

Strategic Planning – Building the Bridge between Public Safety Operations and Technology

John Naisbitt, the author of *Megatrends*, said, “Strategic planning is worthless unless there is first a strategic vision.” It has been our experience that public safety command staffs do a very good job developing a vision for the future services needed by their communities. Their vision forms the foundation for their operational strategic plan, but often the planning process seems to end there. The end result is a gap between the operational strategic plan and the technology needed to achieve the plan. A public safety technology strategic plan bridges that gap and fosters the opportunity for operational success.

Fire, EMS and law enforcement leaders can tell us all about what the future looks like in terms of operations and services provided to the community. For example, some fire and EMS agencies are shifting from just emergency response services to a comprehensive risk mitigation and management focus. In an article titled, [The Future of the Fire Service](#), Doug Cline said, “Fire departments will need to shift from traditional emergency responses services and transition into a combination of emergency responses services with a primary focus on being a community reduction team focusing on public safety in a multidimensional approach of safe buildings through code enforcement, building requirements, environmental impact, community safety, responder safety, community health and wellness and community risk reduction through research and education. We will become the mother ship that guides critical thinking in all aspects of safety throughout our community. The fire service will need to focus on assembling a set of best practices in risk reduction and work diligently to manage risk via educating our communities, proactive engineering practices and code enforcement. However, the fire service does not collect data well at all. We have to transition to being very analytical of collecting certain complete and accurate quantifiable data based upon a standard data model for comparative benchmarking studies.”¹

What Mr. Cline doesn't talk about is the technology needed to realize that vision and how to get it. Let's be candid. Fire, EMS and law enforcement

leaders are experts in their respective disciplines. They're cops, firefighters and medical professionals. Ask them anything about their operational needs and future and they can tell you, because their forte is public safety operations. But how to achieve the future through technology is something less clear to them. They rely on their partnership with the IT support team to help them navigate the technology gauntlet.

CIOs, Public Safety IT directors, IT managers and other IT leaders supporting public safety operations are often driven at a tactical level responding to the day-to-day demands of those they support. We frequently hear, "They don't tell us much. We just respond to the flavor of the day." The deluge of requests to fund public safety technology solutions is a challenge for elected official and other government leaders. They are given little to no insight into the real value of the technology and how it fits into the long-term strategic plan. In many cases both groups tend to believe that public safety technology projects are driven more often by crisis than by strategy. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Technology gurus, on the other hand, live and breathe technology; but are not experts in public safety operations. They don't carry guns, charge a hose or treat a patient, but they do know technology. Some staffs supporting public safety IT adhere to standard IT and project management practices. And then there are the "dreamers." They have a new idea every week about some whiz-bang widget they found at a trade show or read about that will "make things better." So, these technology buffs convince a manager of the benefits; figure out how to get just enough funding to make it work; and they are off and running. There are short-term benefits to these solutions, but the need for integration into the "strategic plan" and the long-term support requirements are often overlooked. But, it doesn't have to be that way.

So, on one end we have public safety leaders feeling that their IT support team doesn't understand public safety operations or the urgency and priority of response needed to support public safety operations. And on the other, we have technology leaders who feel that public safety leaders don't tell them what they want until the last minute or until a crisis happens. Add the fact that there is competition for resources and funds

between law enforcement, fire, and EMS. In the end everyone is frustrated and little positive happens in terms of the agency fulfilling the “Strategic Vision”. But, it doesn’t have to be that way either.

The way to avoid these pitfalls is through comprehensive strategic planning. Comprehensive strategic planning bridges the gap between public safety operations and technology. In today’s world, technology plays a key role in operational success. While the operations strategic plan identifies key operational objectives, a technology strategic plan opens the door for communication and links each operational objective to the technology needed to achieve that objective. It also equips decision makers with the information needed to establish project and resource priorities to achieve a specific operational objective. So, how do we, as leaders, make that happen?

1. Collaboration

Public safety and IT leaders need to be in sync and move forward together. Public safety leaders should look to invite their, IT support leaders to participate in their operational strategic planning sessions. This is the time to share where the agency is headed operationally and when you plan to get there.

IT leaders need to be proactive in offering their help to establish strategies and goals. It is the IT leaders responsibility to know where the customer wants to go and to pave the way through technology to help them get there. The IT leaders need to establish themselves as the technology innovator and visionary who can help make the operational vision become a reality.

Strategic planning sessions should also take place at the public safety community level. Fire Chief, Police Chief, Sheriff, and EMS director, all need to get together and identify the operational objectives they have in common, especially those that require similar technologies, and opportunities to integrate or share systems and data. As these collaborations increase, the departments will soon discover that they have more technology needs in common than you ever imagined.

