

STRATEGY

Using the 28 Characteristics
of a Healthy and Effective
Youth Ministry to
Develop a Strategic Plan



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THE PROCESS

***“Write the vision and make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it.”
(Habakkuk 2:2)***

This booklet is designed to guide you through a step-by-step process of writing a strategic plan for your youth ministry – one that will give you and your team a sense of purpose and direction.

The process, based on 28 characteristics found in healthy and effective youth ministries, will enable you to identify the primary areas that need attention and then will help you prayerfully discern the specific steps to take to improve what you do.

You can view a list of the 28 characteristics in the appendix to this booklet but for a thorough description of them we recommend you read the companion book **ASSETS: 28 Characteristics of a Healthy and Effective Youth Ministry** available through YOUTHTRAIN at www.youthtrain.com/shop

The book will give you much more information to draw on, especially as you begin to set goals and strategies. For each of the 28 characteristics, it will provide you with checklists, along with questions for discussion that will help you dig deeper.

The process consists of ten steps that constitute a mix of listening to God, listening to your people and listening to each other, before ultimately discerning where God is leading you as you develop a strategic plan for your youth ministry.



STEP 1: ADOPT A CHRIST-CENTRED MINDSET

As you embark on the process of developing a strategic plan, it is important to keep in mind that what you are doing is more like an art than it is a science.

You will need to avoid the mistake of thinking that a successful youth ministry is the outcome of a simple formula. You may be tempted to think that once you have discovered the formula, you simply apply it and presto! You suddenly have a healthy and effective youth ministry!

As you write your strategic plan using the approach outlined in these pages, you will be less like a scientist in the laboratory, and more like an artist in their studio. Good art arises out of a person's experiences, impressions, and gut-level sense of what is "right" at the time.

In other words, as you embark on this process, understand that there is no exact formula or guide that will lead you to discover what the "right" answers are for improving your youth ministry.

Instead, have it settled in your mind that the only true Guide is Christ, who is the Head of the church and all its ministries (Colossians 1:18).

To undertake the process successfully, will require prayer and discernment by your whole team working together, as you wait on God and sense His leading through every step of the process.

Adopting a Christ-centred mindset means that you will *"in all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path."* (Proverbs 3:6).



STEP 2: SURVEY KEY PEOPLE

Once you are clear on what your mindset should be, the next step is to survey key people and to get their feedback on the relative strengths of your youth ministry. These people should include all your youth leaders and at least some of your church leaders or elders, parents, and key young people whose insights you trust.

In surveying people, ask them to respond to each of the 28 stated assets with any of the following responses: strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, or strongly agree. They are invited to make comments if they wish.

You can conduct the survey using the downloadable form on our website (see www.youthtrain.com/consultancy) or set up your own online survey for ease of collecting and collating. (We recommend <https://freeonlinesurveys.com/> where you can collect responses free for up to 20 days). Allow people to remain anonymous if they wish.

As you collate the feedback from the survey, remember the following:

- Responses are only people's perceptions – not necessarily reality.
- People are being asked to assess the youth ministry – not necessarily you as a leader. Remain humble and don't take comments personally.
- What people see as priorities for attention do not necessarily reflect God's priorities. In other words, the lowest-ranking characteristic is not necessarily where you will start (more on this later).
- For at least some of the responses, it is worth noting what role people have in relation to your youth ministry. For example, parents saying they feel unsupported by the youth ministry holds more weight than youth leaders saying that parents are well-supported.



STEP 3: FORM A STRATEGY TEAM

Because the process of developing a strategic plan involves discerning what God is saying, it must be undertaken by a team. Guidance, whether personal or corporate is a group responsibility – where two or more are gathered, there is God, making His presence known (Matthew 18:20). Whenever Scripture speaks of the Body of Christ working together, the implication is always, “*We need each other!*” None of us have all the answers (1 Corinthians 12:21).

However, while there is value in inviting others to work with you, it is possible to have too many on a team. Eight to ten people is ideal – beyond twelve is too many. More people mean more opinions, and the process can get weighed down when looking to develop consensus.

