MANAGING FOR MISSION
Administrative consulting for faith-based schools

Strategic Planning: five page overview

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School leaders know that planning is important, but Strategic Plans have a way of emerging at various points in a school's history and then fading into the background. Like fireworks, they produce a lot of light and heat when they are first set off, but they too rarely provide the steady light needed to guide the school for the long-term. It can be vexingly difficult to formulate a plan that will continue to guide school decision-making for more than a couple years. But it can be done.

It begins with a clear understanding of what Strategic Planning is. A working definition for planning that truly guides decisions a school must make for the long-term would be the following:

> *Strategic Planning is the process of identifying and aligning*
> *all the significant factors within an organization's control*
> *in order to more effectively accomplish its mission*
> *in the face of environmental factors that are not within its control.*

When faced with the demands of a planning process, we are tempted to ask if it's really worth it, especially if our school is already successful. If a school has a solid reputation, strong balance sheet and a waiting list, why should it try to "fix what ain't broke?" Why, in any event, should we divert precious resources into a complex process, when to our intuitive judgments as experienced administrators and board members things seem to be working so well?

To move us beyond this thinking I would offer both a *carrot* and a *stick*. The *carrot* is that even if we are already good, we can be better. Successful faith-based schools can easily make comparisons that persuade us that the job we are doing is plenty good enough. But we have a responsibility to be continually better. Jesus' Kingdom will be achieved by all of us continuing to improve and grow into the people God created us to be. There is nothing more life-giving, once we get past our initial reticence, than seeing just how much we can do with the gifts God has given us. This is exactly what we expect from our students. In a world with too much hunger, destitution, violence and despair, schools, just like their students, have to keep getting better.

The *stick* is the fact that schools, even successful schools, can cease to exist. The story of the frog in the pot of water on the stove is instructive here. He notices the water getting warmer, but while he has the ability to leap out, he doesn't feel he needs to. When the water starts boiling, it's too late. Even education, even faith-based education, is vulnerable to the changing world around it. If we don't anticipate the trends before they become full-grown realities, our response will come too late. In mid-1960's there were 5.5 million students enrolled in American Catholic schools. Today those numbers have declined to 2.1 million. During that time, for instance, 8 Jesuit schools, have either gone out of existence or have been

transferred to different owners. While there are many threats to faith-based education today, there are still sufficient conditions to support its viability. Declines, in general, have come about because leaders either failed to apprehend the changes in external factors, which were beyond their control, or failed to address them appropriately by re-aligning the internal factors, which were within their control. This is, by definition, a failure of strategic planning.

The Goals of the Strategic Planning process

The overall goal of the Strategic Plan is alignment, so that the school can maximize its effectiveness in achieving its mission. Think of the difference between a crew shell with 8 rowers in alignment, racing against one where they are not. To produce this alignment, the planning process itself should have goals as well, qualities we want the process to engender in the way the school approaches its future. The plan must be:

Strategic. This sounds obvious, but a Strategic Plan must be distinguished from a Tactical Plan. The Strategic Plan is not a collection of action steps the school must take to strengthen itself. It's about aligning the entire school—all of its people, decisions and resources—around goals that must be achieved in order to optimize accomplishment of the school's mission. Yes, the Strategic Goals will require tactics, and in fact will require a Tactical Plan, but the Strategic Plan itself must stay at the truly strategic level.

Focused. It is impossible to align people, decisions and resources around a multiplicity of goals. Of the many beneficial things a school might commit itself to, the Strategic Plan must therefore lift out the few key ones, the game changers that will determine if the school survives and flourishes in accomplishing its mission.

Broadly-owned. The difference between a successful and unsuccessful plan is that a successful plan is one that people made work. And people will be more committed to a plan they helped create than one that was visited upon them. The people that make the plan work include board members, administrators, faculty, parents, alumni, benefactors, volunteers, sponsoring entities—all of them will be required to put their shoulders to the wheel. So they need to be involved in meaningful and appropriate ways in the early stages of the planning.

Implementation-oriented. The most elegant and compelling plan is useless if it sits on a shelf collecting dust. So the process must be measurable, outcome-oriented, accountable and time-bound. It must connect to tactical plans that accomplish the Strategic Goals.

