

Strategic Planning Guide for Newly Formed Networks

Network Planning Technical Assistance

March, 2016



This is a publication of [Rural Health Innovations, LLC](#) (RHI), a subsidiary of the [National Rural Health Resource Center](#). The Technical Assistance for Network Grantees Project is supported by Contract Number **HSH250201400024C** from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration, Federal Office of Rural Health Policy.

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BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

Rural Health Innovations (RHI), LLC, is a subsidiary of the National Rural Health Resource Center (The Center), a non-profit organization. Together, RHI and The Center are the nation's leading technical assistance and knowledge centers in rural health. In partnership with The Center, RHI enhances the health of rural communities by providing products and services with a focus on excellence and innovation. RHI is providing technical assistance (TA) to the Network Planning grantees through a contract with the Federal Office of Rural Health Policy.

The aim of any strategic planning effort is to identify strategic paths for effective change that will move an organization from today's environment toward its vision. The purpose of this *Strategic Planning Guide for Newly Formed Networks* is to support Network Planning grantees in understanding:

1. Commitment to a shared vision as a key to effective strategic planning
2. The dynamic and iterative nature of the strategic planning cycle
3. Three key components of a strategic plan for a newly formed network
4. Specific tools for developing an effective strategic plan

The outcome of using this guide will be a completed strategic plan for a newly formed network that includes documentation of a shared vision, an environmental analysis of blocks and levers, and a program's or network's strategic objectives.

The audience of this *Strategic Planning Guide for Newly Formed Networks* includes the network leaders of rural health networks that have formed as new collaborative efforts or new organizations within the past twelve to eighteen months. This guide is designed as part of a toolkit that also includes a template and sample documents.

Note: Rural health network organizations that have been functioning as formal entities for more than two years may find our [Program Strategic Planning Guide: Network Development Grantees](#) a useful resource. The strategic planning guide developed for Network Development Grantees assumes the vision of the network is established and well understood within the network's leadership. Therefore, the primary objective of the planning effort is to develop strategic objectives that will address the levers and blocks of the current environment as the organization moves toward its shared vision.

GLOSSARY

The following are terms you will find throughout the strategic planning materials, which are based on the Baldrige Performance Excellence Framework. (National Institute of Standards and Technology, Baldrige Performance Excellence: <http://www.nist.gov/baldrige>)

Alignment: A state of consistency among plans, processes, information, resources decisions, workforce capability and capacity, actions, results, and analyses that support key organization-wide goals.

Approach: The methods your organization uses to carry out its processes.

Goals: Future conditions or performance levels that your organization intends or desires to attain.

Governance: The systems of management and controls exercised in the stewardship of your organization.

Effective: How well a process or a measure addresses its intended purpose.

Key: Major or most important; critical to achieving your intended outcome.

Mission: Your organization's overall function.

Partners: Key organizations or individuals who are working in concert with your organization to achieve a common goal or improve performance.

Results: Outputs and outcomes achieved by your organization.

Stakeholders: All groups that are or might be affected by your organization's actions and success.

Strategic objectives: The aims or responses that your organization articulates to address major changes or improvement, competitiveness or social issues, and service advantages.

Vision: Your organization's desired future state.

GETTING STARTED WITH STRATEGIC PLANNING

The work of strategic planning provides a means for building stakeholder consensus on the vision of the network and the objectives that will drive change. Following are questions to consider as preparation for developing and writing a strategic plan for a newly formed network.

Is writing a strategic plan worth the effort?

A strategic plan is the end result of an intentional planning effort. Peter Drucker, a management thinker from the '50s and '60s, said, "The best way to predict your future is to create it." The goal of strategic planning is to articulate the paths that will create the desired future. Strategic planning provides a focus for an organization and a process to determine the key areas to work on that will move an organization toward its vision and fulfill its purpose.

Strategic planning has also been shown to have an effect on rural health network sustainability. According to results of the Rural HIT Network Development grant program from 2011 to 2014, networks that identified more intentional strategic planning efforts scored significantly higher on network sustainability than those networks that had less focus on strategic planning (4.5 compared to 3.8 on a scale of 5.0).

Strategic plans serve a purpose for both internal and external audiences.

- a. Internal readers will use the strategic plan as a reference for decision making and a guide or roadmap for meeting challenging changes.
- b. External readers will use the strategic plan to gain a better understanding of the organization's focus, direction, and strategies in order to make decisions such as funding or membership.

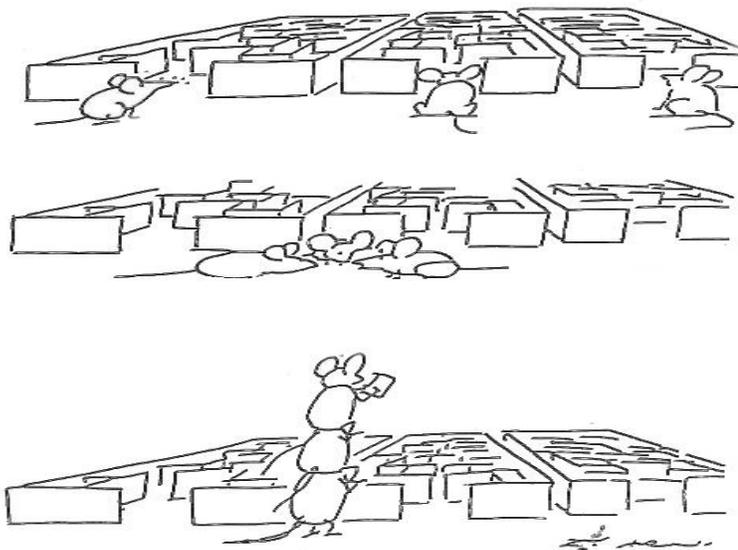
Which strategic planning framework should we use?

