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Plan to Succeed with a Great Strategy

You've probably heard the saying, "if you fail to plan you plan to fail." We'll even take it one step further: "If you don't have a good strategy, you're done before you start." Whether you're considering an advocacy effort, a communication campaign, or a way to improve internal systems and operations, a strategy is essential for achieving full potential and impact. This newsletter is devoted to stories of strategy and tools that can help you create a workable, effective strategy for your next project or for your entire organization.

What Does It Really Mean to Be Strategic?

Although it may seem obvious in the abstract, a concrete strategy can be hard to define. That's one key reason why many organizations may think they're being strategic when actually, they aren't. Other organizations know enough to identify a problem, but are at a loss as to how to create a plan of action to overcome it. Still others may identify where they want to go, but see the path riddled with roadblocks and barriers they just can't seem to get around.

At ACS, we've helped organizations negotiate the ins and outs of strategy development for more than a decade. In doing so, we've learned key tips for strategy development.

Understanding What Strategy Is—and Isn't

ACS defines strategy as a clear, documented, and robust yet realistic plan of action that moves an organization toward its goal. Strategy not only helps you see the path from point A to point B, it also helps you understand the steps to get there, how you can deploy your resources effectively, and how you can increase the impact of your work along the way.

It's easy to confuse strategy with goals and tactics. Think of it this way: The goal is the ultimate destination you want to reach. The strategy is the roadmap you'll take to get there. The tactics are the turn-by-turn directions that will move you along that roadway. At times you'll walk, or drive, or take an airplane or train, or ride a bike, bus, or hot air balloon, but the path—and the ultimate destination—will stay the same.

We see frequent examples of organizations that confuse action with strategy, either because they have no clear goal, or are simply jumping from tactic to tactic without a clear roadmap. For example,

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Past and Upcoming Presentations

- **Rebecca Cohen**, senior strategist of ACS, presented at the NC Works Partnership Conference on October 6th in Greensboro, North Carolina. She shared tools and tips to help workforce professionals strategically communicate and position themselves as community conveners.
- **Lori McClung**, president of ACS, is attending the Great City Schools conference October 19–23, where she'll discuss the strategy opportunities that the Every Student Succeeds Act offers for local school districts.
- **Scarlett Boudier**, vice president of ACS, will present a workshop during the [2016 National Conference for America's Children](#) on October 17-19 in Cincinnati, Ohio titled "[Building A Strategy That Works for Your Community: How to Craft the Right Message.](#)" The National Conference for America's Children is sponsored by [Prevent Child Abuse America](#), a former client of ACS, which promotes healthy development of children.
- **Rebecca Cohen**, senior strategist of ACS, will lead a session at the ZERO TO THREE Annual Conference December 8. She will present an update on the [Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide](#) and facilitate a panel of successful early childhood leaders, including Sam Leyvas (CEO of [First Things First Arizona](#)) and Lana Nenide (Executive Director of [Wisconsin Alliance for Infant Mental Health](#)), who will share their messaging insights. An updated Infant and Toddler Messaging Guide will be released in December 2016 after the conference. ACS & ZERO TO THREE developed this guide based on need expressed by those in the early childhood education field for a document that would help inform their communication at the local level and provide a basis for what is being said nationally and what are the best messages to use in their day-to-day work. Specifically, this message guide helps early childhood advocates, providers, supporters, and public officials communicate to audiences to help raise awareness around the importance of early childhood and the issues and policies that support child development in the earliest years of life. ●

Strategy Development and Deployment: We've Got Tools You Can Use

Every organization is different, and every advocacy, community outreach, and communication effort has its own unique circumstances. But that doesn't mean you can't apply best practices when it comes to strategy.

Check out these handy tips and guides in our [online Tools & Resources library](#).

- **[Network Mapping Tool](#)**
Identify key allies and partners for your new strategy.
- **[Engaging Your Community](#)**
Build a solid community engagement strategy with these 10 key elements and 10 best practices.
- **[Assess Your Collaboration](#)**
Understand the elements of a successful collaboration and gauge your collaboration's performance.
- **[Public Awareness Campaign Components](#)**
Understand the critical components of a public awareness campaign to inform your strategy.
- **[Using Your Personal Network](#)**
Mobilize your personal contacts and connections to help inform, create, or implement your strategy.
- **[Collective Impact: Mutually Reinforcing Activity Checklist](#)**
Double down on a critical element of collective impact strategy.
- **[Building a Grassroots Coalition](#)**
Explore key questions to inform your coalition-building strategy.
- **[8 Tips for Successful Engagement](#)**
Entice more supporters into the creation or deployment of your strategy.
- **[10 Tips for an Effective Communication Approach](#)**
Focus your communication efforts in a way that best reinforces your overall goals.

