

Strategic Planning: thirty-three page overview

jackpeterson@managingformission.com

www.managingformission.com

A. The role of Strategic Planning

We all know we're supposed to be doing strategic Planning, but not everyone knows exactly why, or what Strategic Planning really means. 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. I have learned from my own experience and observing others that it's vexingly difficult to formulate a plan that will continue to guide school decision-making for more than a couple years. But I also know it can be done.

What is a Strategic Plan? Let me rather address the question, what is Strategic Planning? --since the process is more important than the document it produces. *Strategic Planning is the process of identifying and aligning 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.* The word, "strategic," implies that the plan produced must be:

- **Comprehensive.** It can't just focus on one aspect of the organization, say, the curriculum or the business model. The organization as a whole must be understood and aligned. Not only must we identify all the major pieces, but we must understand how they interact.
- **Significant.** It must focus on the big factors, the big ideas, the big trends, the ones we consider strategic because they will make a difference to the school's mission-effectiveness as a whole. These are game-changers for the school.
- **Forward-looking.** Wayne Gretzky's famous line when asked the reason for his success as a hockey player captures the essence of strategic planning: He explained that he doesn't skate to where the puck is. He skates to where it's going to be. And so must we. The strategic planning process must identify the trajectory of environmental trends and guide changes in the organization so that it can thrive in a new reality.

Why is such planning important? This is a crucial question. We all know that we're supposed to have strategic plans, but they take a lot of institutional energy to produce. When faced with the demands of the process, we are tempted to ask if it's really worth it. I think successful schools have a special vulnerability here because they generally have the most robust reputations, balance sheets and waiting lists. This looks a lot like success. So if we are so successful, why should we put the whole operation at risk by fixing 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 things seem to be working so well? Life has enough problems without going to look for them.

To move 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. I remember listening to a hospital administrator tell about his career. His first major administrative post was as a vice president in a suburban medical center in North Carolina. He knew he was an effective administrator because the hospital's profit margin, payer mix and daily census were in the top percentile of hospitals nationally. With this confidence, he applied for the CEO position at an urban hospital in Chicago and was hired. He quickly realized that his success at his former employer was a product, not of his or his colleagues' management skill, but of their location in an area where patients had resources. In a more challenging inner-city environment, he quickly realized that he would have to learn true management skills if he and the hospital were to survive. It took him a few years, but to his credit he dedicated himself to improving his management skills and he was able to turn that hospital around.

Successful faith-based schools have inherited a vital spirituality, effective pedagogy, great reputation and deep loyalty of successful alumni that places them at the top of the heap in the cities where they operate. The patrimony which so richly blesses our institutions can lead us to a complacency. We 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. In the Jesuit school world, we call this the *magis*. 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. Getting a comfortable A in trigonometry isn't good enough for a student who can cut her teeth on AP Calculus. 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. Commercial enterprises are keenly aware of the precariousness of their existence. Blockbuster Video opened its first store in Dallas, Texas, in 1985. Taking advantage of new technologies, and negotiated deals with the film industry, it grew within a few years to become a cultural staple of American life, with thousands of stores around the country and new ones opening every 17 hours. In 1995 it was purchased by Viacom for \$8.4 billion. By 2002, however, it was losing money and 25 years after it started, it was in bankruptcy and being liquidated. What happened? There were probably many miscalculations in an extraordinarily dynamic industry, including growing too fast and losing control of its cost structure. But one factor was how quickly its business model was superseded by Netflix. Blockbuster made the transition from VHS cassettes to DVD's in their stores, but since DVD's were much smaller and cheaper to manufacture, they could be mailed inexpensively. Capitalizing on this, Netflix stole Blockbuster's market in the span of a few years by building a clever distribution system without costly stores, using the Post Office and letting subscribers keep a DVD as long as they wanted, until they sent it back for another. Lower overhead and more convenience for the customer. That's strategic.

The technology-heavy home viewing industry is at the opposite end of the spectrum from the famously stable education "industry." Education hasn't changed in 500 years as much as the video rental industry changed in ten. Why would I even bring it up for comparison? Because our very assumption of permanence puts us at risk. 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 is 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.

For example, 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, in the world where I have done most of my work, Jesuit schools, 8 have either gone out of existence or have been transferred to a different sponsorship model.

Why? Because there are fewer Catholics? Because Catholic schools aren't effective? Because public schools have gotten so good? Because the Catholic community has less resources than it used to? The demonstrable answer to each of these is "No." While many factors that engendered Catholic schools have changed or disappeared, there are still sufficient conditions to support their viability. Their decline, in general, has come about because we either failed to apprehend the changes in external factors, which were beyond our control, or failed to address them appropriately by re-aligning the internal factors, which were within our control. This is, by definition, a failure of strategic planning.

I am not arguing that keeping these schools open would have been easy, or even that it is always possible to see the trends or know how to adjust. Not all of us are Wayne Gretskys and even he probably misjudged from time to time where the puck would be. But unless strategic planning becomes an integral part of our *modus operandi*, we will leave ourselves and our schools entirely at the mercy of changes in the environment.

By systematically assessing our environment, we can begin to see the range of possibilities for where the puck will be. We can narrow down those possibilities to the ones we feel are most likely. And we can think about what responses within our control might prepare us for these possible futures. If changes in the future threaten us, strategic planning may be the key to survival. If changes in the future offer new opportunities to more effectively accomplish our mission, strategic planning will move us toward our institution's *magis*.

B. The Steps of Strategic Planning

Of course there are many ways to do strategic planning. The following is intended to outline the most important steps in the order that I find generally makes sense. But there may be good reasons for skipping a step, adding one, or changing the order. In offering this list, I'm hoping to give readers a starting point from which they can determine their own process

Confirmation of the Mission Statement.

Since the Strategic Plan's purpose is to support the school's mission, the formulation or major revision of the plan is a good time to revisit the school's Mission Statement to see if it still articulates what the school is about.

The Mission is the reason the school came into being and remains in being. It should be possible to state the mission simply. When I first began working with our school's planning process in the early 1980's, our mission statement was four paragraphs. We thought it was fairly succinct compared to the two page

“Philosophy Statement” that we drew from. But it sat on a shelf and was difficult to remember or even reference in going about our work. So in the 1990's we decided it need to be boiled down and came up with the following: “Our mission is to proclaim the Gospel message within and educational community and to graduate students who are leaders in action, modeled on Christ, and committed to the transformation he envisions for the world.” This was a statement someone could memorize and slip into speeches and articles, put on signs, or use as a lens when considering a particular decision. And to my knowledge only two people actually did memorize it. So in the 2000's we came up with a one-word version of the mission: “Transformation.” We were in the business of transforming students along the lines of the Gospel, and having them become transformational people in the world. It didn't make our school unique, because many institutions share that mission. But it did capture why we were in business. No transformation, no reason to exist. Successful transformation, successful school.

There are other statements, apart from the Mission Statement, which institutions need to make about themselves. These statements are closely related to mission, and therefore often find their way into the Mission Statement itself. This has the consequence of weighting it down, making it difficult to remember and obscuring the essential task for which the school exists. If you were the captain of an army battalion and in the heat of battle, with ordnance exploding around you, you received the message from the command, “Take the hill,” that becomes your mission. If your troops then ask you what the mission is and you answer the question with how you will take the hill or why, you will have made it more difficult for them to understand what your battalion has been asked to do. The Mission Statement needs to answer the question, “What are we supposed to be doing?” There are other worthy questions to be addressed, but these should be answered in separate statements, which might include the following:

Vision Statements. This statement answers the question, “What will it look like when we get there?” It turns an abstraction, like “transformation,” into something the imagination can grasp: “200 graduates going into the world each year to take on leadership in their professions, in the Church, in families and communities and set the world on fire with their competence, conscience and compassion.” It is critical that the president and other leaders of the school continually translate the mission into sensory, emotional and inspiring stories that allow people to visualize what does not yet exist but could, if the mission were accomplished. Engineering school-wide, strategic change is hard work, especially at the beginning when palpable results come slowly. A vision of the longed-for reality can sustain the motivation to persevere through the tedious early stages.

Values Statements. How will the school go about accomplishing its mission? We are not referring here to implementation steps, but rather, what values will guide how the school goes about its task. Examples might be: “We will encourage the responsible use of freedom given our students by their Creator.” Values might address the importance of honesty in the school's dealings, or a special regard for the poor, or the use of participative processes and subsidiarity. The statement of the school's values alerts itself and others that, while accomplishing the mission is our focus, we are bound by certain principles that might not be self-evident in that mission.

Identity Statements. The identity of a school is what it is, as opposed to what it's supposed to be doing, or how it goes about doing it. For instance, the school's mission may be transformation, but it doesn't transform people the way a parish might, or a spirituality center or a political action committee. It is a school, and that is fundamental to its identity. Furthermore it may be a Catholic school, a Jesuit school and a college preparatory school. Within that, it may be a Cristo Rey School. So its mission is incarnate in a special kind of organization and it is important for its internal and external constituencies to understand

what that means. Do non-Catholic employees (or Catholic ones for that matter) really understand what it means to be a Catholic school? Do current parents understand what it means to be a Jesuit school? Do the prospective parents who desire only that their son's education be Christian really understand what it means to be a college preparatory school? Rather than assume that they do, we should articulate what this means in writing and incorporate into the school's communications a strategy for ongoing education about it.

C. Formulating Plan Assumptions

In many ways this is the most ambiguous part of the strategic planning process, because it involves assessing what may happen in the future. We often find that the possibilities are so numerous, as are the factors that determine which might become reality, that it seems futile trying to predict where the puck will be. And yet if we don't have some method for handicapping future trends the way a bettor at the track does before the horse race begins, we will be at their mercy. And there is little solace in looking back later and realizing we had the tools to deal with the situation if we had seen it coming.