There are two planning frameworks commonly used in the planning process: traditional strategic planning and logic model. Both approaches involve the same components and conversations, but the descriptive language and terms will vary. The framework selection is based on the preference of the network leadership. Whichever planning framework is selected, be consistent with the language throughout the planning and documentation process. This guide includes language based on the traditional strategic planning framework.

Who should be involved?

The Center and RHI have developed resources describing the importance of collaboration in transforming health care. During this time of rapid change within the health care landscape and the movement toward population health, rural health networks have a unique and critical opportunity to bring stakeholders together from both health-care-based organizations and community-based organizations.

The list of stakeholders invited to participate in the strategic planning process will vary depending the network's unique characteristics. Consider carefully the stakeholders who can bring information and understanding of the environment and who can help strategically consider changes to move from the current reality toward the vision.



Collaboration

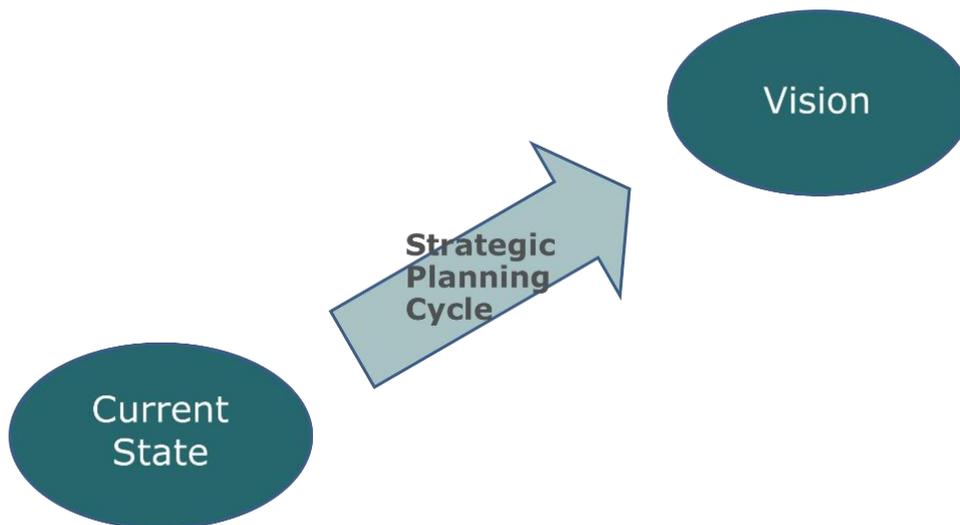
We are better together.

Why is the shared vision important?

When developing an effective strategic plan, commitment to a shared vision is the critical first step for a newly formed network. A vision identifies the “achievements” of the network’s aspirations and therefore acts as a beacon for the organization.

Peter Senge of the MIT Sloan School of Management and author of the organizational development book *The Fifth Discipline* views organizations as dynamical systems in a state of continuous adaptation and improvement. This thinking identifies that having a shared vision pulls an organization toward its vision, where the ongoing operations, when guided by strategic objectives, constantly adjust and work to realize the achievements identified by the vision.

In other words, a strategic planning is effective when it has a destination to aim for, which is the shared vision of the organization’s achievements and aspirations.

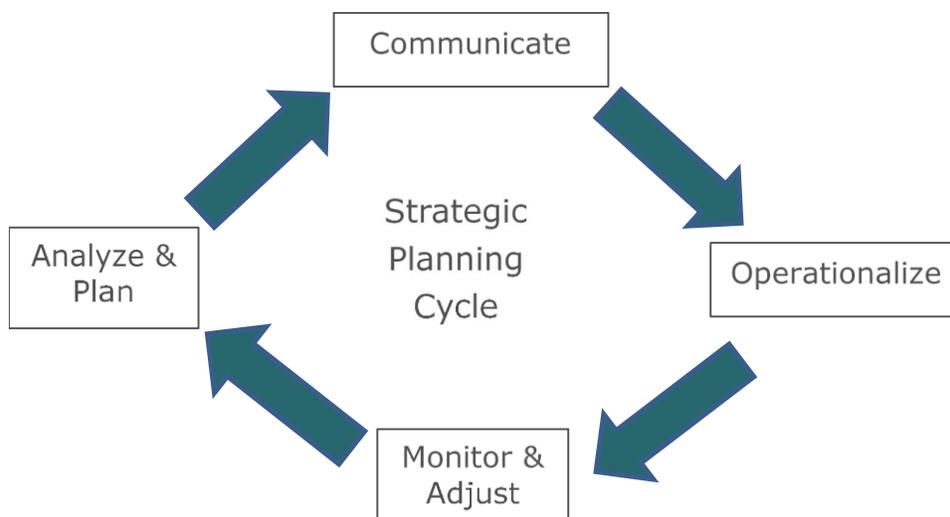


"Creative Tension": Adapted from The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization, Peter M. Senge, 1990.

What is a strategic planning cycle?

