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STRATEGIC PLANNING: LEADING AND NOT FOLLOWING THE PROCESS

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Strategic planning does not have to be a complex, drawn out process that takes a year to conclude. And yet many schools find themselves in interminable discussions and meetings that can take up to two years to result in an actual planning document.

In an effort to engage multiple constituent groups in strategic planning and produce a plan that pleases everyone, many boards fail to realize that each group has different needs and working styles. For example, board members with business-oriented backgrounds usually want closure as quickly as possible and do not believe necessarily that one obtains a better outcome with longer deliberations involving many people or groups. In other words, they want a thoughtful discussion but prefer a process that concludes within six months.

On the other hand, board members who are professionals, doctors, lawyers, professors, HR personnel, consultants, accountants, or homemakers tend to enjoy and feel more comfortable with the longer process involving more dialogue. By their very nature, parents and teachers also want and need time to express their opinions, so they line up with the faction of the board having the same desire to draw out the strategic planning exercise. No wonder that as soon as some schools finish one plan, it is almost time to start another. Or, because the process itself was so arduous, the plan languishes on the shelf as enthusiasm for it comes to a halt.

I. Preparation

Many school heads and chairs who hire this Consultant for strategic planning will ask anxiously what they can do in advance to lay the ground work for that visit. Often they suggest using some type of a widespread community survey to engage the parents and staff before any actual dialogue or process begins formally.

It is not uncommon for subsets of faculty and/or parent groups to organize and agree to respond to such surveys in a certain way in order to influence a particular outcome. While surveys can be a broad community wide participatory tool, they need not precede or be part of the strategic planning process. Furthermore in order for them to be statistically significant, a return rate of at



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least 60% is very important. A school should also avoid launching any survey in the last few months of a school year. By that time, the typical gripes about proposed tuition increases, re-enrollment, workload, certain teachers' performance, etc. have accumulated so that normally fairly happy constituent groups turn "sour."

This Consultant believes that facilitating community discussion in focus groups of parents, students, faculty, board members, community leaders, alumni, school donors and friends can draw out precisely and carefully the same, and even clearer, more relevant constituent views on a wide range of topics. A careful, deliberative and guided set of questions engages the participants in listening to one another, but does not allow them to influence each other beforehand because they have not been privy to the exact questions.

II. The Process

There are two general choices about how to engage in strategic planning: "top down" or "bottom up."

In the bottom up approach, parents, faculty and alumni mostly drive the initial goals of the plan, which the board then sifts, cogitates over and then settles upon. In this Consultant's view, this approach lacks a leadership-centered interpretation of the mission and core vision that requires the passion and commitment of the head/director and board. It is their job alone to set the tone and the pace of the execution of the mission. They should be able to foresee the vision unfolding in the future more clearly than the other constituent groups can.

"Top down" sounds undemocratic or not collaborative and maybe even a little too directive. But it implies that someone is leading and then testing those strategic ideas against the constituents who are carrying it out or benefiting from it

III. The Outcomes

Generally, strategic plans should settle on no more than five to seven priorities or goals. Typically those will fall into these categories:

1. Curriculum change and direction
2. Technology
3. Facilities improvement
4. Recruitment, retention, development and compensation of staff
5. Student life, counseling, pastoral care
6. The financial model as influenced by enrollment, admissions, fund raising, profit centers, market position, financial aid, etc.



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Many strategic plans include a goal relating to developing further and implementing a "21st century curriculum". That phrase means something different to everyone. To some it means personalized instruction or a focus on the different learning styles of students, and to others it means a wide range of specific curriculum programs with "tags" that educators, but few parents and board members understand fully.

In this Consultant's opinion, the adoption of a student laptop or I Pad program or the purchase of more smart boards should not drive the strategic planning process. Ultimately these are tools to carry out the vision/mission.

IV. Summary

Clearly, this Consultant generally favors a strategic planning process whereby the school leadership (board/head/leadership team) retains the ultimate decision making authority for the selection of the school's strategic priorities and goals. They should be influenced appropriately by input from the typical constituent groups and including perhaps even from neighbors, competitors, local political contacts, donors, corporations and friends with a less insular point of view. This input can be gathered from carefully managed and well-timed focus groups and surveys (as long as the school is aware of the limitations of surveys noted above).

This Consultant, based upon experience in leading strategic planning exercises in hundreds of schools worldwide, cautions against: a process that takes more than six months from beginning to end and one that insists upon a community wide survey in advance of the actual on site consultations with the strategic planning committee, board and leadership.

Creating a visionary and doable strategic plan that is efficient and reflects the views of various groups within the school **IS** possible.

John Littleford
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