One of the things that makes formulating assumptions about the future so difficult is that there is no shortage of data. The intuitive first step of forecasting assumptions is to begin gathering reams of data to create a knowledge base for the discernment that will follow. So we do Google searches, contact local government agencies for demographic and economic data, contact umbrella organizations like the JSEA, NCEA or ACSI, send questionnaires to other schools like ours and maybe survey our employees and other constituencies. All good steps, but they result in a wealth of information so vast that even if one person could be familiar with it enough to discern its implications, it would be impossible to do this collaboratively with the others helping to formulate the plan. Wouldn't it be great if there were a panel of experts in touch with a vast array of information and who knew the school well enough to filter it down to what has implications for your school? Well there is ...in a way. Think of our boards, our administrators, our faculties, parents and even our students as supercomputers plugging in to various facets of our schools and gathering and processing a vast array of data. That doesn't seem too far-fetched, but how do you take all those databases and draw out the perspectives and information that will be crucial for planning? That is in great part the challenge of strategic planning, and a good place to begin is the SWOT analysis. SWOT analysis is part of the following three-step process for formulating the strategic planning assumptions:

SWOT Analysis. SWOT is an acronym for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. It is a simple structure for looking at both the external challenges facing a school and its internal resources. It's actually better to look at Opportunities and Threats in the external environment first, before considering the Strengths and Weaknesses of the school. The reason has to do with that old saying that "if the only tool you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." If we focus on our Strengths and Weaknesses first, we may have a tendency to look for Opportunities and Threats that correspond. Another way of saying this is that we might be influenced by the hope that the trends shaping the future will be amenable to the tools we have. It's more helpful to look at the external environment for the relevant trends first, and then begin thinking about the resources that might be missing or available in our tool chest. Unfortunately SWOT sounds cooler than TOSW. I will continue to refer to the SWOT process by its more common name, but encourage you to change the order around:

Threats. Threats are those factors in the external environment that could make it more difficult to accomplish our mission. Examples could be higher costs of energy, fewer feeder schools, fewer students of high school age in our catchment area. These would be trends we cannot change, we can only respond to.

Opportunities. Opportunities are those factors which could give momentum to accomplishing our mission. Examples might be: declining quality of public schools, lower cost and increased functionality of technology, hunger for spirituality in a secular society. Again, we couldn't create these opportunities if we wanted to, but all the same, there they are. Interestingly, some trends could be seen as both threats and opportunities. For instance, would the establishment of a new Christian high school in one's catchment area be a Threat because it would be competing for students or an Opportunity because the public's awareness of faith-based education will be increased. Or an Opportunity because competition motivates us to raise our game to a higher level?

Strengths. These are internal elements that we're good at, that give us leverage in accomplishing our mission. Examples might be: an experienced, well-prepared faculty, a beautiful, functional physical plant or a unique and highly regarded service program. The thing to watch with both Strengths and Weaknesses is that they must be seen as such in terms of the mission. For instance, a school that has such an affluent population and doesn't spend much money on financial aid could see this as a Strength or a Weakness, depending on how it understands its mission.

Weaknesses. These are internal pieces that are missing or deficient within our institutions. Examples might be: high operating costs, an aging facility, or not enough room in the schedule for electives. These are things we could change, though we haven't done so yet because it would be difficult or have consequences we'd rather not deal with.

The SWOT analysis has four basic steps.

The first step is to decide whom you want to include in the SWOT analysis, keeping in mind that it generates a lot of unquantifiable data, which becomes geometrically more difficult to evaluate as the number of respondents increases.

The second step of the SWOT analysis is to give some context to the participants, something to lift their eyes from the close-at-hand to the bigger picture and to the future. This may be done with a thought-provoking article about significant trends or by a respected presenter or panel speaking evocatively about what the future may hold.

The third step is to distribute an input form to the people you have selected. This will consist of four open-ended questions based on the four SWOT categories (eg: What do you see as the external *threats* in the next 10 years to the accomplishment of our school's mission? Etc.). If you have chosen in step one to include the broad community in the process, you may want to select a small group of people you consider knowledgeable about the school and trends in the broader world. In this case you could take the input received from the broader community, summarize it and give it to the smaller group as context for their own reflection on Threats, Opportunities, Weaknesses and Strengths. Make sure, however, that they

understand their job isn't just to reflect back what the broader group has said, but to use their knowledge to push the horizon of awareness outward.

The fourth step of the SWOT analysis is for the Steering Committee for the strategic planning process to discuss the results. What I generally find is that most responses will cluster within a narrow range and many of them will be conservative in the breadth and futurity of the trends they identify as Threats and Opportunities. So the Steering Committee's process shouldn't devolve into letting a preponderance of responses dictate the assumptions for the planning process. Get the group to stretch trend implications out into the future and give special consideration to out-lier responses from the SWOT questionnaires.

It can also be helpful, before you begin the SWOT process, to bring in an outside speaker or assign some books that get at least some of the participants thinking about future trends that they might not have been aware of.

Data gathering. After conducting and discussing the SWOT analysis, the committee charged with steering the strategic planning process will identify a finite set of assumptions about the external environment and the internal state of the school that it considers most relevant for the planning process. It will then frame questions that need to be answered to verify those assumptions. For instance, an external assumption might be that parents will become increasingly consumerist in their selection of a school for their children. Verification questions might include: Is there data to quantify consumer trends in education decisions generally? Is there data about educational consumerism in our market? What factors are considered in educational consumer decisions?

Finalizing assumptions. Using the collected data to verify the assumptions that emerged from the SWOT analysis, the strategic planning committee will then make assumptions about the key issues that will shape the strategic planning process.

The forgoing does not need to be a linear, sequential process. Collecting data can be time consuming and the rest of the planning can rarely be suspended until it is complete. The committee will have to identify which data are most necessary and reasonable to attain before continuing with the process. It may well be that the process will be revised in light of data gathered at a later point. In fact, it is likely that the completed strategic plan itself will include action steps aimed at gathering data needed to improve decision-making in some aspect of the school. This is one reason why I said above that the strategic planning process is dynamic, even after a Strategic Plan has been written and approved by the Board, it should be flexible enough to be reviewed as new data emerges and new trends develop.

D. Setting Goals

Once you've clarified your assumptions about the future, which means you've identified the biggest and most likely threats, the opportunities you want to capitalize on, the strengths you have that will help you do that and the weaknesses you will have to shore up to be ready, you can set specific, strategic goals designed to bring you to where the puck will be.

Strategic goals are major initiatives the school must undertake to better accomplish its mission. By saying "major," we mean that they are beyond the incremental improvements you expect in the normal course of

business. Strategic goals are therefore, by definition, disruptive, challenging, time- and energy-consuming and generally not attractive to folks who are just fine with the way things are. We begin to realize this as the process unfolds. There is an unconscious, sometimes conscious, tendency to water the goals down so they keep us well within our safety zone. It reminds me of the story my dad told me about the time he was working a summer job as a security officer in a Nevada casino. Dad was a college professor with a law degree who never practiced law because he hated confrontation. So, on this security job he would pay close attention to the alerts on his radio for suspected cheaters so he could be on the other side of the casino when they were caught. He was a wonderful college professor, but in the field of casino security, he was no Wayne Gretzky. He was skating to where the puck would not be. Unfortunately, we can do that with strategic plans, and the formulation of strategic goals is the first place where we need to decide if we're heading toward the action or hoping that we can just keep doing what we're doing.

For this reason, Strategic Goals must be challenging. If they don't make us a little uncomfortable, we probably are underestimating the challenges the future will bring. They also must be compelling, to move us and our colleagues beyond our inertia. And they must be realistic. I know some people argue that organizations need Big, Harry, Audacious Goals (B-HAGs). And for some organizations that's appropriate, such as one with a competitive culture where most of the employees see themselves as high performers, or organizations that are so stagnated that the leadership needs to and has the resolve to, shake people up, and scare some of them away. But in most faith-based schools, with a lot invested in the quality of community and a lot of good things going for them, B-HAGS would be an over-prescription. In such a setting, challenging but realistic goals will be more sustainable.

The most likely way strategic goals lose their potency is by becoming too broad and vague. I've been down that road. These are goals like, "The school will substantially improve the annual giving program." This is a good goal in the sense that it's probably important to do. But imagine trying to determine 5 years later what progress you've made on this goal. What qualifies as a substantial improvement? \$5,000, \$100,000, \$1,000,000? While you might think a \$5,000 increase didn't meet the goal's intention, someone else might. Who's to say whose interpretation of this goal is valid?

Another problem with this goal is that it can be evaluated in terms of inputs rather than outcomes. Someone could hire a consultant to upgrade the solicitation materials and claim they have substantially improved the Annual Giving program. Nor does the goal tell us when the improvement was to take place, nor who would be responsible for it. This is how strategic plans become dust collectors. Even if they give expression to our hopes for the school, if we don't agree on what specifically we will see when the goal is achieved, if we don't know what mission-related outcomes it will produce, or when it will produce them or who will be responsible, such strategic goals will be of little use in managing change at the school. For the plan to have value one, three, five and ten years from now we need to push ourselves to make sure the goals are complete. A moat does not protect the castle unless its circle is complete. Going only $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way around does no good. To help us remember the four characteristics of complete goals, think of them as a MOAT protecting the goals' integrity, with each letter from this word representing one of the characteristics: **M**asurable, **O**utcome-based, **A**ssigned, **T**imed (Similar to SMART goals).

First MOAT Characteristic: Measurable

The first MOAT characteristic which a strategic goal requires is a **Measurable** result. People are either enthusiastic about or hostile to the idea of measurable results. Those who have to evaluate tend to like them because they can't evaluate unless they have clear standards. Those who are evaluated fear the measurements will give misleading evidence about their work. Both are valid concerns and measures have to be designed well to address them.

In the book of Genesis, God tells Abraham that he intends to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness. But he didn't give a metric for just how much wickedness would occasion such a result. Abraham could have left it at that and figured the Lord knew what he was doing. Instead he decided to engage the Lord and put some numbers on it. So he asked God if he would destroy the city if there were 50 righteous people living there. The Lord said he would not destroy the city for those 50. So then Abraham tried a lower metric, 45, and again the Lord said he would relent. Abraham continued with this process and eventually learned that the hurdle metric the Lord had in mind was 10. Unfortunately Sodom & Gomorrah could not attain even such a low goal, but at least Abraham didn't produce 10 righteous people only to find out God wanted 50. Metrics can be a help to both the evaluator and the evaluated.

The fact is, for every aspiration we have for our schools, there is some evidence we rely on to tell us whether we are moving toward that aspiration or not. If a history teacher says, "At the end of my course, my students will understand the causes of the Civil War," she will base the judgment of her success on evidence she considers reliable. It could be a test she gives. Or she may base it on what students say during class discussions, or on how they do on an AP exam, or what their history teachers in following years tell her. Based on the evidence, she will decide if she needs to alter the way she teaches.

Essentially, we have three kinds of evidence on which we base our decisions: Intuitive, Anecdotal and Statistical.

Intuitive evidence: 156 plus 243 equals 399. Even if I've never actually seen 156 things added to 243 other things, I know by deductive reasoning that they will add up to 399 things. Likewise, it stands to reason that if an administrator provides more quality in-service time to the faculty, they will grow in their professional development; if they grow in professional development, they will be better teachers; if they are better teachers, students will be better learners. As logical as this progression is, unlike a mathematical operation, many variables can contravene the result we expect. Our intuition provides important evidence in support of our choices, but it is not infallible. We need to verify our assumptions.