The dynamic and iterative environment of planning, communicating, operationalizing, and adapting is described as a strategic planning cycle.

Robert Kaplan and David Norton, business management writers and thinkers of the 1980s, studied organizations to figure out why some succeeded and others didn't. They discovered that successful organizations approached planning in a holistic way. Based on their study and their discovery, they devised a planning methodology called the Balanced Scorecard. One of the key aspects of the Balanced Scorecard planning methodology is the strategic planning cycle: Analyze & Plan, Communicate, Operationalize, and Monitor & Adjust.



Walking through the basics of strategic planning, we'll use a baseball team for an analogy to help understand the terminology:

Before a team even begins to analyze or plan, some basic aspects of existing as an organization need to be in place: the mission, values, and vision.

Mission = What do we do? For our analogy, we are playing baseball.

Values = How do we want to behave? Our baseball team wants to play fair and play competitively.

Vision = What do we want to achieve or become as an organization? Our baseball team has agreed they all want to win the biggest trophy and have the most devoted enthusiastic fans in the league.

In this strategic planning guide, we are jumping into the strategic planning cycle at the Analyze & Plan phase, where strategies are developed using information from

the environment. The intention is for the strategies to leverage what is going well and address those aspects of the environment that are blocking progress toward the vision. For our baseball team, a *game plan* is established with strategies, such as: increase ticket sales, utilization of effective training programs, entertain the fans with our athleticism and showmanship, effective implementation of game strategies, and foster a positive culture.

In continuing around the strategic planning cycle with our baseball team; to be a successful team, there is more strategic work to be done. The next phase is *communicating* the mission, values, vision, and strategies to the players and staff, as well as with all of the stakeholders involved in the team's effort to achieve its vision. The goal of the communication phase is to engage all involved so that everyone understands what the organization is aiming to achieve.

The next phase for the team's success is to operationalize the strategies by *creating and executing key initiatives*, such as increased ticket sales processes, and ensuring the stadium infrastructure is functioning and meeting expectations of the players, coaches, and fans. And finally, to address an ever-shifting environment, the team must *both monitor progress toward the strategic objectives and key initiatives to be able to adjust to the challenges of change* as they move closer to their vision of winning the biggest trophy and having the most devoted and enthusiastic fans in the league.

Why concentrate on the Analyze & Plan phase for newly formed networks?

This guide is designed to support rural health networks at the beginning stages of their formation. We recommend the Analyze & Plan phase as a critical first step where the strategic objectives and key initiatives you develop in this phase focus your network's initial collaborative efforts. When the network is ready for next steps, the tools and resources provided at the end of this guide will offer support through the Communicate, Operationalize, and Monitor & Adjust phases of the strategic planning cycle.

STRATEGIC PLAN COMPONENTS FOR NEWLY FORMED NETWORKS

This guide provides support to networks in developing a strategic plan based on the following three components:

1. Network Purpose and Shared Vision

This section provides a high-level overview of the network's history, members, mission, and shared vision.

2. Environmental Scan and Analysis

This section reviews significant characteristics of the network's internal and external environment in terms of key blocks and strengths of the network.

3. Strategic Objectives and Key Initiatives

This section identifies the two- to three-year strategic objectives and key initiatives that will move the network toward its vision.

Network Purpose and Shared Vision

Provide a high-level overview of your network and set the context for the strategic planning effort. When writing your strategic plan, the following elements are typical for this section:

History: The information in this section provides the reader with context for the network's activities and infrastructure. A brief overview of the main points and significant achievements is an appropriate level of detail for the strategic plan.

Members: Listing the key partners participating in the network will help illustrate collaborative achievements, demonstrate the level of community commitment, and convey the scope of the project. Also consider including the location or service area of each partner, type of organization, and network role.

Mission: A mission statement articulates your network's purpose for being and the network's values. Another way of saying this is that the mission describes how the network will achieve its vision in relation to specific objectives and customer needs.

Shared Vision: A vision statement or list of vision "achievements" expresses your network's aspirations. It outlines where your network wants to be in the next 2 to 3 years, acting as a beacon for identifying strategic objectives.

It is critical for the network's vision to have full commitment from leadership, staff, and stakeholders in the early steps of planning. See the [Facilitation Guide](#) section of this guide for assistance in developing a shared network vision or conducting a vision check-in discussion.

Environmental Scan and Analysis

This section reviews significant characteristics of the network's internal and external environment in terms of key blocks and strengths of the network.

It is important within the Analyze & Plan phase of the strategic planning cycle to take time to study the environment in which the network is functioning. It is in this effort and analysis that the network can identify the aspects of its environment that will assist in reaching the vision of the network and those issues that are blocks to achieving the shared vision.

When writing your strategic plan, a summary of the environmental data and findings from the environmental analysis is included.

Environmental Scan: Below is a checklist of suggested environmental scan information to gather in preparation for rural health network strategic planning. This is not an exhaustive or required list but is meant to prompt thinking in preparation for strategic planning.