For me, these are the top four goals of the planning process, but we could also include 6 others, which because of their particular circumstances, some schools would include in their top 4. We also want the plan to be: *Accurate, Coherent, Comprehensive, Flexible, Forward-looking, and Timely*.

The components of the Planning process.

There is no one *right* way to do strategic planning. The process should be geared to the specific needs of the school. Nevertheless it is often difficult for a school to know just what its needs are. Otherwise, why would it need to do strategic planning in the first place? Some individuals or groups in the school may be convinced they know exactly what the school needs, but they often don't recognize the perspective bias that comes from their specific role in the school. And even if they have all the answers, that doesn't mean the rest of the team is in alignment. Having worked with one school through many planning cycles, and

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with many other schools, for me some components have emerged which ensure the accomplishment of the planning goals outlined above. There may be good reasons to skip or change these components, but such a decision should not be taken lightly.

Set-up

1. **Board initiation.** The school's board generally will identify the need for a Strategic Plan, often in response to a proposal from the school administration. It will authorize the process and set up a Steering Committee to direct the process on its behalf

2. **Steering Committee.** The Steering Committee (of 8-12 members) will consist of some board members and others who bring perspectives from various aspects and constituencies, both internal and external to the school, as well as professional expertise as appropriate.

Mission

3. **Verify the Mission.** Does the school have a mission statement? Does the statement truly articulate what the school is in existence to do? It doesn't need to be perfect, because the statement itself is less important than how it is explained and interpreted within the school community. Trying to get it perfect could involve a lot of time, which often still results in a statement that some people aren't satisfied with. So schools should avoid delaying their planning process to refine an acceptable mission statement. But the statement needs to be clear and accurate enough that the school knows what its Strategic Plan is supposed to accomplish.

4. **Mission Pillars.** Pillars identify the major pre-requisites needed for the school to accomplish its mission. Identifying the 4-5 major areas needed to support the mission will help people understand plan goals and make sure that, while the goals are focused, nothing strategic is overlooked. Examples might be the educational program, the spiritual formation program, human resources, financial resources or facilities. These may not be part of the mission itself, but they are needed to accomplish it. Identification and wording of the Pillars will begin early on, but is subject to revision throughout the process.

Data-gathering

5. **SWOT Analysis.** A survey of the **S**trengths, **W**eaknesses, **O**pportunities and **T**hreats for the school helps us get all the important issues on the planning radar. Opportunities and Threats are the factors external to the school, over which it has no control. Examples might be the economy, government regulations, the number of students coming out of feeder schools. Strengths and Weaknesses are the factors internal to the school, over which It does have control if it chooses to exercise it. Examples might be the quality of the curriculum, the efforts made at marketing the school or the tuition charged. Engaging 30-40 leaders of various constituencies of the school in this process, using an on-line instrument, will not only assure that all the issues are identified, but that key leaders are alerted to the process and are engaged early on.

6. **Stakeholder Survey.** The SWOT is a qualitative inventory of the issues based on the views of a select group of people. They give us some idea of perceptions of the school's overall constituency, but because of the small size of the sampling and their very closeness to the school, they may not be an accurate reflection. So certain perceptions from the SWOT are tested against the experience of the school's base of stakeholders. The Stakeholder Survey is administered on-line and is sent to every employee, parent, alum and friend in the school's database. The school

may choose to canvass the general public or prospective families as well. Student input can also be sought, using a different instrument.

7. School Performance Metrics. The school should be compiling basic data about its operational results in preparation for the process. During the process, there may be a need for additional data, and after the Strategic Plan is approved, data-gathering will be focused around the achievement of the strategic goals. The school should be careful not to invest too much time gathering data for its own sake, as an excess of data to review will only slow and confuse the process.

Identifying Potential Goals

8. Stakeholders Meeting. When the Steering Committee has defined the key issues facing the school it invites all school stakeholders to an event to hear about the process and the general issues being considered, and give their input and perspectives. The meeting begins with a plenary session of all participants, who are then invited to select topic sessions to participate in during a 3-session round-robin, at each of which they will be given some background and asked to share their views. All of the schools stakeholders (parents, alumni, employees and friends) are invited to participate. Again this assures that all important issues, and the perspectives around them, have been taken into account. It also builds a sense of ownership for the resulting plan.