2. Map the Strategic Objective to Technology

Once the strategic objectives have been identified for each agency and in particular those that are in common; internal and external drivers influencing the strategic objectives need to be identified as well as a list of current and planned technology projects. Each current or planned project needs to be linked as supporting one or more of the objectives. Those objectives that need technology, but are not supported by a planned project need to be discussed and flagged. If a project on the list cannot be linked to an objective, it must be carefully evaluated to determine why the project is being undertaken. If no technology is needed to support an operational objective, it should be noted as such.

IT support leaders, then need to step in and lead the discussion concerning those flagged objectives that need a technology solution. They need to confirm that the organization has no existing technology to support the strategic objective and begin discussing what high level functional and technical requirements are driving the solution, and what innovative solutions are available or needed to meet the preliminary requirements. These discussions should consider cost, resource availability, compliance with standards and architecture, enterprise initiatives and other factors influencing alternative solutions. The proposed project should then be linked to the objective.

We have found that a single page document, we call them placemats, for each agency and one for the combined public safety community are extremely helpful in visually communicating the overall strategic plan and the link between the objective, the drivers, and existing and future technology projects.

3. Objective and Project Prioritization

The next step in the planning process is to prioritize each objective and the associated technology projects. This needs to be done at three levels: The individual public safety agency, the combined public safety community, and at the enterprise level as a whole.

This is not an easy task, as each agency will be vying for the projects that it sees as most important. But this is where the rubber meets the road. The public safety leadership team needs to accomplish this task as a group. It is the responsibility of the leadership team to establish public safety priorities, given input from their various constituencies.

Several factors must be considered when prioritizing strategic objectives and projects. Public safety leaders must consider funding and project resource availability, staff skills and availability to maintain the solution, the impact of the disruption to current and future operations, system integration, staff training, facility readiness, disaster recovery, and long-term support. The impact this will have on other departments in the organization such as legal, procurement, enterprise IT, etc., needs to be considered as well. Coordinating project activities with these departments will help gain their support and assist them in their planning processes.

4. Seek Funding Together

The chance of obtaining funding for projects supported by all public safety leaders is far greater than when competing individually for the same funds. Public safety leaders need to identify all funding sources that may be available before requesting funds to support new technology projects. Existing grants, bonds, RICO, CIP, O&M and other funding sources must be considered before additional requests for funding are submitted. The funds from some sources, such as RICO funds, can only be used for very specific things. Those funds that have restricted use should be allocated to the projects that meet the funding restrictions. The funding sources without restrictions should be linked to the remainder of the projects based on the project's priority previously established by the public safety leadership team.

The command staffs from each agency will be well served to support one another's requests before the funding authorities for all public safety projects. The chance of getting funds from a city council or

board of supervisors is far greater when the fire chief stands in support of the police chief's request and vice versa. Public safety officials should also stand in support of IT leaders when they are requesting funds for enterprise application and infrastructure projects needed for public safety.

5. Project Initiation and Implementation

Public safety technology projects tend to be complex and require a very specific understanding of the operations and technology. Most organizations do not have staff with the skills needed to successfully initiate the project and implement the solution. Public safety and IT leaders should consider the services of a skilled project manager with practical experience in the technology being implemented to lead the project. The project manager could be a full time staff member, a temporary staff member brought on board just for the project, or an outside consultant.

The project manager should lead the effort to get end-users involved in the project, identify and document functional and technical requirements, create an RFP and Statement of Work, review and evaluate vendor responses, set up and attend vendor demonstrations, participate in selecting the desired solution that best meets the operational needs, assist in contract negotiations, work with the selected vendor to establish a unified project schedule that supports the desired end result, and monitor and control project activities throughout the life of the project.

6. Communicate

It is essential that public safety leaders communicate their operational and technology strategic plan to all levels inside and outside their respective agencies. Frequency and level of detail about a particular technology initiative should increase with time to ensure all staff members are aware of the project, the initiative the project supports, the ultimate goals of the objective, the benefits it will bring to the organization and the community, and the latest status of the project. They need to share difficulties as well as successes. Sharing the issues encountered and the resolutions to

overcome the issues establishes an atmosphere of reality and helps keep the rumor mill at bay.

Communication may be accomplished through email, staff meetings, web sites, intra and Internet, videos, teleconferencing and other mediums. Use what works best for your agency and use it often. Everyone in the organization needs to be kept informed. By doing so, the chances for end-user, agency, and organizational support and acceptance will increase dramatically.

Comprehensive strategic planning builds the bridge between public safety operations and technology. It is the enabling factor that facilitates collaboration with multiple departments, identifying public safety service objective and relevant projects, establishing project priorities, obtaining funding, initiating and implementing quality solutions, communicating the benefits, and ultimately achieving the public safety operational objective for which it supports.

Comprehensive strategic planning can close the gap and build the bridge!

ⁱ See more at: <http://www.thecompanyofficer.com/2011/02/08/the-future-of-the-fire-service/#sthash.mnqgNXXR.dpuf>