Suggested Environmental Scan Data
Structure and Governance
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mission and values • List of board members and/or network leadership, including name, job title, employer, and length of service • Network governance and policies • List of partner organizations and brief description of collaboration history • Results from member needs assessment or collaboration assessment
Resource Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Network positions and FTE allocation • Summary of financial environment and primary revenue streams • Financial forecast for the next 2-3 years • Inventory of other resources owned by the network or shared by network partners
Market Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographic setting of the network • Demographic information for the service areas of the members (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity, income) • Health indicators of the service area population • List of local and regional service providers • Member, customer and/or patient satisfaction survey results
Significant Initiative Progress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grant project work plan update and progress report • Network evaluation plan update • Communication plan tracking

Environmental Analysis Findings: There are many approaches for designing and completing an environmental scan analysis for effective strategic planning. The key is to use a participative process that provides all stakeholders with an opportunity to consider the environmental information and seek the underlying barriers and opportunities that will inform their strategic thinking.

See the Environmental Scan Analysis section in the [Facilitation Guide](#) for one approach to using a consensus-based method that gathers many ideas and highlights the key environmental levers and blocks to consider for developing strategic objectives.

Strategic Objectives and Key Initiatives

This section identifies the two- to three-year strategic objectives and key initiatives that will move the network toward its vision. Listing and communicating the agreed-upon strategic objectives and key initiatives, as they relate to and are aligned with the shared vision of the network, is the primary purpose of the strategic plan. Therefore, it is important to make it easy for both the internal and external reader to see the alignment of the strategic objectives and key initiatives with the vision of the network.

When writing this section of your strategic plan, we recommend using a type of visual to illustrate alignment of the network's strategic objectives and key initiatives. Use the accompanying *Strategic Planning Sample* document to see both a traditional strategic plan framework presentation and a logic model framework presentation of strategies and initiatives.

For newly formed networks, we are recommending an intentional, focused effort to identify both objectives and initiatives, since in the collaborative environment of a newly formed network, a success factor is to practice solving problems and agreeing upon achievements together. In this strategic planning guide, there is less emphasis on the Communicate, Operationalize, and Monitor & Adjust phases to encourage spending more focus and time in the Analyze & Plan phase of the strategic planning cycle.

Although there are two specific steps for developing strategic objectives and key initiatives, sometimes, due to the nature of newly formed networks, initiatives are also identified during the strategic objectives planning effort. Following are some suggestions and guidance on both the strategic objectives and key initiatives steps.

Strategic Objectives: The paths for moving an organization toward the shared vision.

- A best practice of strategic planning is utilizing the environmental scan and analysis to prepare the planning participants for strategic thinking.
- A participative process is key to building consensus among stakeholders and identifying meaningful strategic objectives. This is significant for newly forming networks, as it furthers relationships and builds trust and understanding among the network partners.
- Strategic objectives focus on achieving the vision of the organization while addressing the identified blocks and taking advantage of the identified strengths.
- There are many approaches to identifying and prioritizing strategic objectives. See the [Facilitation Guide](#) for one approach that uses a consensus-based method to gather many ideas and group those ideas into similar strategic objectives.

- Typically, strategic objectives look out 2 to 3 years toward the vision.
- It is helpful for the strategies to be written following the SMART acronym: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely.
- Typically, but depending on a network's governance structure, the strategic objectives are finalized when approved by the network's governing body.

Key Initiatives: Leadership and staff operationalize the strategic objectives through implementation of key initiatives.

- After the strategic objectives are approved, stakeholders can begin identifying initiatives that will accomplish the objectives.
- Newly formed networks often choose to focus on smaller, realistic initiatives as a means of building momentum toward the next stage of development.
- Initiatives are a group of activities that typically take six to eighteen months to accomplish. Sometimes initiatives are referred to as mid-term outcomes or projects.

FACILITATION GUIDE FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING

The following materials are intended to provide support in designing and leading strategic planning events that include discussions and workshops with network stakeholders. The facilitation conversations and workshops are based on the Technology of Participation Focus Conversation and Workshop methods. These methods center on participative values and group decision-making facilitation principles. The goal of the following tools is to provide network leaders with ways to engage stakeholders through meaningful discussion and problem solving for effective strategic planning. This guide contains the following 8 facilitation tools:

Strategic Planning Design and Agendas

- The first agenda illustrates a single event designed for 6 to 8 hours of presentation, discussion, and planning.
- The second agenda breaks the planning elements down into four 60- to 90-minute sessions, which could be completed over the course of 4 monthly board meetings, for example.

Shared Vision Workshop and Vision Check-In

- If your network has not yet fully developed your network vision, the Shared Vision Workshop will guide you through the visioning process.
- If your network has an established vision, it is important to revisit the vision through an intentional check-in and commitment discussion before moving forward with strategic planning.

Environmental Scan Analysis Workshop

- After a facilitator presents the data collected during the environmental scan, the planning participants will engage in a discussion to analyze the data. Through this conversation, participants will identify the key levers and blocks the network is facing.

Strategic Objectives Workshop

- Participants will brainstorm the actions and activities that will help move the network toward its vision, while leveraging the prioritized levers and working around blocks.

Alignment with Vision and Mission Discussion

- After reaching consensus on strategic objectives, participants will engage in a discussion to ensure alignment of the objectives with the vision and mission of the network.

Identify Key Initiatives Discussion

- This step gives planning participants the opportunity to adjust or reprioritize the objectives in order to bring the network closer to realizing its vision for the future.