The team should include at least some of the youth leaders – all of them if the team is small. Because they are involved with the youth ministry from week to week, they are in the best place to comment on what is taking place and what needs to change. If necessary, choose those who are experienced and enjoy discussing strategy.

It is also good to involve at least one church leader or elder. Not only do they bring a wider perspective to the conversation, but their involvement means they will be a helpful advocate for any changes you may decide upon.

Similarly, it is important to involve at least two parents. Choose those who are supportive of you, who are constructive, and who are well respected by other parents. Finally, consider involving a couple of mature and prayerful young people as they will bring still a different perspective.



STEP 4: IDENTIFY THE GAPS

Once you have selected your team, distribute the results of the survey to them and arrange to meet. Allow about three hours to work through the process of drafting your strategic plan. You might like to do this all in one morning or afternoon or alternatively, meet over a couple of evenings.

Your first task will be to agree upon those characteristics that require the most attention. Generally, these will be the ones that scored lowest on your survey, but be open to the possibility that your discussions may lead you to identify gaps in areas not rated as significant by those who completed the survey.

There will be few, if any, of the 28 characteristics that won't require any attention at all. Many will point to minor changes – things that you yourself can correct without input or discussion by the team. What you are looking for are significant “gaps” – areas that will require ongoing work and attention.

At this stage of the process, avoid getting bogged down in discussing *what* changes need to take place. That will come later.

Also, don't spend too much time deciding if a characteristic needs significant attention or just minor adjustments. Strive to reach a consensus, but if you can't agree, include an area on your list anyway.

In engaging in this process, most groups come up with ten to twelve gaps but don't be concerned if you find a few less or even a few more. If however, you identify twenty gaps, you have likely set your criteria for areas needing attention too low, and if you have less than five, you may have set them too high.



STEP 5: DETERMINE THE PRIORITIES

As mentioned in step one, you are engaged in a process that is more like an art than a science. This is no more true than in this next step.

Here you need to determine which of the gaps you will focus on first – the ones that will be your priorities as you develop your strategic plan. It is not as easy as simply selecting the lowest-rated areas. Instead, keep in mind the following as you establish your priorities:

- Ideally, you will want to develop a strategic plan for 12 months beginning at the start of a calendar year. In this instance, you want to choose 3 or 4 gaps – five at the most – to focus on. If you are developing a plan for the next six months you may be best to consider focusing on just 2 or 3 gaps.
- Consider choosing those significant gaps that won't require as much work as the others. It will give your team a sense of momentum as you tick these off in the months ahead, and will encourage you as you tackle the more difficult areas.
- Again, be aware that the lowest-ranking characteristics may not be the most urgent. Some gaps may be left for a time with little significant effect, while others are best tackled straight away.
- Be alert to the possibility that a logical order in which to work on correcting gaps may emerge. In other words, fixing one area may make it easier to focus on another characteristic later.
- Finally, and most importantly, remain prayerful as you choose those gaps to attend to. Listen to God as you discuss these together and try to discern collectively what He is saying to you. Avoid the temptation to vote on your priorities. Work to achieve a consensus, even if it takes some time, as it will be time well spent.



STEP 6: STATE THE GOALS

Your aim at the end of this process is to present a strategic plan – a document that lists a set of goals followed by strategies that you intend to employ to meet those goals.

Some may balk at this point. “Isn’t this sounding too much like business theory? The church is not an organisation! It is a living organism led by Jesus.”

Of course, this is true, but that is not to say that we don’t develop plans. Note the following:

- Jesus lived his life with a clear plan in mind. He knew *what* He was called to do and *when* (John 2:4; John 7:6; John 12:23; John 13:1-2; John 16:32).
- The leaders of the early church made plans and set about implementing them (Acts 5:41-42; Acts 6:1-4; Acts 11:29,30; Acts 13:46-47; Acts 15:1-3).
- Those same leaders altered their plans when led either directly by God or through circumstances permitted by Him (Acts 8:1; Acts 8:26,39,40; Acts 9:28-30; Acts 11:1-18; Acts 15:36-40; Acts 16:6-10).

From these Biblical examples, we learn that it is good to make plans – to set goals and strategies – but we should remain open to God altering these plans as we proceed.