Craving a strategy tool you don't see? Let us know! We're always adding new tools and resources, and your request will help inform the development of upcoming pieces. ●

New Clients!

- ACS is delighted to welcome four new clients—and one longstanding client with a brand new project. Look for updates on their progress and what we're learning together in the coming months.
- **Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), Detroit, Michigan**—As part of a community-wide effort to create a two-generation strategy to improve outcomes for vulnerable children, CSW is taking the lead on creating a first-ever collaborative approach between the city's workforce development and early childhood systems. ACS is creating talking points for multiple audiences about this unique strategy, identifying opportunities for stakeholder collaboration, and making recommendations for next steps that will help carry new two-generation approaches forward in Detroit.
- **Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children (Idaho AEYC), Boise, Idaho**—The ACS team is looking forward to working with the Idaho Association for the Education of Young Children (Idaho AEYC) to design and implement a 3-year, statewide strategic communication and community outreach plan. The goal of the plan is to research targeted audiences to clearly understand their perceptions and understandings about high-quality early learning; educate parents, families, and community leaders about the importance of high-quality early learning; and build awareness, support, and demand within Idaho communities and among state leaders to invest in early childhood education. The Idaho AEYC's ultimate goal is to ensure that every child under the age of 6 has access to affordable, high-quality early learning programs.
- **Foundation Center Midwest, Cleveland, Ohio**—The Foundation Center Midwest has hired ACS to help with strategic communication issues including messaging and communication to target audiences to help align and reinforce the brand of the Foundation Center Midwest.
- **William J. and Dorothy K. O'Neill Foundation, Cleveland, Ohio**—The O'Neill Foundation has hired ACS to meet with potential grantees to determine the best match for the foundation's resources, ensuring the proposals are sustainable and there is a positive impact on families.
- **First Things First (FTF), Arizona**—Although FTF is not a new client, ACS has been tasked to help the statewide early childhood organization develop a new strategic plan that will guide the work of the organization through 2020.

In the News

Be sure to check out articles in the [Latest News](#) section of the ACS website, where we highlight specific issues around areas of particular interest to ACS and our clients. Recent posts include articles related to boys and young men of color, workforce, and housing:

- A look at how education systems can create a better “it” for boys and young men of color. (September 7)
- A response to a compelling and heartfelt Washington Post article from Nikkia Rowe, principal of Renaissance Academy High School in Baltimore, about the ways in which our nation devalues young men of color. (September 15)
- The importance of cultivating the “soft skills” that all employers want, whether or not college is a part of the picture. (September 21)
- Questions about how our schools are preparing special-needs students for futures in the workforce. (September 28)
- Cleveland's efforts to house 100 young adults in 100 days as part of its participation, along with Los Angeles, CA and Austin, TX, in the 100-Day Challenge to End Youth Homelessness (October 13)

Client Spotlight:

J. Marion Sims Foundation

For 20 years, the J. Marion Sims Foundation, a health legacy foundation located in Lancaster, South Carolina, served 93,000 residents in its geographic footprint in Lancaster and Chester counties. Along with the foundation's board of directors, the new President & CEO Susan DeVenny has charted a pathway for the foundation toward proactive, transformative work. This new strategic direction was spurred by a vision to create long-term change that builds on the community's assets for current and future generations.

"I knew we had an obligation to talk with community members and learn about their needs and where we could make a difference," says DeVenny. "To do that, we needed a partner with a breadth of experience in this work, and the talent to do it well."

DeVenny knew of ACS' expertise from her previous work in the early childhood and K-12 fields. When she learned that ACS also had experience applying their community engagement and strategy development skills to the foundation field, the choice was easy.

The ACS team helped DeVenny take the pulse of her board members, who were eager to proceed. "My board wanted to be more transformational in the community, but they needed to understand their options to move forward," she says. "ACS helped unlock their potential for engagement."

ACS presented different aspects of community engagement to the board, then worked closely with staff and board to design a community engagement effort that included surveys, focus groups, and community conversations that reached more than 900 residents, from high-school students to senior citizens.