Anecdotal evidence: An alum returns from MIT and tells you that his high school math courses propelled him far beyond his college classmates. This is confirmation of what you intuitively know about your math program, because you've hired great teachers and have a well-thought out scope and sequence to the curriculum. You also hear similar reports from graduates at Stanford, Harvard, Yale and University of Chicago. What more proof do you need? These aren't just kids who have gotten lucky on the SAT, they are competing favorably day in and day out at the premier institutions in the country. This would not be true if the school didn't have an effective Math curriculum. Oh, yes there was that one student who flunked out of Harvey Mudd, but there are several plausible explanations for that one.

Anecdotal evidence is helpful in evaluating our choices because it tends to be holistic. By looking at the story of one student we can take into account a host of factors and how they interrelate to produce results. The danger is that we have no assurance that that students' narrative represents the experience of students in general. And if we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit we pay more attention to the stories that tend to confirm what our intuition has been telling us. Both intuitive and anecdotal evidence are indispensable for making good decisions. But they are not sufficient. They are two legs of a 3-legged stool. The third is statistical evidence.

Statistical evidence. Often, when people hear about data- or evidence-based decision-making, they assume we're talking about statistics. But statistics are just one form of data, and like intuitions and anecdotes, they form only one leg of the stool. Statistical evidence cannot stand without the other two. When we look at statistical evidence in isolation, we tend to over-estimate or under-estimate its usefulness. So claiming that a school is improving because its average SAT scores are rising, may not be justified. What else might we need to know? What kind of students are coming to the school? What might the school be doing differently to get different results? Are the higher SAT scores coming at the expense of some other area of student growth? With these caveats in mind, statistical evidence is still an indispensable tool for decision-making because it gives a broader, albeit shallower, picture of results across the entire group being evaluated, be it students' experience, faculty skills, parent perceptions, etc.

All three of these forms of evidence are important in the management of a school. Measurable results for a goal should be a statistic that indicates whether the desired outcomes are being achieved across the board, but they should be verified and challenged by both anecdotal and intuitive evidence. Anecdotal evidence is especially helpful in pointing to where the statistics chosen may not be telling the whole story. Intuitive evidence is indispensable in developing process steps that lead to better results. The point of the forgoing discussion is that while statistical evidence is the main tool for gaging progress on the strategic plan, it must also be interpreted in light of anecdotal and intuitive evidence for the three-legged stool to stand.

The first MOAT characteristic of a strategic goal is a **Measurable** result. Without a measurable result, we can't tell if we are making progress. If we can't measure our progress, we can't adjust our processes and see which adjustments positively impact results. This is similar to the scientific method we impress upon our students in science classes. We have them observe something that seems significant; they develop a hypothesis that might explain what they observed; they test the hypothesis by devising an experiment; they revise the hypothesis based on the results of the experiment; and they continue to test and revise until they understand the phenomenon well enough to predict it reliably. Just so, we may observe that our school seems less diverse than similar schools. We hypothesize that this may be the result of insufficient financial aid, and so we set a goal to increase financial aid to a level we think will correct the problem. We are now in a position to measure progress toward this goal at two levels: did we make available the amount of financial aid we said we would, and did that improve our diversity numbers as we thought it would? If the answer to the first is no, then we need to find out why we didn't provide the funding and determine how to correct that. If the answer to the first was yes, but the second was no, then financial aid was not the cause or not the sole cause of the problem and we need to search for the other factors. If the answer to both questions is yes, we feel the plan is successful, but in reality, even if we fall short of our goals, the plan has helped us navigate accurately and in that sense it is still successful. Success in any case depends on having agreed-on, measurable goals. Without them, it will be impossible to plot our way forward.

Second MOAT Characteristic: **Outcome-based**

The second MOAT characteristic of a strategic goal is that it be **Outcome-based**. Changes need to be made upstream, but measurements need to be made downstream. A woman walking by a river she had played in as a child noticed that the water had become turgid and brown, and she could smell noxious odors that hadn't been there before. She decided to walk upstream to see what was being added to the water. As she walked along the bank, she began to see what caused the turbidity of the water. She noticed that the farms along the river were different than those she had known as a child. Pasture and meadows had been replaced by more intensive farming practices, intermixed with small businesses and light manufacturing. She was sad to see the river in this state and wondered what she could do about it.

We are often like this woman. We see something different in our students, perhaps something that worries us a little. It might be that they stop going to church after they graduate or that fewer are getting married in the Church, or maybe it seems that fewer seniors are getting into the highly selective colleges. These sorts of trends would show up as Weaknesses (internal) or Threats (external) in our SWOT analysis and if they are significant they would need to be addressed in the strategic plan being formulated. If we think we know the cause of the problem, our inclination might be to word the strategic goal in terms of fixing the cause. For instance if there is a downward trend in applications to the school, and we think it is because of tuition levels, we might want to set a goal like, "Hold tuition increases to less than 3% over the next five years." That's specific and measurable, but it's not really the goal. It's the means (and perhaps only one of several) to a goal that lies downstream from it, something like, "Increase the applicant pool by 25% over five years." But the real strategic outcome may actually be further downstream from that, because applicant pool is not an end in itself either. Why do we want a large applicant pool? To produce a student body which has the proper academic, ethnic and economic makeup to support the school's mission. So the real goal may be something like, "Over the next 10 years, the student body profile will include 95% students who score 19 or better on the entrance exam, 25% minorities and 20% students who will require financial aid to attend."

Outcomes, outputs, inputs and resources. Strategic plans should identify the results desired as far downstream as possible. Implementation plans will address the upstream inputs that we expect to produce the downstream results. But unless we define the ultimate results we want, it will be unclear whether our solutions are accomplishing them. We must work backwards, or upstream, from ends to means, from *outcome* to *output* to *input* to *resource*. To understand this backward design, take an automobile manufacturer which has as its mission making money for its shareholders. It may find that its mission is being impacted by too many product recalls, which cost money that can no longer be paid out in dividends. Available profits for dividend payments is the downstream result, which we will call the *outcome*. So the outcome-based goal in their strategic plan might be, "Reduce product recalls by 25%." To do this, the manufacturer has to start working upstream to improve the process that leads to the results. It might determine that the proximate cause for most of the recalls is the use of highly sensitive digital sensors. So the company decides to build more robust sensors. The new sensors would be considered an *output*. As opposed to an *outcome*, an *output* is further upstream. It's not the ultimate result the company is seeking, but a process result that will lead to that outcome. Moving further upstream, the company determines that the durability of the sensors can be increased by incorporating a higher quality silicon processor. Incorporating the better processor would be an *input*, and the processor itself, a *resource*. The

input of a more expensive *resource* is not desirable in itself, but it produces an *output* which leads to an *outcome* that is.

Transposing this to the environment of a school, let's say you are concerned about an increase in student attrition, which could eventually threaten enrollment levels. You decide that an important strategic goal would be to reduce attrition by 50%. This is your *outcome*. You determine that most of your attrition is due to academic issues and particularly freshmen not being prepared for the increased demands of high school. You want to address this by ensuring that every freshman understands how to use time-management skills by the end of the first 6 weeks of school. This is your *output*. To accomplish this, the school introduces lesson plans into every Freshman English class on time-management. This is an *input*. To accomplish this, the school provides in-service training, and purchases a time-management workbook, which are *resources*. The *resources*, *inputs* and *outputs* should all lead to the *outcomes*, and *outcomes* should be defined in the goals of the Strategic Plan.

The second MOAT characteristic of a strategic goal, again, is that it be **Outcome-based**. Strategic Planning, again, is the process of identifying and aligning 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. Strategic goals, therefore, need to identify downstream *outcomes*, toward which the *outputs*, *inputs* and *resources* will be aligned.

Third MOAT Characteristic: Assigned

To be successful, Strategic Goals need champions. The school must know who is responsible for leading the implementation of each goal. The challenge of this is that, if the goal is truly strategic, many people from various departments of the school will need to be involved and it is often hard to determine who should take the lead. Sometimes the goal will correspond neatly with an administrative position. For example, "Increase the endowment by 30% between years 2 and 7 of the plan," would probably be led by the Director of Development. Other times it is clear that someone on staff has a passion and talent for leading a certain process. For example, "Increase parent support of the formational goals of the school by 25%," might be managed by a teacher who has a special talent for and interest in adult education. Generally, the more accountability required from more school departments, the higher up the administrative ladder leadership must come.

Regardless of who provides the ongoing leadership of a strategic goal, accountability must clearly tie into the governance and administrative structure of the school. The Board and its committees must have ownership, oversight and appropriate involvement in the Strategic Goals.

For implementation, it is best to set up a structure with the chief administrative officer (e.g. the president or school head) as the ultimate leader, the CAO's reports (eg principal, vice presidents, CFO, etc) as supervisors of various goals, and either they themselves or their reports as managers of various objectives within the goals. It is best not to have a goal manager reporting to someone who is not her direct superior. The reason for this is that the report would then have two bosses, one for the Strategic Plan and one for everything else. But circumstances may call for variations on this structure. For instance, one of the CAO's reports may have an unusual workload and need a colleague to supervise one of his reports

managing a strategic goal. Or the CAO may have some technical expertise needed to supervise someone who is managing a goal but is two levels down on the org chart.

Regardless of the accountability structure, the Strategic Plan must make clear to those responsible for Goals and to everybody else, who is leading the charge.

Fourth MOAT Characteristic: Timed

Imagine yourself evaluating progress on one of your strategic goals five years from now. You know the measurable outcome of the goal and who was responsible for leading its achievement. But how long did you give yourselves to achieve it? Are you behind schedule? Ahead? If this goal was important enough for you to include in the Strategic Plan, you must have had some sense of when you would like to accomplish it. A cross-country runner can set a goal to run three miles, but it's meaningless unless she completes the distance within a respectable time.

Like the other MOAT characteristics there is a tendency to blur accountability by not being specific on when we expect to accomplish our goal. This is understandable, because the fact is, we really don't know, until we've tried them, just how our implementations steps will go. And when we are in the goal formulation stage we won't even know what all the implementation steps are. The operating principle here, as with all the MOAT characteristics, is something I heard a Novice Master say to a group of young Jesuits: "Anything worth doing, is worth doing... poorly!" Wait a minute. We've always been told that "Anything worth doing, is worth doing well." Yes, that's also true. If it's worth doing, do it well. If you can. But what about when you can't? Well, if it's still worth doing, do it poorly. Unfortunately, we sometimes don't want to do something unless we can do it well, especially if we think it might reflect negatively on us. We don't want to write down a time-line that we may not be able meet and so we don't put any time-line at all, or we put one that is so general, no one will ever know if we've achieved it or not. And that undermines the whole point of the exercise, doesn't it?