9. Topic Teams. The Stakeholders Meeting will further solidify the topic areas the Steering Committee wants to consider in the Plan. The Committee inaugurates 4-6 Topic Teams of 8-12 members each to delve deeper into each area and recommend strategic goals back to the Committee. The Topic Teams have three meetings each: the first to review background from school staff for their topic area, the second to begin identifying the issues they want to focus on and the third to formulate 1-3 goal recommendations for the Steering Committee to consider for the Strategic Plan. In the course of their meetings additional ideas at a tactical level will be generated and recorded for use in the implementation phase. Topic Team members can be drawn from school staff, board, key community leaders, topic experts and participants in the Stakeholders Meeting.

Plan Formulation

10. Goals. The recommendations are received by the Steering Committee from the Topic Teams. Goals need to be measurable, outcome-based, be assigned to someone to take the lead and have a specific time-frame. I have found that most people are already familiarity with the SMART acronym. Because it is already familiar to them and embodies the same principles, I will often use it instead. Unfortunately, there are several versions of what the initials stand for, so I have standardized on **S**trategic, **M**easurable, **A**ttainable, **R**esponsible, **T**imed.

11. Distilling. Since each is focused on its own area, the Topic Teams will likely generate more potential goals than would be appropriate for the Strategic Plan. So the Steering Committee has the responsibility of distilling all the suggestions down to the strategic few that will be highlighted in the Plan. This doesn't mean the other recommendations will not be acted on by the school, but the point of strategic planning to make the critical targets the school has to hit clear to all those involved with the school, even if that should mean it can't pursue the others.

12. Drafting. Working with an author (school head, committee member, consultant) or even a series of authors, the Steering Committee reviews and gives input to drafts of the plan until it has one that meets the goals established for the process. The actual plan document should be brief and compelling (4-6 pages), so that it can be easily digested by the school's many, busy stakeholders.

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There can be appendices to the plan showing more detail for those groups and individuals for whom this is appropriate, but the school must be able to articulate the essence of its plan in a way that is as concise as it is strategic.

Implementation

13. Approval. The plan is presented back to the Board for approval. The Board may make adjustments to the plan, but should not re-do the work it delegated to the Steering Committee. It is preferable that the Board have the opportunity to give input to an earlier draft so that the Steering Committee can incorporate their suggestions in a way consistent with the work they and other participants have done.

14. Dissemination. Once approved the Plan can be presented to the school community through a compelling, graphically-designed hard-copy and digital brochure. It should be distributed by various means and presented at the meetings of various school groups (faculty, parents, support organizations, etc.). Each year, the Plan should be re-introduced to the various constituencies, and updates given.

15. Annual Implementation Plan. Even while the Strategic Plan is being drafted by the Steering Committee, the administration of the school should be working with its team to formulate the Annual Implementation Plan. This will be a tactical plan focused on steps that need to be taken in the first year, but will outline the steps needed in following years to accomplish the school's Strategic Goals. The administration should use the Steering Committee as a sounding board, but the Annual Implementation Plan is presented by the Administration for approval by the Board. It becomes not only a tool for the administration to align its work with the Strategic Plan, but it assures them of the Board's support for their efforts and helps the Board to maintain its role in governance and not be drawn into management.

The foregoing outlines the basic components of a process to produce a plan that is Strategic, Focused, Broadly-owned and Implementation-oriented, as well as embodying the other six characteristics we expect of a Strategic Plan. The components are adapted and adjusted to fit the needs of each individual school, but they provide a reliable method for the school to align all the internal factors within its control in order to accomplish its mission in the face of external factors that are not within its control.

If you would like more information about *MfM*'s strategic planning process, our website, www.managingformission.com, has a more detailed, downloadable 33 page description, as well as how to order the book, Strategic Planning for Faith-based Schools.

To watch a 6:31 video tutorial on Strategic Planning for Faith-Based schools, please this link.

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