1. Strategic Planning Agenda: Single-Day Event

[Rural Health Network] Strategic Planning Event

[Date and Time]

[Location City, State]

9:00 – 10:00 am

- Welcome, Introductions, and Agenda – 30 min
 - *Network Director*
 - *Planning Facilitator*
- Strategic Planning Overview and Methodology (presentation) – 30 min

10:00 – 12:00 pm

- Strategic Planning – Part 1
 - Shared Vision:
 - Shared Vision Workshop – 90 min (if vision needs to be created or revised)
 - *OR Vision Check-In and Commitment – 30 min (if vision is established)*
 - Environmental Scan (presentation) – 30 min

12:00 – 12:30 pm

- Lunch

12:30 – 3:30 pm

- Strategic Planning – Part 1 (continued)
 - Environmental Analysis to Prioritize Levers and Blocks – 60 min
- Strategic Planning – Part 2
 - Development of Strategic Objectives – 100 min
 - Alignment of Strategic Objectives with Mission and Vision – 20 min

3:30 – 4:30 pm

- Consider Next Steps – 45 min
 - Initial measures for evaluation of strategic objectives
 - Identify Key Initiatives
 - Board/Advisor Approval Process for next board meeting
 - Planning Event Conclusion – 15 min

2. Strategic Planning Agenda: Multiple-Day Sessions

[Rural Health Network] Strategic Planning Sessions

[Dates and Times]

[Location City, State]

Session 1: (45-60 min)

- Agenda and Introduction – 15 min
- Strategic Planning Overview and Methodology (presentation) – 30 min

Session 2: (60-120 min)

- Review Results of Session 1 – 20 min
- Vision Workshop (if vision needs to be created or revised) – 90 min
- *or Vision Check-In and Commitment (if vision is established) – 30 min*

Session 3: (120 min)

- Review Results of Sessions 1-2 – 30 min
- Environmental Scan (presentation) – 30 min
- Environmental Analysis to Prioritization of Levers and Blocks – 60 min

Session 4: (120 min)

- Review Results of Sessions 1-3 – 20 min
- Development of Strategic Objectives – 100 min

Session 5: (90 min)

- Review Results of Sessions 1-4 – 15 min
- Alignment of Strategic Objectives with Mission and Vision – 20 min
- Consider Next Steps – 45 min
 - Initial measures for evaluation of strategic objectives
 - Identify Key Initiatives
 - Board/Advisor approval process for next board meeting
 - Planning Event Conclusion – 10 min

3. Vision Workshop Facilitation Guide: 90-Minute Workshop

Rational Objective: Create a practical and shared vision to use for aiming the strategic planning.		Experiential Objective: Feel motivated by a common vision for the future.	
Setup and Materials: Sticky wall or blank wall for displaying notes and writing markers. 50 half-sheets of paper, 10 green full sheets of paper.			
Pre-requisites: Environmental scan and state of the network report by the Network Director. Network members share own organization goals and efforts that are aligned with or overlap with the network's efforts.			
FOCUS QUESTION: What do we want to achieve in the coming 2-3 years as a result of our work?			
Opening and Context: (5 min) Review the purpose and description of a shared vision. Provide an opening story for imagining the future of the organization. For example: <i>There is a documentary team coming into town to do a story on the health and vitality of rural communities. This network has been selected as an "Outstanding Model Organization" and asked to present at a national rural health conference to tell its story of success in improving the health and wellness of their community. What has been achieved in the past 2-3 years? What are some of activities you want to be sure to highlight? What events have taken place? What are community members saying about the health and vitality of the community? How are people working together that is different from before? Who are some of your key champions and partners? What new partnerships have been formed? What are the neighboring communities saying about this rural health network?</i>			
Brainstorm: (20 min) Brainstorm a list of concrete elements of the vision that you can see completed in 2-3 years. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Working individually, make a list of >10 ideas. Review your individual list and star 4-5 own best ideas. Working in groups or pairs, combine your lists and <u>select the best 5-6 ideas</u>. (Note: Need 30-35 total data ideas, assumes 6 pairs) Write <u>one idea per white half-sheet</u>. Use 3-5 words to describe. (Post example for reference.) 		Data and Organize: (30 min) Form ideas into pairs and cluster: "What are similar accomplishments or achievements?" <ol style="list-style-type: none"> What are the clearest or most straightforward ideas? Have each group select 2-3 ideas (white half-sheets) from their list. What are unique ideas or complex ideas? Have each group select 2-3 additional ideas from their list. Start forming columns of ideas with similar "accomplishments or achievements." Complete clustering. For the remaining ideas, have participants post them within columns and report additions to larger group. 	
Name: (30 min) The intent of this section is to name the different components of the shared vision by naming the columns of ideas/data: "What is the accomplishment that is reflected in each column of ideas?" <ol style="list-style-type: none"> For each column, read through the idea sheets in that column. Give each column a 3-5 word name. It is helpful to use Adj-Adj-Noun. For example: cross-agency collaboration, integrated health home, healthy lifestyle culture, comprehensive health services. <i>Note: Because these are not strategies, try to avoid using verbs when naming the components of the vision.</i>			
Commitment to the Vision: (5 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a participant read across the vision titles. <i>Are there any surprises in these? Which one is the most vivid or the most difficult to imagine?</i> <i>What is the significance of the vision we have described here together?</i> <i>Our strategic work will be aiming at our vision, and we all need to aim for the same thing. Do these consensus areas describe the shared vision we have for our network? A show of thumbs-up (agree), flat (can live with), or thumbs down (can't live with and need more discussion).</i> 			