Rather, I propose that early on in the formulation of the goal we start writing down time-line expectations. They are almost certain to be inaccurate. That's okay. It is better to have an inaccurate completion target than no target at all. With no target, everyone is working on their own time-line. With even an inaccurate target, people start communicating with one another about whether there is some way to achieve it and how it might be done. The worst case scenario is that you have to go back to the Board and revise the strategic plan because your time-lines were unrealistic. But this only means that the Board now has a deeper understanding of the plan and the plan itself is stronger for having been shaped by lived experience. That's a great outcome. But it doesn't happen if it has to be either perfect or nothing in your first iteration. That sort of perfection leads to formulating a dust-collector rather than a living, challenging document.

What would a time-line for a Strategic Goal look like? The time-line sets out the date that the measurable outcome will be achieved by those to whom it is assigned. This deadline has to be within the time horizon of the overall plan. So if it's a ten-year plan, the Goal has to be achieved no later than ten years. It must be achieved even sooner if some other strategic goal depends on its earlier completion. In some cases, what can be accomplished within the horizon of the Strategic Plan is not what is ultimately envisioned for this goal. For instance, let's say the vision for the school may be that the entire campus will be retrofitted to

the highest LEED environmental standards. This may take 30 years to accomplish. So the goal for a 10-year strategic plan might reference the school's ultimate vision but commit the school to retrofitting one third of the campus within the ten year horizon of the current plan.

The goal should also contain some milestone time-lines to allow progress checking during implementation of the plan. The Strategic Plan shouldn't be weighed down with tactical information, but a mid-term target would be helpful. An appendix accompanying the strategic plan can contain more information about implementation milestones.

MOAT Characteristics: an Example

So here is how a strategic goal incorporating all of the MOAT characteristics might look:

Goal I. In order to serve the poor and all economic classes, the school will move to need-blind admissions and meet the demonstrated need of all applicants. Toward this end the school will increase endowment by \$20 million in order to produce enough income to increase financial aid by \$1 million annually. By year 10 of the strategic plan, under the leadership of the Director of Development, the school will grow endowment from the current \$30 million corpus to \$50 million. \$5 million of this growth will be achieved in the first 5 years of the plan and the other \$15 million in years 5-10.

Is this sample goal **Measurable**? There are actually three measurable targets here. The overall goal is to be accessible to all economic classes and its measurable target is to meet 100% of demonstrated need of applicants. To support this, financial aid has a measurable target of a \$1 million increase and to produce this, there is a measurable target of \$20 million in new endowment.

Is it **Outcome-based**? Returning to our earlier discussion of *Outcomes*, *Outputs*, *Inputs* and *Resources*, all of them can be found here, so we need to sort out which is the *outcome*. In this case the goal of accessibility for all income levels is the mission *outcome*. It is an end in itself for a faith-based school. The increase in financial aid is an *output*. It is necessary to achieve the goal, but not an end in itself. It will be produced by the endowment increase, which is an *input*. And the endowment increase, in turn, will be the product of *resources* put in place by the development office. The importance of making these distinctions is that at the level of the Strategic Plan, the school must identify the *outcomes* downstream as far as possible, so that it is clear why they are important to the Mission.

As the school develops its implementation plans, it will focus more upstream on what were considered only *inputs* from the perspective of the school overall, but would be considered *outcomes* by the departments charged with producing them. For instance, when Development formulates its plan, it will consider the targeted endowment increase as an *outcome*, because in the framework of development, increased endowment is an end in itself. But for the school overall, it is only a means. Thinking strategically for the school as a whole means understanding the ultimate *outcomes* of our strategic decisions.

Is it **Assigned**? In this example, the Development Director is the person responsible for achieving the goal. That doesn't mean that the Board and the President aren't also responsible, nor that others

throughout the school don't need to have ownership of this goal. But the leader who sits at the nexus where activities will be directed and resources will be mobilized is the Development Director. Actually there are other elements to achieving the accessibility goal that are not in the Development Director's purview (how we assess need, how we market financial aid to potential applicants, etc.), but the strategic contingency for this goal is having enough financial aid funding. Hence the Development Director is assigned the lead.

Is it **Timed**? In this case the goal statement includes both 5 year and 10 year targets. Using these goal dates, the Board and administration can determine if the school is on-track to meet the measurable target.

One further note before we leave the topic of MOAT Goals. While the MOAT characteristics are the key ones for me, I have found that most people are already familiar 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.

E. Coordination and Leadership of the Strategic Planning Process

Before answering the question of how the planning process is coordinated, we need to look ahead to how various people will be involved in implementation. We've already talked a bit about how the goals must be assigned to individuals who will lead their implementation. But what about the overall leadership and coordination of the plan? For the board, the Strategic Plan is a tool for providing governance-level guidance to the administration. Without getting drawn into implementation, the Board can discharge its main responsibility of assuring that the administration is pursuing the Mission faithfully and effectively. For the administration, the Strategic Plan is a way of confirming direction with the Board. As long as the Board has approved the plan, based on their thorough understanding of the goals, the administration need not fear that major strategic initiatives it is pursuing will be second-guessed by the Board.

The Strategic Plan is the primary tool of the school chief administrative officer (this person may be called the head, the president or the principal, but I will use the term president here). It gives the president his leadership agenda. It may not articulate or ground everything the president does, but he shouldn't be pursuing a major strategy that isn't in the plan. If he is, he must stop pursuing that alternate strategy, or work to revise the plan to incorporate it.

Because it is his leadership agenda, the president's job is to lead the formulation of the plan and then lead its overall implementation. The president must see that the Board, administration and any other key leaders in the school are educated about the planning process, understand its importance and are ready to incorporate it into their priorities. The president must see that the strategic planning process is well-designed and disciplined. The president must see that people are encouraged to participate in the planning process, and reminded of the vision, both for the planning process and for the school. And the president must make sure the activities of the various leaders of the plan's goals are coordinated and receive the resources needed.

In the foregoing paragraph, I have consistently used the phrase, "the president must see that..." I have been careful not to say that the president is the one who educates, formulates, encourages and

coordinates, but simply that she makes sure these happen. Individual presidents may not have the skills required for all these areas. In some cases, the president can delegate or be assisted by other leaders in-house. In some cases, the president may have to reach outside the school for the needed expertise. In fact, the president must be careful that the plan is not just her plan, just her personal agenda, or even perceived as just her personal agenda. In fact, the more the president can draw others into leadership in formulating and implementing the plan, the better. But the president has to be at the center, underscoring the importance of the plan and making sure that all the bases are being covered.

There are a number of tools that the president and the administrative team can use to coordinate the implementation of the Strategic Plan. These include the Annual Implementation Plan, Strategic Plan Objective Write-ups, a Strategic Objective Implementation Table and the Strategic Workload Table, examples of which are available from [Managing for Mission](#). Coordinating and staying on task will require significant communication and effective use of meeting time in addition to the written plans and forms.

F. Participation and ownership

If the president leads and coordinates the Strategic Plan, who actually creates it? The simple answer is “The people who will be needed to implement it.” I remember early in my career visiting an attorney at his office to ask him for a pledge to our capital campaign. I showed him a summary of the long-range plan that I had authored for the school and, asking if he had seen it yet, was surprised to hear him say, “I wrote that.” Fortunately I suppressed my pride of authorship long enough to learn that he had been on a committee that put together a philosophy statement upon which the plan would ultimately be based, so in a sense he did write it. Of course he made a pledge to the campaign because he saw it as implementing a vision he had helped create. This is a lesson I have learned over and over again. The difference between a good plan and a bad plan is that a good plan is one that people make work. And people tend to make work those plans that they have helped create.

So first you must ask yourself, whose help will we need to make this plan succeed? Of course, you'll need the Board. If they don't see this as their plan, then their attention and governance directives will be leading the school elsewhere, or generating a lot of work extraneous to the Strategic Plan. If the Board has a strong committee structure, then by extension, the committees will need to be involved as well.

The administration will need to see it as their plan, and not just the president—the principal, or whoever is the chief academic officer, is crucial, because the plan begins and ends with improving the educational program. The CFO will need to develop and monitor financial projections. The development director will have to shape how the fundraised resources will be achieved. The facilities director and the IT director will almost certainly have to give input to and help with implementation of components of the plan. The vice-principals and all those administrators responsible for curricular and extra-curricular program will be key to “operationalizing” it, since they shape the schedules and priorities of the faculty and students. I've seen schools err on both sides of administrative inclusion. Some don't involve the administration at all because they are “too busy” to take on the extra work involved. So the board or a group of well-meaning volunteers does the work for them with the consequence that the administrators feel free to ignore it as something someone else came up with. Other schools don't involve anyone besides administration

because of concerns that a bunch of non-experts will complicate administrative work by bringing in initiatives from left field. Both extremes should be avoided.

Without faculty input and support, the plan will be stillborn. Not only will teachers be heavily involved in implementation, but it is hard to imagine others supporting a plan that the people at the center of the education process don't understand or support. Since most school strategic plans require fundraised dollars to implement, benefactors like the one in my story above, and particularly the school's alumni, will need to support it. If the first opportunity they have to be part of it is when they're asked for money, it's not likely they will. And finally other organizations that have authority or otherwise exert influence over the school should be brought into the planning process so that their support can be counted on during implementation. These include the umbrella organizations that sponsor or accredit the school.

So far two key groups are notably missing from the list above: students and parents. In one sense they are the most important groups because they are the very people for whom the school exists in the first place. But their horizon of involvement with the school is different than the other groups. Students are at the school as students for at most four years. Any senior or junior will be off at college by the time the plan gets rolling, although they may be involved later as alumni in the benefactor category. Parents, unless they have a younger student, or they are part of the benefactor group, won't have an ongoing relationship with the school. So students and parents, unless they also end up in one of the other groups listed above, will not be critical to plan implementation. It is, however, important to get their input because they represent the groups which the school's mission serves most directly and as such their perspective on what the school needs to do is indispensable.

This is starting to sound like a pretty big committee. How do we get the input and ownership of all these folks without creating an unwieldy process? The key is to develop a variety of vehicles of involvement and use them to maximize participation by these different groups.