Once you have identified the characteristics you intend to focus on you can then restate these as goals. For example, suppose you feel led to focus on the first characteristic: “Christ-centred: The ministry intentionally seeks to discern and follow Christ’s leadership and can give examples of how He has led.” Your goal might simply be stated as: “For the youth leadership team to intentionally seek to discern and follow Christ’s leadership.”



STEP 7: DETERMINE THE STRATEGIES

Having stated your goals, you next want to identify the specific steps you will take to achieve these goals. Again, strategies may alter as time goes on, but it is preferable to adopt a strategy and then alter it later than to have no strategy at all, causing your goal to remain a vague and empty wish.

It is in developing strategies that the book, “ASSETS” will be of particular value to you. For each characteristic, there is a checklist of ten items. Work through the checklist as a team and as you identify those items that require attention, you can turn them into specific strategies.

Again, supposing your goal is based on the first of the 28 characteristics mentioned on the previous page. The first item on the checklist found in the book “Assets” is, “A leadership team exists and meets regularly to discuss decisions related to the direction of the youth ministry.” If this is not already occurring, your first strategy might be “To meet together regularly as a leadership team to discuss the direction of the youth ministry.”

The second item on the checklist is, “Whenever it meets, the leadership team devotes time to praying for the youth ministry and discerning what God is saying.” The resulting strategy might therefore be, “To set aside time for prayer and discernment at all our weekly youth leadership team meetings.”

For each goal, there is no fixed number of strategies you should aim for but be mindful of the fact that too many strategies may cause you to lose focus. Try to choose only those that will bring the greatest benefit.



STEP 8: SET INDICATORS

Having identified your goals and stated your strategies, your next task is to set one or more indicators for each goal. These are things you will look for at the end of the year (if that is the duration of your strategic plan), to determine if you have achieved your goal.

It is important that you are as specific as possible. A vague indicator will leave you, and those monitoring your strategic plan, wondering if you really did achieve your goal.

Again for example, if your goal is, “For the youth leadership team to intentionally seek to discern and follow Christ’s leadership” and your strategies are, “To meet together regularly as a leadership team to discuss the direction of the youth ministry” and “To set aside time for prayer and discernment at all our weekly youth leadership team meetings”, an indicator might be “The youth leadership team regularly met together over the course of the year, to pray, discern God’s will and discuss the direction of the ministry.”

Another indicator, picking up on the second part of the first characteristic, might be. “We are able to give specific examples of how God has led us over the past year, in response to our prayers.”

You will see from these examples that indicators can be a restatement of the strategy in specific terms or describe a logical outcome. However, care should be taken not to set in place an indicator that makes unwarranted assumptions about the effect of the strategies employed. For example, it is not valid to make your indicator, “Attendance is increasing”, as this is not necessarily a logical guarantee or outcome of discerning and following God’s leadership.



STEP 9: COMPILE AND CIRCULATE YOUR PLAN

Once you have followed the above steps, identifying which characteristics to focus on, and determining your goals, strategies and indicators, it is time to compile these into a single document using the format below.

Our Mission:

Goal 1:

- Strategy 1.1
- Strategy 1.2
- Strategy 1.3
- Indicator 1.1
- Indicator 1.2

Goal 2:

- Strategy 2.1
- Strategy 2.2
- Strategy 2.3
- Indicator 2.1
- Indicator 2.2

...[etc.]

Once your youth leadership team has agreed to this plan, submit it to your church leadership for their input and approval, before making it available to parents and any other interested parties. If anyone has concerns about the direction you have set, you should pass their concerns on to your church's leadership for their consideration along with any recommendation you might have.



STEP 10: ASSESS AND ADJUST

Over the course of the year (or whatever period of time your strategic plan covers), you should regularly examine your progress in implementing your plan.