4. Vision Check-In and Commitment Facilitation Guide: 30-Minute Discussion

Rational Objective: Reach agreement on and commitment to the network vision as a critical component in creating meaningful strategic objectives.	Experiential Objective: Gain understanding of and comfort with the network vision.
Setup and Materials: Prominently display or provide the network vision.	
Pre-requisite: An existing shared vision in place for the network.	
Opening: (5 min) Review the purpose and description of a shared vision. Read through the network vision. (This may be the highest-level grant goals.) Our network vision has already been approved by the governing board [if applicable]. Due to the importance of having a shared vision during the planning process as a beacon to aim for our planning for the coming 2-3 years, let's spend about 20-30 minutes talking about what this vision means to us and our network.	
Focused Conversation: (20 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What specific word in this vision catches your attention? (Have every participant answer this question.)• What about this vision resonates with you? How does it hold your attention?• How does this vision describe what we want to become as a network in this region and for our members?• What might be the impact on our communities as the network strives to become what is stated here?• Is this vision one we are all comfortable with using as a beacon for our strategic planning?<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ If not: What can we adjust to make it right for us today?	
Consensus Building: (5 min) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Make sure all participants are ready to move forward with the vision for strategic planning. Use a method of gaining commitment to the vision: thumbs-up (agree), flat (can live with), or thumbs-down (can't live with and need additional discussion).• Do not proceed with planning until all participants are in consensus that the vision is a worthy target for strategic planning.• Note: If the vision is close but the discussion identifies that revisions and further input are needed, consider getting group consensus that it is close enough for the strategic planning process and that a vision review will take place in the near future. Set a timeline and ask an individual to take the lead on next steps.	

5. Environmental Scan Analysis Facilitation Guide: 90-Minute Workshop

Rational Objective: Find key levers and blocks, both internal and external, which will be incorporated into the development of strategic objectives.		Experiential Objective: Feel confident that the key leverage points and underlying blocks have been identified in order to consider strategic options.	
Setup and Materials: Sticky wall or blank wall for displaying notes, writing markers, 2-4 flip chart-sized papers. Label two papers, one as “Levers” and one as “Blocks”			
Pre-requisites: Presentation of environmental scan data and commitment to a shared vision.			
FOCUS QUESTION: “What are the levers and blocks that we will either leverage or work around in moving toward our vision?”			
Opening: Review the purpose and description of an environmental analysis; identifying key levers and blocks. <i>Given the information provided in the environmental scan presentation, we will be considering our focus question. In this discussion, we will begin by first brainstorming events and happenings that will help our network move towards its vision (levers) and also those that will get in our way (blocks). We will share our ideas and discuss together to gain insight on what we can leverage and the underlying issues that we need to be aware of as we plan the paths we will take toward our vision.</i>			
Brainstorm: (10 min) Individually brainstorm the events and happenings going on in health care, your community, and your organization that are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helping the network move toward its vision (leveraging) Getting in the way of the network from moving towards its vision (blocking) Working individually, make a list of >10 ideas. Review your individual list and star 4-5 own best ideas. 	Small Group Discussion: (15 min) First for levers and then for blocks: Working in pairs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Between both individual lists, select the top best 5-6 ideas. (Note: need 30-35 total data pieces, assumes 6 pairs) Ask small groups to be ready to share with the larger group, 1 idea at a time. 	Report Out: (30 min) Synthesize the data to identify key leverage points and key blocks. Sharing from small groups, one group at a time, until all levers and blocks are shared. The intent is to identify those underlying levers and blocks. Ask deeper questions if there is a “Lack of” description, and seek the cause of the issue. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask: <i>What are the clearest or most straightforward ideas?</i> (Record onto flip chart, moving to next group following a response.) Ask: <i>What are different ideas or complex ideas?</i> Continue around the small groups until all levers and then blocks have been shared. 	Identify Keys: (20 min) The intent of this section is to prioritize underlying levers and blocks and transition to the strategic planning effort. Working together as a large group: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Of these Levers/Blocks (address separately), which ones are important for us to highlight and be sure to bring forward in our planning and problem solving?</i> (Underline identified levers and blocks). [IF TIME] Ask participants to put a mark to have the group prioritize: <i>“What are top 3 Levers and top 3 Blocks that are <u>critical in moving the network toward its vision/mission</u>?”</i> Allow 15 min for this voting work.
Transition to development of strategic objectives: (5 min) Next Step: Getting started with strategic thinking and planning. Looking for key paths that will take us from our current reality to our desired future state. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Have a participant read the network’s vision and another person read through the titles of Levers and Blocks. <i>Are there any surprises in these? Did we get to the underlying issue or the cause?</i> <i>Of the top 3 Levers, which will be easiest to leverage and take advantage of? Which one will be more difficult? Of the top 3 Blocks, which one will be the easiest to deal with or work around? Which one the hardest?</i> 			

