

Common Pitfalls in Strategic Planning

(And How to Avoid Them)

Episode 2 Companion Blog

Even the most passionate and mission-driven teams can stumble when it comes to building and implementing a strategic plan. In Episode 2 of *Mission-Driven Momentum: Nonprofits, Leadership & Growth*, we opened up about the most common missteps we've seen—and even made ourselves—in strategic planning.

Because let's face it: strategy isn't just about getting organized. It's about leading with clarity and creating a foundation that can flex and grow with your organization.

Why Strategic Plans Fail

Strategic plans don't fail because people don't care. They fail because they're rushed, vague, or siloed. The most common culprits:

- Plans created behind closed doors
- Goals that sound nice but mean nothing
- Strategies that disappear after rollout
- Culture and communication gaps

Sound familiar? These aren't just planning errors—they're leadership moments waiting to happen. Each pitfall is a chance to pause, course-correct, and build something stronger.

Pitfall #1: Planning in a Vacuum

This happens when a plan is developed by a few people at the top, without real input from the rest of the team. A well-meaning leader rolls out a strategy solo, and the team responds with silence or confusion. Why? Because they weren't part of the process.

We once worked with a nonprofit where leadership announced a five-year plan that no one on the program team had even heard of. It wasn't a bad plan—but it lacked buy-in, and without buy-in, implementation flatlined.

The Fix:

Involve key voices from the start. Host listening sessions. Survey staff. Build working groups. When people feel heard, they're more likely to act—and to care.

Pitfall #2: Vague Goals and Fuzzy Metrics

"Grow our programs." "Reach more people." "Build awareness." These might sound strategic, but they're too broad to act on.

If your goal wouldn't pass muster in a project management meeting, it's probably not strategic enough.

The Fix:

Set SMART goals—Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Example: Instead of "increase donor engagement," try "increase recurring donors by 20% over the next 12 months." That's a goal your team can work with.

Pitfall #3: The Disappearing Plan

We've all seen it: a plan that gets unveiled with fanfare, then slowly fades from view. No check-ins. No ownership. Just a polished PDF collecting digital dust.

We shared a real story in the episode about a team that invested weeks into building a gorgeous strategic plan... only for it to get buried in a shared drive no one ever opened again.

The Fix:

Keep the plan alive. Assign ownership. Build regular check-ins into your workflow. Talk about it in meetings. Track progress and celebrate small wins. Strategy should show up at staff meetings—not just annual retreats.

Pitfall #4: Overplanning, Under-Executing

You've got dozens of drafts, detailed charts, and word-smithed objectives—but nothing's in motion. That's a red flag.

Overplanning often happens when teams are afraid to start. But perfection is not the goal—progress is.

The Fix:

Embrace a "version 1.0" mindset. Get the plan good enough to start, then learn and adapt. Strategy isn't a final product—it's an evolving process.

Pitfall #5: Ignoring Culture and Communication

Culture makes or breaks execution. If your people don't feel safe to give feedback or if leadership doesn't reinforce the plan consistently, even a great strategy will stall.

We talked in the episode about an organization with all the right pieces on paper—but a culture of fear and disconnection meant no one felt comfortable naming what wasn't working. The result? Silence. Until things started unraveling.

The Fix:

Communicate regularly and transparently. Make space for dialogue. Align your culture with your strategy. Don't underestimate the power of storytelling to bring your plan to life.

Real Talk: The Strategic Slip-Ups We've Seen

In this episode's Real Talk Roundtable, we shared behind-the-scenes stories—including the time an "open retreat" turned into two days of chaos without clear facilitation, and a plan that leadership loved but staff had never even seen.

The common thread? Disconnection.

Strategy isn't just about what's on paper—it's about how your people experience it. If your team isn't aligned, the plan won't go far.

Quick Wins: Avoid the Pitfalls

- ✓ Involve your team early and often
- ✓ Make your goals SMART
- ✓ Assign ownership and timelines
- ✓ Build in regular check-ins
- ✓ Make communication part of the strategy

Each of these steps is simple—but not always easy. And that's where support comes in.

Download Your Free Resource

We created a **Strategic Pitfalls Cheat Sheet** that recaps every pitfall—and how to avoid it—with prompts you can use in your next team meeting.

 [Download the cheat sheet at missiondrivenpod.com](https://missiondrivenpod.com/resource/strategic-pitfalls-cheat-sheet)

Let's Keep the Conversation Going

Have questions or feedback about the podcast or blog? Email us at contact@missiondrivenpod.com.

Need help building a strategy that sticks? Reach out at contact@thescanlandgroup.com or visit thescanlandgroup.com.

From our family—including Gracie, Moody, and Diamond—to yours: keep leading with heart, keep showing up with purpose, and keep creating a world where everyone belongs.

Until next time—stay focused, stay mission-driven.