The plan also drew on the foundation's internal strengths and assets, with a little training from ACS staff. Board members served as focus group leaders, and ACS prepared a cadre of summer interns to become youth focus group facilitators, adding a new voice to inform the foundation's work.

"ACS helped us ensure that all sectors were represented and that we identified assets in our community we may have missed otherwise," says DeVenny. "When unexpected opportunities arose to capture new perspectives, they always helped make it happen."

"I've done a lot of work with consultants who check a box and produce a report or a plan that is not actionable or realistic. Plans like that end up living on a shelf," she adds. "ACS stands shoulder-to-shoulder with you, learns by inquiry what your mission and goals are, and embraces those as a full partner in your

effort. They helped us recognize our own capacity and how we can leverage that."

DeVenny and ACS presented the results of the foundation's community engagement process during a recent board retreat to help set the trajectory for the foundation's next 20 years.

"Once you begin community engagement, you open the door to new knowledge and intelligence," DeVenny says. "ACS gave us not only the structure and process but also the courage to know we could make our vision a reality, and identify new ways to move forward and change the way the foundation serves the people of our community for the better." ●

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– President & CEO Susan DeVenny

hosting a press conference for an isolated reason, such as the release of a report that is not tied to any broader strategy or goal. Or holding a symposium without a clear purpose, and asking for input or attention from the participants with no thought to follow up or how their knowledge might be used and shared. Or “getting the word out there” through billboards or ad campaigns without stopping to think about creating a consistent message and the reason for sharing the message in the first place –and whether your target audience believes that messages on a billboard are true or just marketing ploys.

Getting Started With Strategy

Use these five tips to help you think through the strategies that will get you where you want to go.

1. Understand your goal. To create a strategy, you first have to know where you want to go and why. What’s the purpose of your work? What’s the end goal? Do you want to close the achievement gap? Influence new policies around juvenile justice? Connect more well-trained workers to local employers?

Once you’ve determined *where* you want to go (your goal), you can start to consider options about *how* to get there. The *how* is where strategy comes into play.

2. Examine your current reality. Think about ways in which you do your work. What are you already doing that you can leverage on your new strategic journey? Where are the gaps? How can you work smarter, better, or more efficiently in order to increase your effectiveness in meeting your goal? What assets do you have on hand to deploy in pursuit of your goal, and what assets will you need to secure from other places? There can and likely will be multiple strategies; the key is not too many that it is overwhelming and unrealistic but not too few to have little to no impact towards meeting your goal.

3. Create tactics to move the strategy forward. It’s easy to get caught in the weeds when discussing specific tactics, but resist the temptation to allow details to cloud your overall vision. For every tactic, ask yourself, “Why? How does this move the strategy forward?” If you can’t easily articulate the answer, it may be best to let that tactic go. You should always be able to clearly explain why you are doing what you are doing. For example it may sound or feel good to suggest making 20 phone calls to stakeholders but if you only call 10 stakeholders and they are the right stakeholders, isn’t that the better tactic?

4. Understand the timeline. Some strategies move quickly. Others are designed to bear fruit across a number of years. Thinking through the timeline for your strategy up front can help protect you from a last-minute panic. It can also help you manage

the expectations of staff, board, partners, funders, and your community about when they can expect to see results.

5. Establish measures and milestones. One of the biggest mistakes organizations make in creating strategies is failing to include the ways in which they’ll measure progress. But if you don’t, how will you know your strategy is working? How will you know it’s time to change or add tactics? Figure out where you want to be in six months, a year, or further down the road. What can you measure within your list of tactics that will show forward movement? What will success look like at each stage of the strategy?

A good strategy will help your organization work smarter rather than harder. A solid strategy makes it easy to organize thoughts and actions, and to communicate your work to all stakeholders. A poor strategy or no strategy can leave you mired in conflicting demands and feeling frustrated.

If you feel like you’re spinning your wheels, it may be time to check in on your strategy. Or, if you’re about to start a new project or a new stage in your organization’s work, it’s a great time to develop a strong strategy from the start. Either way, ACS is ready and able to help. Contact info@advocacyandcommunication.org to learn more. ●

Connect and Collaborate with Us!

ACS is now on LinkedIn and Medium.com! We are sharing tools, resources, and stories about our clients. Find us at:

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/advocacy-&-communication-solutions-llc>

and

<https://medium.com/@acsllc>

Contact one of our team members, call toll-free at 1-877-372-0166 or visit our website at advocacyandcommunication.org

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