Avenues of Involvement in Strategic Planning:

Steering Committee. This is a small committee that will guide the overall planning process on behalf of the Board. It should include key representatives from the Board, faculty, administration, parents, alumni, benefactors, sponsoring agencies and possibly a student. Of course some members may represent more than one category. For instance a Board member may also be an alum and a major benefactor. (8-12 total participants)

Topic Teams. Committees of 8-12 members who will focus on and develop recommendations for specific areas of the plan. These might include curriculum, extra-curriculars, technology, plant, personnel, development and spiritual formation. Members would come from the same categories as the Steering Committee, plus outside experts who give the process new insights and credibility. A school can have as many Topic Teams as they can reasonably manage, but usually they will number from four to six. The limitation is the personnel needed to train and coordinate the Topic Teams and the challenge of funneling and reconciling all their recommendations into the few strategic goals that will appear in the Strategic Plan. (50-75 total participants)

Stakeholder Input Meeting. All constituents can be invited to an evening or weekend session, or a series of sessions to kick-off the planning process. Often these meetings have a presentation about the process and some of the key issues facing the school. Then participants are invited to sit in on sessions around the topics listed above under Topic Teams. Generally participants will have the opportunity to give input on several topics over the course of the evening. In some cases, they are given the opportunity to continue on with one topic by sitting on a Topic Team. In other cases, the school will want to be more intentional about recruiting the teams. (80-200 total participants)

Special presentations. Existing groups like parents' clubs, booster clubs, alumni associations and even community groups can also be asked to dedicate a regular meeting to giving input to the Strategic Plan. This allows the school to efficiently hear perceptions of a wide range of constituents and the opportunity to align these groups' agendas with the school's strategic agenda. (100-500 total participants)

Focus groups. These can be organized to get the input of key constituencies during the process or to get input on a topic more focused than the plan areas taken up by the Topic Teams. An example might be using focus groups to learn more about parent perceptions around tuition. Focus groups are also helpful as a step in preparing the next vehicle, surveys. (30- 60 total participants)

Surveys. Finally, the school can offer all of its constituents a chance to learn about the planning process and give input through surveys. The survey process requires some skill and planning if it is not to produce a lot of time-consuming, useless data. There are methods for efficiently compiling a great deal of input even if every one of the school's parents, alumni and friends chose to respond. However, a reasonable expectation would probably be a 5-15% overall response. Our [website](#) has a free, downloadable 3-page guide to building a Stakeholder Survey. (500-2,000 total participants)

Looking at all these different vehicles, and there are other variations as well, it's conceivable that the school could involve over 250 people directly in shaping the plan, and another 2,500 giving input that will be used in formulating it (with everyone else at least having been given the opportunity). Imagine all these folks not only sharing their insights, perceptions and hopes, but also learning more about the school and its needs and beginning to see themselves as part of the team that will address those needs. The power of this involvement for the ultimate success of the plan should not be under-estimated.

Rolling all the Input up into a Plan

I mentioned three characteristics of the strategic plan earlier. To be truly strategic, I said the plan must be: Comprehensive, Significant and Forward looking. To work effectively, the plan must have several other qualities, and this is a good time to briefly consider three of them. As the forgoing discussion suggests, the strategic plan must be **broadly owned**, so that the people who implement it are invested in its success. It must be **coherent**, meaning that it can't just be a hodge-podge of good ideas that don't support or may in fact contradict each other. Along those lines, it must also be **focused**. We don't want to attack on many fronts, want to find a few key beachheads to our desired future and concentrate our energies there.

The participative process described above will secure broad ownership, but how will we be able to take the hundreds of ideas and forge them into a coherent and focused plan? To do this, we use a *distilling* process. Distilling is the process of narrowing or funneling a large number of recommendations into a

strategic few. As recommendations are distilled from broad-based participation vehicles, like Stakeholder Meetings and Topic Teams, toward the Steering Committee formulating the overall strategic plan, they are often consolidated, eliminated or changed to produce a focused and coherent set of strategic goals. To accomplish this, it is important that participants understand how their input will be molded into a focused plan. This should be built into the process from the beginning.

First, as we invite folks to participate in these various involvement vehicles, we explain to them where they fit in the planning process, and what will happen to their ideas. We explain that their ideas will be taken by people working on the next step in the process and who must forge them into a coherent plan. Second, we involve them in the distilling process themselves by giving them responsibility to narrow their ideas down. For instance, at the Stakeholders Meeting, 100 people may generate 500 ideas. 50 ideas might emerge from this process and be received by the Topic Teams. Five Topic Teams might receive from the Stakeholders Meeting 10 each, which they will flesh out and perhaps add to. They are told that their work will be given to the Steering Committee, which will have to boil down all the recommendations from the Topic Teams into a few strategic goals. We also challenge them to limit themselves to three recommended goals each. By helping with the distilling process themselves, participants experience that distilling is hard work, and not every idea can be designated as truly strategic for the school.

Finally the Steering Committee at the pinnacle of this process must formulate a handful of truly strategic goals that will be included in the long-range Strategic Plan. This takes courage similar to that of a basketball coach making cuts. She realizes that if she takes more than 12 players, she won't be able to give them enough playing time to become impact players. But there are a lot of good players who represent a talent pool she probably wishes she could have at her disposal.

Distilling is also difficult because we want to honor the work of the volunteers. How will they feel they were listened to if their ideas don't show up in the final plan? I have two answers for this. First, the strategic plan is too important to be used as a way to pat people on the back. Second, there are other ways to do that. Be sure to publish the names of the participants whenever possible. Share back the minutes of their meetings or compilations of ideas, so they can confirm that their idea was at least heard in the process. And assure them that the ideas generated, while not highlighted in the plan, will still be part of shaping it, and will also be available for reference during the implementation stage.

G. Time Horizon for the Strategic Plan

One of the first questions to come up in strategic planning is, "What should the time horizon of the plan be?" I've been in meetings with people who said we should be thinking 25, 50 or even 100 years into the future. I think of the movie *Back to the Future*, when Professor Brown explains to young Marty McFly that there are actually innumerable futures. He draws a line on the chalk board to represent time moving into the future. Then he puts the chalk on a point on that line and says that if something different happens at that point, the future takes off in a different direction, which he shows by drawing a line going off. You could draw an infinite number of lines representing an infinite number of radically different futures, based on an infinite number of decision points. That's the challenge of long-range planning. As we push out the time horizon, the number of possible futures increases geometrically. It might be nice to shape our school's future for the next 25 years, but think again of the definition I offered for strategic planning: the

process of identifying and aligning 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. As we push out the number of years, those factors not in our control increase geometrically, and we simply cannot develop responses for all the possibilities that might happen and it is equally impossible to guess which ones won't.

In many industries, they find they cannot do any meaningful planning more than three years out because their environment is changing so rapidly (think of the Blockbuster scenario discussed earlier). In such industries, strategic planning must be very agile, which means that it must cycle pretty fast. Health care has become such an industry. A hospital might be able to project that in the next 1-3 years stand-alone clinics providing outpatient treatment will be the most profitable. But during that time Medicare reimbursement policy may change and in a matter of months the system has to adjust to providing integrated health care that might not work well in stand-alone clinics.

In our own industry, education, there are three factors that influence how we approach the planning horizon issue. The first is what I call the "Ground Hog Day Effect." This is based on the movie of the same title, starring Bill Murray. Through most of the movie, Murray's character is condemned to relive the same Ground Hog Day over and over again. He wakes up each morning only to find that this day will go the same as every other day. The 9 month school year can have that same effect. Research has shown how much students forget during summer vacation. But so do institutions. Most people working at a school will be gone for one to three months in the summer. Like the students, they will leave school thoughts as far behind as possible. They will work on re-charging their batteries and on personal and professional development.

If the school had been working on some strategic initiative during the just-completed year, most of us will lay down our tools where they were as the school year closes. In the fall, we will come back refreshed and rejuvenated to take them up again. But like our students, we will have forgotten most of the stuff that someone else told us was important. We will take at least a month to get the academic year and the fall sport season started, and have about a month and a half to engage big picture, strategic issues till the Christmas oblivion comes. After Christmas we fight the headwinds of senioritis (theirs and ours), and people get a little grumpy about extra work that seems only remotely related to the urgencies at hand. We labor heroically, inspiring our students to achieve great growth, intellectually, spiritually and emotionally. But, as another year ends, so do our hopes of making progress on those big issues that we seem to face each year. September will be Ground Hog Day, when we wake up and go through the cycle again. Administrators know this cycle, and how difficult it is to engineer change that doesn't fit easily into the cycle. The Ground Hog Day Effect makes big-picture thinking difficult and big picture implementation nearly impossible. The strategic planning process is a way to get beyond this, but only if done thoughtfully.

The second factor influencing the planning horizon for schools is that education is conservative. Despite an uncountable number of reform initiatives, it has changed very little since the Renaissance compared to just about every other industry. And because it hasn't changed, we have come to believe that it won't change. People simply don't believe Harvard researcher Clayton Christiansen, author of *Disrupting Class*, when he predicts that over half of all high-school classes will be delivered on-line by 2019. Change is happening. The fact is that 19.7% of Catholic schools in the US in 2000 were closed or consolidated by

2010 (<http://www.ncea.org/news/annualdatareport.asp>). The Archdiocese of Detroit Michigan closed all 7 of its Catholic high schools in one year, 2005. Are these just wave patterns, or a sea-change?

The final factor influencing the school's planning horizon is how communitarian we are. Research has shown that the biggest factor leading to the success of Catholic schools is our abundant social capital. This concept, introduced by researcher James S. Coleman in the 1980's, refers to the community that surrounds the school. Teachers, parents, volunteers and benefactors comprise a village that supports each student. They see the school as *their* school, they own it and they are confused and upset when decisions are made without their involvement. In fact, if schools leave the broader community out of the loop, the community will eventually conclude that the school doesn't need it. I remember enrolling one of my children in a local public school for the first time. I sat down with my son and the counselor to select his classes. The counselor looked at me quizzically and then told me that I didn't need to stay, he would take it from here. I was so surprised that I actually got up and left. Only later did I realize what had happened. He was used to parents not taking an interest in their child's education, and had developed his processes on that assumption. And now I as a parent had gotten the message that my involvement wasn't welcome. I wasn't prepared for this because it would be unthinkable in most Catholic schools. Parents and other stakeholders expect to be involved in every aspect of the school. Our job as administrative leaders is to manage that indispensable asset that we have been given, and a strategic plan is a key tool for doing that. It takes a lot of time to receive the input of a broad community.

So, what do these three factors tell us about the time horizon of our Strategic Plan? 1) It has to be long enough to spread the implementation beyond the confines of what can be accomplished in one hectic nine-month cycle, yet short enough that people can see results from the extra, strategic work that's been added to their plate; 2) It must take into account just how fast the environment around could change, or already is changing; and 3) It must allow for the participative process described earlier to gather input from its support community and roll it up into the plan.

Each school must decide based on its own circumstances how to weigh these factors, but in my work at my own school, which included four strategic planning cycles, I always worked with a ten year time horizon. The biggest driver of this was setting up the participative process. It takes about three years to build that participation. Ideally, by year 8 of the current plan, we need to start educating people, particularly the Board and administration, about the planning process. In year 9, the Board must evaluate the current plan, set parameters for the process and appoint a steering committee, and the administration must start gathering data. In year 10 the Task Teams make their recommendations to the Steering committee, which then finalizes the next strategic plan and presents it to the Board for approval. It is clear that if three years is needed to produce the plan, it had better have more than a 5 year horizon. It takes a lot of energy for the school community to give the kind of input and provide the broad ownership needed. And even though the horizon for the plan is 10 years, it doesn't mean that the school can't update it sooner.

