The process, as outlined, includes numerous opportunities for customization in response to the particular needs of an individual library. It also allows for scalability, depending on size of library, resources available for Essential Planning, and any particular circumstances driving the decision to embark upon planning. The Planning Committee will work with the consultant, if one has been hired, to finalize the best planning process to meet the library's needs, and to develop a timeline to keep the project on track. See Appendix 2 for a sample timeline.

3.2.1 A Word about Language

Regrettably, there is no standard or consistent approach to the language of planning. While earlier literature had readers struggling to understand the distinction between goals and objectives, more recent articles and books tend to use one or other, or both, interchangeably. Tasks are sometimes called actions, denoting the concrete work that needs to be done to achieve objectives. Strategic Directions are sometimes called Strategies or Goals, and Objectives are sometimes called Strategic Directions. Likewise, a Situational Analysis is, in some cases, the same thing as an Environmental Scan, while in this guide there is a distinction between the two, the Environmental Scan being one part of the Situational Analysis.

There has been every attempt to use language consistently, and with definition and explanation, throughout the guide. The language that appears in the planning process outlined above is the language used throughout.

3.2.2 A Word about Meetings

Further to the discussion in section 1.2.2 the Essential Planning approach recommends holding one full-day session for library board and staff. Whether or not all staff attend, or how many, depends on how many there are, and how big a room is available for the session. Ideally, every board member is able to be there, and from three to ten staff, representing the range of programs and services offered by the library.

The timing of the session is important in that the information gathering phase needs to be completed and the information made available to board and staff prior to the session, as background reading. The agenda for the day is to engage in a series of conversations that address steps 1b, 2 and 3 of the Essential Planning process. That is, participants will collectively make sense of the information that has been gathered and summarize the library's current reality. They will then look to the future, and collectively imagine an appealing and compelling future for the library. Finally, they will collectively identify the 3-5 major thrusts of work to be done in the next 3-5 years to move the library towards its compelling future.

Since the one day session covers much of the crucial decision-making, additional meetings earlier and later in the process are minimal. Depending on how many people are involved in the information gathering, meetings may be required to coordinate the various activities.

The Planning Committee will need to meet at least a couple of times following the session to refine the language for the mission, vision and strategic directions; and identify objectives and tasks for each strategic direction. The board as a whole will need to endorse the final version of the written plan. As well, interim draft wording and revisions may or may not go back and forth between the committee and the board, before final wording is agreed upon and endorsed by the board.