6. Strategic Objectives Facilitation Guide: 120-minute workshop

Rational Objective: Reach group consensus on strategic objectives that address Levers and Blocks and that will move the network toward its vision.		Experiential Objective: Agree that the identified strategic objectives are doable and will provide guidance to the organization over the coming 2-3 years.	
Setup and Materials: Sticky wall or blank wall for displaying notes and writing markers. 50 half-sheets of paper, 10 blue full sheets of paper, 6-8 full yellow sheets of paper. Writing utensils. Painter's tape if needed.			
Pre-Requisite: Completed environmental analysis with established priorities of underlying Levers and Blocks.			
Opening: <i>Together, we will be considering, "What are the key strategic objectives that will guide this organization from today's reality toward tomorrow's vision?" We have agreed on our network vision and identified the key Levers and Blocks of our current reality. In this discussion, we will begin brainstorming actions and activities that will move us toward our vision and then spend time identifying key strategies that our ideas describe. We'll then seek consensus on the strategic goals or objectives that will provide guidance to our network over the coming 2-3 years.</i>			
Brainstorm: (10 min) Individually brainstorm: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>What are the ideas, initiatives, tasks, or to-do's that will address the issues impacting the network that we identified in the environmental analysis?</i> • Have each person compile a list of >10 ideas. • After giving time for brainstorming, have each person review his/her list and star the 4-5 best ideas. 	Data: (15 min) Working in pairs: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare between both lists and select the top 5-6 ideas. (Note: Need 30-35 total data pieces, assumes 6 pairs) • Describe each idea using 3-5 words. Write one idea per half-sheet of paper and post on wall, or use flip chart to record ideas. 	Organize: (40 min) Working together as a large group, synthesize the data to identify key leverage points and key blocks. Another way to think of this is seeking consensus on strategic directions or objectives. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster data into similar ideas. <i>What is the common thread or strategic path being described by this data that moves the network from today's reality to tomorrow's vision?</i> • Seek consensus on the key strategic directions or objectives by naming the clusters. For each cluster, ask, <i>"In this cluster, what is the title that best describes the strategic idea?"</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Titles should be descriptive and action oriented, 3-5 words: verb + adjective + noun. Examples: Improve Operating Efficiency, Provide Outstanding Customer Service, and Deliver Timely and Effective Care. ○ Write strategic objective title on a full sheet of green paper and place at top of cluster. 	Name: (30 min) The intent of this section is to prioritize the strategic objectives and set commitment (strategic objectives = titles agreed upon in the Organize step). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read the titles across and refer back to the overall planning question: <i>(TITLES) are our key strategic objectives that will guide this network toward its vision.</i> Ask participants: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>How do these strategic objectives align with our network's mission?</i> • <i>Which of these strategic objectives are critical to our network's sustained success?</i> • <i>Which will take more focus and dedication of us as members?</i> • <i>How will we as network leaders be involved in promoting and communicating these strategic objectives?</i>
Begin to review the strategic objectives: Next Step: Double check for SMART objectives and revise as needed. Begin considering the key initiatives that the network can undertake for each strategic objective. Transition to assessing the objectives' alignment with vision and mission.			

7. Alignment with Vision and Mission Facilitation Guide: 30-Minute Discussion

<p>Rational Objective: Confirm alignment of new strategic objectives with network vision and mission.</p>	<p>Experiential Objective: Gain understanding of and comfort with the new network strategic objectives relative to the organization's vision and mission.</p>
<p>Setup and Materials: Prominently display or provide the network's vision and mission.</p>	
<p>Pre-requisites: Development of strategic objectives based on identified Levers and Blocks.</p>	
<p>Opening: <i>Throughout our strategic planning efforts, we have worked to aim our thinking and our strategies toward our network vision, recognizing that it is our shared vision pulling our network forward.</i> [Read through vision that is displayed nearby for everyone to see. It is nice to have the vision posted to the left of the strategic objectives in as a "target."] <i>Let's spend the next 15 minutes or so checking our new strategic objectives back to our vision to double check that we are indeed aiming for it.</i></p>	
<p>Focused Conversation: (10-15 min) Have someone read through each of the newly agreed-upon strategic objectives. Then ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Which of these objectives are ah-ha's or surprises? Any that really "hit the nail on the head"?</i> • <i>How do these strategic objectives move us toward our vision?</i> • <i>How do these strategic objectives follow the guidance of our mission?</i> • <i>Are there any themes running through the objectives?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ If objectives are identified as "similar" in strategy, rearrange the information to group those objectives next to each other and consider adding a larger title to capture the common idea. • <i>Which of these objectives are going to be more difficult to operationalize or will need careful monitoring?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Place a star by the identified objectives to highlight them. This is a good place to emphasize the role of the board or advisory group to monitor progress toward the strategic objective and the network leadership's role to operationalize the objectives into actions and initiatives. • <i>What might be the impact on our communities as our network uses these objectives to guide our work?</i> • <i>What is our commitment to these strategic objectives to guide our work toward our vision?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Check in with everyone to gain consensus with a thumbs-up (agree), flat (can live with), or thumbs-down (can't live with and need additional discussion). ○ Do not complete the planning without full consensus (thumbs-up or flat). If there are any thumbs-down, then more discussion is needed. 	
<p>Next stages of strategic planning: Seek formal acceptance of the strategic objectives by the board/advisory group. Articulate the key initiatives the network will engage in to support the strategic objectives.</p>	

