

Manager's Corner



Strategic Plan Implementation as a Process of Change

By Ian Prichard, Deputy General Manager, Calleguas Municipal Water District

Strategic plans are everywhere. Some gather dust. Others influence a chief executive's daily decision making. When done right, they can provide an effective platform for even the most radical organizational change.

At its core, a strategic plan is a statement of policy priorities. These can—and should—change with the times, based on what your organization has learned from day-to-day operations. The policy process is a cycle and each stage—planning, implementation, evaluation—influences the next. Planning establishes a set of hypotheses about the future and how your organization

can best meet it. Implementation tests those hypotheses. Evaluation measures the effects, pointing, in turn, to new hypotheses about how to improve. There is no end state. Even if you could build every project on your CIP, wrap up all those lawsuits, and negotiate a perfect union agreement, your employees will change, your ratepayers will change, the climate, the economy, the

political environment—it's all going to change. And those changes affect what's possible for your organization to accomplish.

In the case of Calleguas Municipal Water District, following severe water allocations in 2022 that resulted in unprecedented water use restrictions, the Calleguas Board of Directors created a new vision in the 2023

Strategic Plan that will revolutionize operations. From being a wholesale water distributor that essentially wheels water from a larger wholesaler to 19 retail agencies, Calleguas envisions developing local supplies to diversify our supply portfolio; amounting to what is, in our world, a revolutionary transformation.

What A Strategic Plan Is—and What It's Not

A strategic plan tells the community what's important to policymakers and how they plan to express it. Front and center in the plan is often the Mission Statement, a distillation of the organization's core purpose, which is usually perennial. The Vision Statement, describing how the organization conceives of its future form and function, can be tweaked whenever the strategic plan is reopened or overhauled at inflection points in an organization's trajectory.

Then there are the priorities and objectives, some of which can change significantly from plan to plan. The trick is to elaborate these at the right altitude: you want them to be tangible enough for managers to translate into work plans, but you don't want them to be work plans. Policymakers generally aren't involved in carrying out the plan. That's the work of your chief executive, who can keep the board apprised of progress through periodic updates.

Aligning Capacity with Vision

How much of the organization's vision outlined in the strategic plan you'll be able to fulfill depends not just on having enough people to do the organization's work, but the right people. That might seem obvious, but it's important as part of the strategic

planning process to ask, "Are we capable of doing this?" If not, can you hire the people to do it? The board can only provide the organization chart and salary schedule that are possible within its economic and political constraints. Knowing your constraints on how the organization can grow is critical to planning for what that growth will look like.

As an agency that essentially imported surface water and built the infrastructure necessary to get that water to new development through six decades of growth, Calleguas long prided itself as an organization of exceptional engineers and superhuman operators.

Developing local resources is a different ballgame. It's going to require that we think differently; influence policymaking at the local, state, and federal levels; and enter the public square via modes of communication that may be new to us. Calleguas needed to build capacity to do that, so we created new departments and increased our workforce to staff them.

From Concept to Concrete

Whether creating new programs, expanding jurisdictional boundaries, or building new infrastructure, implementation—that test of your strategic hypotheses—takes place in the physical world. Depending on your setting, this can present a whole new set of challenges. For Calleguas, this looks like increasing costs and decreasing revenues. Ventura County is nearly build out. Entrenched water use efficiency and statewide conservation mandates mean people are using less water. The climate—hydrologic, climatic, political, regulatory—is changing. All the easy

projects have been done. What's left is the gathering realization that new alignments of interests are required to build, together, the things we can't do on our own.

This all takes time, which is the final negotiation in the process.

Executives want to execute. Board members want to be reelected. This isn't a bug, but a feature; our institutions are structured to deliver results. Some hypotheses are easier to test than others—once a pipeline is in the street, it's pretty tough to change its diameter—but remembering that the policy process is a cycle that evolves and revolves can help your organization navigate the competing pressures of planning and implementation. Getting to the end is just a chance to go back to the beginning.

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Learn more on the topic at the General Manager Leadership Summit session "Leadership Lessons from Your Peers - Collaboration and Transformation."



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