But is ten years too long a period, especially if, as I have argued earlier, the education industry will be facing an increasing rate of change? The short answer is "yes," so there is another component of the strategic planning process, annual implementation planning, that will be needed. But before we discuss annual implementation planning, we need to look at the final three qualities of a successful plan. In addition to being Comprehensive, Significant, Forward-thinking, Broadly Owned, Coherent and Focused, the plan must also be: **Accurate, Timely and Flexible.** **Accuracy** means that we have made correct

assumptions about our current situation and future trends, particularly during the SWOT analysis. If these assumptions are sloppy or wrong, the plan will steer us off course. For instance, if we fail to acknowledge that the enrollments of feeder schools have fallen off in lower grades, we may not prepare for the enrollment issues that will reach us during the plan horizon. **Timeliness** is a function of accuracy. Does the plan respond to external trends soon enough, or maybe too soon? Does prioritization of the plan goals reflect the inherent timing of the issues the plan addresses? Hopefully the planning process will assure that it does, but what is accurate and timely when the plan is written may change, especially if the plan horizon is 10 years. In a dynamic environment, the plan also needs to be **flexible**. We know this intuitively, which is one of the reasons people tend to waffle on the MOAT attributes of the plan goals (Measurable, Outcome-based, Assigned and Timed). Neglecting any MOAT attribute will make a goal more flexible. But this is the wrong way to achieve flexibility. As one of my Board members used to say to me, “If you don't know where you're going, any road will do.” That's a kind of flexibility you don't need, but is all too common. The way to build flexibility into the process is with the Annual Implementation Plans (AIPs) that re-evaluate and define action steps each year. The AIP process is described later in this monograph.

H. Format of the Strategic Plan Document

Once the Steering Committee has finalized the goals for the long-range Strategic Plan, it must now decide how to communicate them to the school's stakeholders. This will be done by a number of means, but anchoring all the communications about the strategic plan will be a document which captures the essentials in a readable format. To decide on the format, it is important to understand what you want the document to accomplish.

First of all you want to **inform**. Anyone reading the document should have a clear understanding of what the school intends to accomplish over the time-frame of the plan and why.

Secondly, you want to **inspire**. Anyone reading the plan document is likely to be involved in some element of the plan implementation. This is your chance to touch their imaginations and their hearts, to help them see a vision of what the school could be if they would help it accomplish its strategic goals.

Thirdly, you want it to be **read**. This is requisite to the first two. Unless the document is actually read, and referred to, it can neither inform nor inspire. To accomplish this, it must be attractive, well-written and, most important, brief.

If the distilling process is used rigorously to focus the plan, the actual document should be short. As with the Mission Statement, the shorter the document, the more likely it will be read, remembered and referred to. Brevity competes with completeness, however. Readers must be given enough context that they understand the reasons that major, strategic goals are being proposed for the school. The goals must have enough specificity that readers will be able to picture what they mean and what the school might look like when they are accomplished. Much of the detail about metrics, implementation, assignments, time-lines and data which drive the goals can be included in appendices, but the plan itself should be as streamlined as possible.

The plan should begin with a brief statement of its overall purpose, which should include a reference to the school's Mission. If the Mission Statement is a sentence or two, it can be incorporated in its entirety, which is another argument for having a very brief Mission Statement.

Example: Favre Preparatory School's mission is to give the Church and the world leaders of competence, conscience and compassion. With the increasing pace of change in that world, Favre's graduates must be prepared in ways not even conceived of just a few years ago. The Strategic Plan that follows articulates the key steps the school must take in the next ten years to produce graduates who can apply time-honored values to new and unanticipated challenges.

There should be a paragraph about the process for creating the plan, stressing how key constituencies gave their input and the process for gathering the data leading to the goals. A list of the Steering Committee, especially if they are known and respected by the school's constituencies, will be of interest to the reader as a quick confirmation of the plan's quality. For this reason and so that it doesn't weigh down the plan narrative, the committee's names and titles should be listed in a graphical side-panel.

Example: This plan is the result of a community wide process of assessing and considering responses to the challenges and opportunities facing the school. The entire community of alumni, parents, students and friends were invited to give input through a survey, to which 2,320 responded. Over 300 people were involved personally in meetings, presentations, focus groups and committees. 60 community members and outside experts served on 5 Topic Teams to evaluate various aspects of the school and make recommendations to strengthen how they support the mission. Topic Teams reviewed academics, school life, spiritual formation; personnel; technology and facilities; and finances and development. Their recommendations were presented to a Steering Committee charged by the Board of Trustees to identify from this process the most pressing strategic needs, set key goals and commit the school to achieving them as set out in the plan you are about to read.

Each goal should be preceded by a few sentences showing why it is important to accomplishing the Mission and responding to trends faced by the school. The goal itself should be stated simply and clearly. It should articulate what the perceivable or measurable results will be.

Example: The school cannot produce graduates of competence, conscience and compassion if it becomes an enclave of a privileged few. And yet trends in the cost of education could lead to just that scenario unless the school provides relief to families struggling with the cost of tuition. Therefore, over the next ten years, the school will increase its endowment fund to provide enough financial aid to meet the demonstrated need of all admitted students. This will require a multi-year fundraising effort to raise an additional \$15 million in endowments.

The plan should end with a vision of what the school will look like once the plan is fully implemented and an invitation to be part of its accomplishment.

Example: Imagine a Favre Prep preparing students of competence, conscience and compassion, as it has done throughout its history, but in ways that match the challenges of a new world. As a result of this plan, Competence for our graduates will mean, not only critical thinking skills for which our education is well-known, but mastery of new technologies that will empower them to be leaders in a fast-changing world. Conscience will mean, not only grounding in Christian values, but the ability to defend and apply those values in an increasingly secular culture. And Compassion will mean the ability to love, and show love for, neighbors in their own community who might otherwise be invisible, and neighbors in a global community coming closer each day. Your prayers and support of the strategic goals put forth in this plan will make that vision a reality in the next ten years.

Our [website](#) has a free, downloadable 3-page guide to building a Stakeholder Survey.

I. Who Should Write the Plan?

In the examples above, I was able to adhere to the standard of brevity for two reasons. First, I was writing them in a vacuum. I didn't have to deal with the complexities of an actual school. Secondly, I wrote them by myself. I didn't have to honor the work and input of hundreds of people. Attaining clarity and simplicity is considerably more difficult when a document is produced by a group of people, even a relatively small Steering Committee at the top of the process. For this reason, the actual writing of the plan should be an iterative process between the steering committee and an individual writer. Ideally this should be the school's chief administrative officer, who will be responsible for leading the accomplishment of the plan. The first step would be to have this individual propose an outline and let the committee edit or add to it. Then the individual writes a draft on his own and brings it back to the committee for editing. The draft can be projected on a screen and edits input directly from the committee. The result will be a draft that captures the individual opinions of the committee but lacks consistency and elegance. The individual writer is then charged with writing a coherent and compelling document, taking into account what the committee has said, but having enough latitude to reshape it as necessary. This may take several iterations, and may even pass to different individual writers. But what I have found is that committee members are surprisingly willing to see their individual contributions transformed and even eliminated as they see a coherent and compelling document emerge from the individual author.

Once the steering committee feels it has a plan that is comprehensive, significant, forward looking, broadly-owned, coherent, focused, accurate, timely and flexible, it is ready to present it to the Board. With the Board's approval the plan is ready for the implementation phase, and that is guided by the Annual Implementation Plan.

J. Annual Implementation Planning (AIP)

The way to achieve flexibility, and maintain accuracy and correct timing, is by building Annual Implementation Plans (AIP's) every year. Essentially, this involves the administration each year reviewing the goals of the long-range Strategic Plan, assessing the school's progress in accomplishing the plan and deciding next steps.

The long-range strategic plan should ideally be brief, high-level, and, well, strategic. It can have addenda and other sub-plans, but if the school can keep the plan itself to five pages, it greatly increases the likelihood that it will be read by a broad group of stakeholders. The strategic plan won't go into detail about implementation or intermediate targets on the way to the strategic goals. These should be left to the AIP. Using the long-range plan as a guide, the administration, collaborating with faculty, Board, parents and others as appropriate, will outline the steps it will take in a given year to move toward attainment of the school's long-range strategic goals. This is how schools overcome the "Ground Hog Day Effect." The school focuses on what can be done within the 9 month window, because that's what schools do, but thanks to the long-range plan, it is able to set targets for that 9 months that feed into a larger, multi-year cycle that leads to significant improvements.

The most difficult Annual Implementation Plan to formulate will be the first. In order to decide on the steps to be taken the first year, the school needs to have a sense of what steps will be required overall. If you've ever crossed a stream by stepping from stone to stone, you know that you have to choose a first stone that you can reach and make sure it will be secure. But you also have to glance across the stream to your destination and trace back a plausible series of stones that connect with the first stone. You don't evaluate all the stones at once as carefully as you evaluate the first one, but you have to at least know that the first one will give you good options ahead. Once on the first stone you can now take a closer look at your options for the next step, again glancing ahead, and so on till you cross the stream. In formulating the first year's AIP, you will already be shaping future implementation steps.

Process Chains

I won't go into detail on the how and who of formulating implementation steps, but it will be helpful to look at the general approach. In general, the process is similar to the "backward design" of a curriculum, developed in the work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe. You start with the outcomes you want and work backward through the steps required to achieve that outcome. This is your glance across the stream. One way to do this is by gathering those involved in implementing the Strategic Plan and, using a room with a large, blank wall, visually build a *Process Chain*.

Let's say the SWOT analysis suggest that the recent fluctuations in your school's applicant pool are likely to get worse because of current demographics in the feeder schools. So your school sets a strategic goal to "Stabilize enrollment at 1200 students." At one end of the open wall, then, a sheet of paper is posted with the strategic goal articulated in the long-range plan. Then the group identifies the step nearest that goal which must be achieved if the goal is to be realized. The temptation will be to assume obvious causal links and not include them in the chain, but it is vital that every causal link in the process chain be articulated. So if your goal is to stabilize enrollment at 1200 students, your next prior step might be to *register* enough students to sustain a student body of 1200. Sounds silly to say it, but how can you have an enrollment of 1200 students, if you don't register enough students such that, after attrition, you end up with 1200 students? Let's say that your experience suggests that you need 1230 to register to end up with 1200 FTE by year end. The next prior step, would be to register a freshman class large enough to support 1230 registrants. Let's say you lose 20% of your students from freshman to senior year; that means you need to start with a freshman class of 330. The next prior step would be to *admit* enough freshman students to achieve the 330 freshman enrollment target. If your admissions yield is 80%, that means you need to admit 413 students.