Any of the following scenarios may emerge:

- Strategies have been employed and a goal has been achieved: In this case either maintain the goal for the remainder of the year or set a new goal and accompanying strategies
- Strategies have been employed but the goal has not been achieved: Some goals take time, even when the correct strategies have been applied so either continue with the same strategies, or, if necessary, devise new strategies.
- Strategies have not been employed and the goal has not been achieved: Here you need to ask why the strategies have not been employed. Were they unrealistic or did other factors emerge that made them impractical or ineffective? If so, devise new strategies; if not work at implementation.
- The goal has been deemed to no longer be practical or even desirable in the short term: Perhaps other priorities have emerged meaning that new goals need to take precedence. In this case, set a new goal along with new strategies and indicators.

In other words, as you review progress in implementing your plan, be open to adjusting what you do. Remember, your goal is to follow God, not to slavishly follow your plan. There is no shame in altering plans.



APPENDIX: The Characteristics of a Healthy and Effective Youth Ministry

Category 1: Christ-Centred

Christ is central to the life and activities of the youth ministry.

1. Christ-Led: The ministry intentionally seeks to discern and follow Christ's leadership and can give examples of how He has led.
2. Christ-Focussed: The youth ministry is "all about Jesus". The message of His life, death, resurrection and the new life is frequently taught.
3. Christ-Conscious: There is a sense of expectancy when the young people meet, as Christ is recognised as both present and active.
4. Christ-Honouring: The youth ministry is a place where Christian values and standards are upheld, and God is glorified in all that takes place.

Category 2: Intentional

The youth ministry deliberately maintains Biblical purposes and strategies in all it does.

5. Purposeful: The youth ministry emphasises making disciples who live out the Great Commandment and the Great Commission.
6. Values-based: The youth ministry has an intentional culture based on shared Biblical values and unique strengths.
7. Strategic: The youth ministry has a clear sense of direction and is working purposefully toward achieving God-given goals.
8. Assessed: The youth ministry regularly assesses itself and identifies areas that need to be strengthened or developed.

Category 3: Equipped

An intentional strategy for employing and developing leaders is present and working effectively.

9. Exemplary: Youth leaders are good role models for young people showing maturity and a genuine Christian faith that is evident to all.
10. Trained: Youth leaders are experienced and receive ongoing training, mentoring and support in their leadership role.
11. Diverse: Those involved in leadership in the youth ministry are drawn from a wide range of ages and personalities.
12. Youth-Led: Leadership responsibilities, training and opportunities to serve are given to young people.

Category 4: Integrated

The youth ministry operates as an integral part of the wider church.

13. Body: The youth ministry is an integral part of the church body and young people are known, valued and supported by all.
14. Belonging: Young people regard the wider church as “their” church and are engaged and involved in its activities.
15. Family: The youth ministry acknowledges the importance of the family and seeks to work with and support parents.
16. Transition: The youth ministry successfully manages age-related transitions into and out of the youth ministry.

Category 5: Relational:

The youth ministry sees relationships as being vital to its life and deliberately seeks to enhance these.

17. Individual: Every young person who comes to the youth programme is individually cared for and prayed for by at least one leader.
18. Attendance: Attendance at programmes is monitored and leaders follow up absentees, letting them know that they were missed.

19. Newcomers: Newcomers are made to feel welcome by youth and leaders alike, and quickly gain a sense of belonging and involvement.
20. Culture: The youth ministry is a safe place where acceptance, affirmation and encouragement are experienced by all.

Category 6: Balanced

Programmes effectively disciple young people through various stages of faith toward maturity in Christ.

21. Comprehensive: The youth programme seeks to build well-rounded disciples through Bible study, fellowship, worship and prayer.
22. Appropriate: Programming is effective in meeting the needs of those at various stages of maturity and Christian growth.
23. Missional: Young people understand the importance of mission and are engaged in service and evangelism.
24. Excellence: Programmes are prepared and run to a high standard and effort is made to continually improve their quality.

Category 7: Ordered

Systems and strategies are in place that contribute to the smooth and effective running of the youth ministry.

25. Planning: Programmes and events are well planned by a team of leaders with tasks delegated and shared.
26. Curriculum: There is an intentional long and short-term approach to planning a curriculum.
27. Database: An accurate database of useful information for all young people and parents/guardians is kept and maintained.
28. Communication: Good lines of communication and accountability exist between the youth ministry and all interested parties.