8. Identify Key Initiatives Facilitation Guide: 30-Minute Discussion

<p>Rational Objective: Identify how each of the stakeholder organizations/groups are contributing to the network’s vision and strategic objectives. Identify network key initiatives, those 6- to 18-month projects that begin to operationalize the strategic objectives and are complementary and additive to the stakeholder initiatives.</p>	<p>Experiential Objective: Begin to imagine the work ahead of the network and how the network will provide value to the stakeholder organizations.</p>
<p>Setup and Materials: Prominently display or provide the network vision and mission and the strategic objectives, posted to a sticky wall or using another surface. 10-15 salmon half-sheets and 10-15 yellow full sheets.</p>	
<p>Opening: <i>We have worked during our strategic planning efforts to aim our thinking and our strategies toward our network vision. [Read through vision that is displayed nearby for everyone to see. It is nice to have the vision posted to the left of the strategic objectives as a “target.”] We are going to spend about 30 minutes to identify how each of our organizations is already contributing to the network’s efforts and also what projects, key initiatives, the network can consider that are in alignment with our shared vision for the network.</i></p>	
<p>Focused Conversation: (15-20 min) Have a participant read through the network’s strategic objectives.</p> <p>Then ask:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>As stakeholders, consider your current initiatives. What 6- to 18-month projects are aligned with the network’s strategic objectives? Select the three that fit best with the network’s vision and objectives.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Write each of the 3 identified initiatives on salmon half-sheets and post next to the appropriate strategic objective. ○ Have each stakeholder organization report out their top 3 initiatives and why they placed them next to the selected strategic objective. • <i>For the network,</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What initiatives do we currently have in place that are aligned with the network’s strategic objectives or complementary to the stakeholder organizations/groups? (Write on yellow full sheets and place next to the selected strategic objective.)</i> ○ <i>What are new initiatives we could consider that would move the network toward the vision, and which strategic objectives do they fit with? (Write on yellow full sheets and place next to the selected strategic objective.)</i> ○ <i>Are there any of our current initiatives that do not fit with our strategic objectives? (Write on white full sheets and place along the bottom or to the right side of the sticky wall.)</i> • <i>What might be the impact on our communities as our network continues or begins to implement these 6- to 18-month initiatives?</i> • <i>What are possible timelines and resources needed for these identified initiatives? (Write on white half-sheets and post next to the associated initiative.)</i> • <i>What are next steps for our network to begin to operationalize these initiatives? (Post to flip chart and include tentative timeline and lead person on the action.)</i> 	
<p>Next stages of strategic planning: Begin to plan communication of the objectives with stakeholders and consider development of an evaluation plan.</p>	

CONTINUING THE STRATEGIC PLANNING CYCLE

As the network organization gains familiarity working with the strategic plan developed in the Analyze & Plan phase, it will become time to continue the planning process and pursue the next phases in the strategic planning cycle. See the [Strategic Planning Toolkit for Development Grantees](#) and the resources listed below for additional guidance when you're ready to begin these steps.

Communicate strategic objectives throughout the network organization.

Developing a communication plan, specifically for approved strategic objectives and the environmental analysis with partners and stakeholders, is a key step for building commitment and accountability in achieving the strategic objectives. Consider the audience, the channel, the timeline, and the responsible parties for each message within the plan. It's often valuable to create visual representations of the objectives and progress for use in your communications, including tools like a strategy map or a dashboard.

Operationalize key initiatives with project management.

For newly formed networks that have utilized this strategic planning guide, operationalizing the plan describes the next level of detail related to select key initiatives. The network work plan is a project management tool for activities related to the identified key initiatives. Using visual tools such as a scorecard or a logic model is helpful when documenting progress and status of the key initiatives.

Monitor progress of the strategic objectives, and adjust to keep aim on the shared vision.

Strategic objectives must be monitored and reviewed over time to determine the effectiveness of the network's progress toward the network vision. Consider developing an evaluation plan to identify measures of success, data collection, and reporting results. It is critical to schedule regular review sessions with the network board and staff to discuss progress toward goals and identify any needed course adjustments. It may be helpful to implement a Balanced Scorecard or a dashboard with key measures, targets, and results. See our [Evaluation Plan Guide and Template](#) for more information on developing a program evaluation plan.

STRATEGIC PLANNING RESOURCES

For further research and guidance on the strategic planning process, we encourage you to explore these additional resources:

Aim for Impact and Sustainability, Rural Health Innovations
<https://www.ruralcenter.org/rhi/network-ta/aim-for-impact>

Baldrige Performance Excellence Program: Health Care
http://www.nist.gov/baldrige/publications/hc_criteria.cfm

Business Model Canvas, Business Model Generation
<http://www.businessmodelgeneration.com/canvas/bmc>

Integrating the Strategic Plan, Logic Model, and Work Plan, Evaluation Research Team
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/evaluation/pdf/brief5.pdf>

Program Evaluation Planning and Tools: Network Development Grantees, Rural Health Innovations
<https://www.ruralcenter.org/network-ta/resources/program-evaluation-planning-and-tools>

Program Strategic Planning Guide and Tools: Network Development Grantees, Rural Health Innovations
<https://www.ruralcenter.org/network-ta/resources/program-strategic-planning-guide-and-tools>

Strategic Planning Basics, Balanced Scorecard Institute
<http://balancedscorecard.org/Resources/Strategic-Planning-Basics>

Strategic Planning Process Outline, Center for Rural Health, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences
<https://www.ruralcenter.org/tasc/resources/strategic-planning>

Strategic Planning That Leaves you Smiling, Studer Group (webinar recorded 10/13/2014)
<https://www.studergroup.com/resources/news-media/articles/studer-group-to-host-national-rural-health>

Strategic Planning That Works: Integrating Strategy with Performance, American College of Healthcare Executives (webinar series ACHE members: \$530, Non-members: \$605)
http://www.ache.org/seminars/online_detail.cfm?PC=ONLSTPLAN