The same rigor must be continued as you trace the steps back to the first steps, which would include: the size of the applicant pool, the number of test-takers, the decisions families make to enter the process, their perceptions about the school, the messages you give and potential applicants you connect with through your various marketing efforts, till you finally reach the steps of actually designing and implementing a marketing program that will eventually stabilize enrollment at 1200 students.

You keep adding steps backward from *Outcome*, to *Output*, to *Input* to *Resources*, until you have articulated the entire process chain that leads to accomplishing the Long-range Strategic Goal. I want to emphasize again the importance of rigorous thinking in laying out this chain and not skipping causal links.

When the process chain is complete, you can visualize what you have created through the process (see example in Fig 1, below). Imagine sitting with your colleagues looking at a wall with a line of 30 sheets of paper that articulate all the steps in a causal chain that leads to the goal expressed in the long-range Strategic Plan. That in itself will be helpful, not only for your own understanding of how the goal is achieved, but for understanding it *with* other team members. But what you do next is the real pay-off. Now you ask yourselves, what are the links in this chain that need to be strengthened for us to reach the goal? Then together, you can brainstorm ideas for strengthening those links. These can be written on sheets of paper which are posted beneath the links they would strengthen. You've now gone from a one dimensional chart showing what has to happen, to a two dimensional chart showing how it could be made to happen. The result will be many ideas for initiatives that can lead to stabilizing enrollment. In fact, too many ideas, many more than you could ever focus on. So you use the distilling process to identify the most important links and the ideas with the highest impact potential. You decide which ones you can focus on this year and leave the rest for ensuing years. After you've built Process Chains for each long-range strategic goal and funneled the ideas down to the high-impact few, you have the basis for building the Annual Implementation Plan.

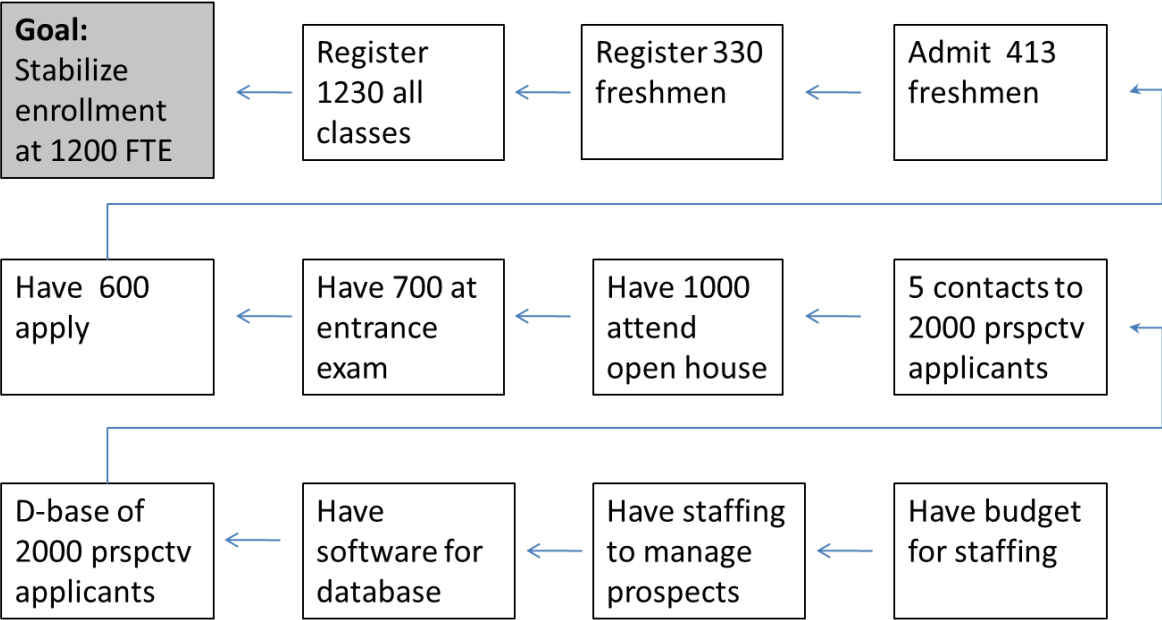


Figure 1: Process Chain

It is probably clear to the reader that the foregoing is a simplified description of building process chains. The foregoing example assumes that each link has only one prior cause, when in fact some links have several. For example, we said that achieving 1200 FTE requires a prior link of registering 1230 because of attrition. But another prior causal link could be to lower the rate of attrition. So you now have two branches in the process chain. One leads backward to improving the admissions process and the other toward improving the retention process.

As logical as this process may appear on paper, it is counter-intuitive for the people participating in it, because we don't naturally think backwards and we like to skip causal steps that we think are obvious. We just want to get right to the "problems," what we "know" needs to be fixed. In my experience this natural tendency to focus on the problems we already know about, gets us nowhere. If we already know the problems, why do they persist? The tendency is to blame people: teachers who don't want to change, administrators who don't understand the pressures, parents who don't get the mission. We're stuck in Ground Hog Day until we discover what is truly holding us back. Process Chains can get us unstuck because they make all the steps in the process visible. But they require people to learn new skills and new ways of thinking about old problems.

Formulating the Process Chains, generating ideas for strengthening them and funneling them down to a limited number of key initiatives is a collaborative process. This is key, because Strategic Goals generally require the commitment of the entire school. There is a tendency to think (and to want to think) that the Goals of the long-range plan can be assigned to particular departments or divisions of the school. But the process chains will help the participants see that any goal that is truly strategic will have links that require people from throughout the school to participate in strengthening them. For instance, let's say the school has a goal to increase resources garnered from fundraising. The tendency is to say, "Well, that's obviously the concern of the development office, so let them deal with that." But if you look at the whole process chain for fundraising outcomes, you will see links that require attention to how expectations are communicated to new and prospective parents, how students are taught stewardship, how academic administrators and teachers endorse the *case* for support, how the facilities department provides information about capital projects, and how program quality and our ability to measure program outcomes affects donors' willingness to give. It becomes clear that a robust development process requires collaboration throughout the school.

Objective Implementation Plans (OIPs)

Process Chains are designed to achieve the outcomes targeted by the overall strategic plan. The word we use for these strategic outcomes is "goals." But in the course of developing the Process Chains, we will identify several initiatives to achieve intermediate targets. We call these intermediate targets, "objectives." While goals, in our usage here, are proper to the long-range strategic plan, objectives are proper to the Annual Implementation Plan.

Building the Process Chains and generating objectives are a collaborative process, for the reasons explained above. But once these Objectives have been identified, the planning process shifts from group-work to individual leadership. While many will be involved in fighting the battles, someone has to raise the flag and lead the charge. These are the *managers* referred to when we discussed *Assigned* as one of the MOAT characteristics. So if one of the school's strategic goals dealt with improving program and one

of the objectives toward that goal was to increase the number of Advanced Placement offerings, the manager of that objective might be the Academic Vice Principal. The AVP would take that objective and, consulting with others involved, develop it into an executable implementation plan. She would do this using a tool called the Objective Implementation Plan (OIP), which would spell out the following steps:

- Identify the Goal in the Long-range Strategic plan that this objective supports
- Articulate as concisely yet accurately as possible what the objective is
- Specify the metric for evaluating whether objective is achieved, including
 - the methodology for measuring the results
 - the base-line measurement before the implementation steps have begun
 - the results expected once the steps have been implemented.
- List the steps to be taken in the current plan year, with completion dates for each step
- Outline follow-on steps required in future plan years, by year
- List others involved in implementing the steps and what is expected of them
- List resources (dollars, release time, meeting time, policy changes, etc) needed to implement the steps, including rough estimates of amount.

So in the example above, the AVP would first restate the overall strategic goal of program improvement, then express in a sentence what the administrative team wants to do with the AP program.

Then she would identify the metric to be used to evaluate progress. An easy measure would be the number of classes offered. But remember, that's just an input, and inputs are upstream while outcomes are downstream. Results should be measured as far downstream as possible without losing correlation to the inputs being evaluated. So the number of students taking AP classes would be better, and the number of students scoring 3 or above would be better still. Once this metric is decided, The AVP establishes the baseline, for instance how many students are getting 3's or above now, and what the school's target will be for number of students scoring 3 or higher.

For implementation steps this year, she might say that she will ask departments to assess their current and potential AP offerings by November 1, complete a survey of other school's offerings by November 15, propose 2 new courses for the following year by February 1, based on which she will work with the department heads and other administrators to adjust the schedule by April 1, and secure final approval from the Principal by May 1. In year two, she might propose adding 2 more courses, evaluating the number of students getting 3's or higher on the AP exams against the objective, and in year three either add new courses, or rework the curriculum of the existing courses, depending what the data on her metric suggests.

For others involved, she might list the principal, saying she needs his consultation and approval, which will require four meetings of about 1.5 hours each. She might list department heads, the registrar, an administrative assistant and a couple key teachers and say what she would need from them and the hours she estimates it will require.

Finally, she would list the resources she will need, like a curriculum consultant at \$10,000, training workshops for new AP teachers totaling \$7,000, 6 hours of department head meetings and 4 hours of faculty-wide in-service time.

Formulating the Annual Implementation Plan

The forgoing is a time-consuming and mentally challenging process. It requires busy administrators who have many demands pressing on them throughout the school year to somehow carve out time in their week to do some proactive thinking. But it has to be done if the school is to continue to improve, and no one else can do it other than the administrators who are at the front-lines, who are experts in their area and who will have to lead their colleagues in implementing the plan. And once they have formulated the objectives in this way, the following years require far less planning and can focus on execution. If everyone has done their job in the design phase, implementation should actually give back more energy than it takes and should be enjoyable.

After the Objective Implementation Plans have been written up by the managers, the process for finalizing the Annual Implementation Plan involves another funneling process. Even though the results of the Process Chain were funneled, there will still be too many objectives to focus on in one year. And achieving strategic objectives, especially in an environment where people have a lot of daily demands, requires focusing on the most important strategies. The administrative team reviews the Objectives written up by the managers and puts them into four categories:

1. Objectives that have implementations steps which are major, and critical to do this year
2. Objectives that have implementation steps that are minor, but are critical to do this year
3. Objectives to defer because they aren't priorities and won't fit on this year's plate
4. Objectives to defer because prerequisites need to occur first

The first category, those objectives which have major steps to be done this year, constitute the core of the Annual Implementation Plan. These might be items like “complete construction of the new library,” or “Have all faculty meet minimum technology competencies.” You may not be able to accomplish everything you want to this year, but you need to accomplish these. The Annual implementation plan must be formatted in a way that everyone who reads it, administration, Board, faculty and staff, know that these are the must-do's. For this reason, when they are presented in the plan, they must be presented with all the MOAT characteristics: the **M**etric, the downstream **O**utcome it is measuring, who is **A**ssigned as manager and the **T**ime-frame for achieving the objective.

The Annual Implementation Plan may also include Objectives from the second category, those which have only minor steps, but which are critical to accomplish this year. These might include, “Budgeting money for a marketing plan to be done in year 2,” or “Establishing a metric and base-line measure for the new formation program to be implemented in year 3.” If they are included, they should be presented in abbreviated form at the end of the AIP, so as not to distract from the importance of the Category 1 items. The president and key administrators need to follow up on them, but they won't want to waste precious attention span by highlighting them in the plan. Resist the temptation of turning the Annual Implementation Plan into a grab bag of things it would be nice to do if you had the time. The AIP should consist only of those Objectives you are willing to make the time for. This is why distilling is so important. The distilling processes described in this book can be painful, but they are the key to making meaningful change without burning everybody out.

Categories 3 and 4, Objectives that can't fit on the plate or require a prerequisite, will be queued up for future years and considered for future AIP's. An example of Category 3 might be, "Begin construction of the new theater" when you have to finish the library and you can't do both at once. An example of Category 4 might be, "Implement a distance learning component in all courses," when this would require all faculty to attain certain technological competencies first. The current AIP should not contain any Category 3 or 4 items.

The AIP is then presented to the Board for approval, ideally at the end of the prior school year, but no later than the first meeting of the year covered by the AIP. The AIP is a key tool for the Board to verify the administration's understanding of priorities, and bless or redirect them. For the administration, it is a tool for getting the Board's concurrence and relieving the concern that during implementation the Board will be surprised and unsupportive of the direction the administration is taking. In short, it allows the Board to give governance-level guidance without being drawn into micro-managing.

Once the AIP is approved by the Board, the president needs to loop back with the managers to make sure they are keeping their Objective Implementation Plans current. Implementation steps that have been re-scheduled to future years as the AIP is finalized must be so reflected in their Objective write-ups. To this end, it will help for the president to maintain a master table of implementation schedules for all objectives. Not only will this be a good reference as she makes sure everyone's expectations are aligned, but it will allow her to identify stacking up of steps in some years as she receives all the Objective write-ups from the managers. With this information, she can work with the managers to adjust to more realistic schedules.

K. Common Pitfalls to Strategic Planning

In the forgoing description of the strategic planning process, I have tried to identify those elements that will lead to an effective plan. I want to take a moment to look at planning from the other perspective and address the forces that can undermine or simply dilute the planning process. I have myself fallen into each of these pits at various times. We have to resist them vigorously if the plan is to succeed.

Pitfall 1: Apple Pie & Motherhood. Making choices is hard work and it is emotionally difficult when we must choose between good ideas that have passionate people advocating them. In the strategic planning process we have asked many people to give input and we did so, in part, to secure their ownership for the eventual product. But the distillation process required to produce a plan that is focused enough to be truly strategic means saying no to some good ideas along the way. To avoid the pain of disappointing people, we have a tendency to just make the plan bigger and make sure no good idea is lost. I've done this. I've presided over the formulation of a plan that is more an inventory of everybody's ideas than anything strategic. Another variation on this is the idea that every department or program must be represented in the plan lest we send a message that it is not important. But not every department has strategic needs. The athletic program may have ways it can improve but not need an institutional level commitment to change. An inventory of everybody's ideas or of every department's needs isn't a bad thing to have, but it is bad if you try to let it be your strategic plan. Because it throws all ideas, strategic or not, into one big grab bag, this is as sure a way of killing strategic decision-making as having no plan at all.

Pitfall 2: A big target. One way to hit the bulls-eye is to become an expert marksman. The other way is to just make the target very big. People understand this intuitively, and so when pressed to set goals, if they are experiencing some diffidence about what they can achieve (and who isn't?), they try to make them as wide as possible. So instead of saying that “75% of all seniors will have earned a 3 on at least one AP exam,” we say that “AP participation and scores will improve.” The latter goal would be met if a handful more students manage a 3, but that is hardly strategic. For the goal to be strategic, we have to challenge ourselves, say what we hope for, what will really make a difference to the school. This pushes us out of our comfort zone, but I would rather articulate a goal, fail to meet it and learn why, than put forth a goal that I can't miss and doesn't challenge me to look at what I'm doing. Another variation on making the target bigger is just moving it closer. This can be done by focusing measures on inputs rather than outcomes. So in the AP example above, in order to assure ourselves of an achievable goal we might say, “We will increase the number of AP offerings by 5 courses.” By focusing more on means than ends, we bring it more under our control, and in the process avoid the possibility of having to make unanticipated changes to how we do things in order to achieve specific results.

Pitfall 3: Kicking the Can Down the road. The most common example of this is the goal that begins with, “Develop a plan to...” or “Determine whether such and so needs to be done...” I find myself gravitating toward this approach when the planning process is up against time constraints and we're having trouble getting consensus about a trend or what we want to do about it. So we make a plan to make a plan. There may be cases where this is all you can do, but it's just too easy and not very strategic. Imagine Gretzky saying, “I think I'll just watch a while and see where the puck goes.” Strategic planning is skating to where we think the puck will be, not forever chasing it. It is better to be bold, start skating and even if we're wrong, we're in the flow of the game and can more readily make adjustments.

Pitfall 4: Shooting the moon. I remember being in an education workshop and we were given the challenge of learning how to maximize the distance from which we were able to toss a ring onto the nose of a little stuffed clown. We were given five rings and we could choose to start close and work toward greater distance. Or we could just pick an ambitious distance and toss our five rings, hoping one would land on the nose. I, and two other men, chose the latter. I moved way back and just started throwing. Being honest with myself about why I chose this, I had to admit that if I got the ring onto the nose I would be a hero. If I didn't get any rings, I could say to myself, “Well there's no shame in missing from such a distance.” I really had no plan for increasing my capacity. My ambitious goal was really a cop-out. If I succeeded I could brag about it, and if I failed, well, I had a good reason. For 15 years I have tutored first graders who have trouble learning to read, and I notice they tend to “shoot the moon.” They pick books beyond their level and then are not disappointed with themselves when they can't read them. I have to patiently direct them back to books which challenge them to the next level, but are reasonable steps along that path. In strategic planning, the same principle applies. The difference between a challenging goal and shooting the moon is that, with the former, you are prepared to make the sacrifices that will get you there, and in the latter, you don't give it much thought because you're basically relying on luck. And that doesn't take a lot of planning.

Pitfall 5: The sky is falling. A strategic plan with ambitious goals can be a frightening thing, especially for the people who have to implement it. But before our colleagues start running around like Chicken Little, telling themselves and everyone else that the sky is falling, we need to break it down with them. The whole point of long-range planning is to take big goals and break them down into doable steps that can be worked into the 9 month cycles of a school. But if people aren't used to breaking big goals into smaller

steps, or if they've worked in a culture where they are not given the opportunity and tools to do that, the goals themselves will induce anxiety. I experience something similar every time I scramble up one of the beautiful mountains in the region where I live. If I can even see the summit, it is often so far away it makes me laugh. It generally feels impossible for me to reach that summit and return in a day. But I can get to that ridge to the northwest in 2 hours, and from that ridge angle north to that gully in maybe another hour and a half. From there it's just another 1,000 feet up a talus slope to the top. Rare are the times when I haven't made the goal, but if I let my initial anxiety about the overall goal prevent me from breaking it down into the doable stages, I would never take the first step.

Pitfall 6: Red Herrings. The origin of this expression is the practice used to confuse a hound following a sent, by dragging a particularly pungent fish across the line of the real scent. We have a lot of red herrings in our lives. With strategic planning we can establish the track that leads us to our desired future. But as we follow the true scent, others are dragged across the trail that can divert us from where we really need to go. Maybe it's a new foundation-funded program that offers the prospect of more dollars, or a new sport that has a strong constituency of parents or students behind it, or a building that isn't in your top five priorities, but there is a benefactor ready to fund 20% of it right now. Unless the call of the strategic plan is firmly planted in people's hearts and minds, other inevitable attractions and urgencies will divert us from our resolve.

How do we overcome these various pitfalls? The most important defense is to know that they will be there. As with any pit, once you know it's there you're much less likely to fall into it. They are all natural human inclinations. People are acting with the best of intentions when they don't want to turn apple pie and motherhood away from the plan; or when they want a bigger target to assure they don't let people down; kick the can down the road because the future is murky; or shoot the moon when they don't see the steps that lead to a realistic result; or fear that the sky is falling when they think about the demands that strategic shifts might put on them; or get pulled off course by the inevitable red herrings. Knowing this can help the leaders of the school to be more patient and understanding, but also to be firm and not let these distractions from the true course rule the day. In his book, *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks about the flywheel effect. From his research of companies that have made the transition from being good firms to great ones, he learned that they generally went through an early period of little perceptible progress, mostly because the people who had to implement change were resistant to it. This early stage looks a lot like failure, and inexperienced administrators will conclude that they need to change course. But like a flywheel, strategic changes gain momentum if the leadership is persistent. People learn new skills, learn new ways of viewing obstacles and soon what was very difficult just becomes the new normal. If you can recall learning to ride a bike, you will surely remember that it seemed impossible. The only reason you didn't give up is that all the kids before you managed to do it. The leader of strategic change must not let people back down until they begin to feel the flywheel move, and the more he can articulate the vision and make the desired future palpable in the present, the more he can increase persistence in the culture of his school.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius describes the “enemy of our nature,” which is a personification of what can drag us down. Like a military commander laying siege to a castle, it will do anything to see us fail. It will search for weaknesses it can use to breach the castle walls and cause the castle to fall. These are the pitfalls which I described above and which can undo the good intentions of the plan as surely as an enemy commander laying siege to a castle. St. Ignatius also describes this enemy as a false lover and a bully, and this suggests how it should be dealt with. First, understand how it works, be aware of the

vulnerabilities described above and be alert to the enemy trying to exploit them. Second, don't keep it secret; when you see the pitfalls taking shape, warn people about what is happening. Third, stand up to it. Like any bully, the enemy of good planning will back down when it sees our resolve. Finally, and most importantly, pray for God's help; God will surely come to the aid of those who are doing his will, so don't neglect to ask for it.

If you would like more information about *MfM*'s strategic planning process, our website, www.managingformission.com, has downloadable [summary](#) versions of this description, as well as how to order the books, [Strategic Planning for Faith-based Schools](#), and [Managing for Mission](#), which explains not only strategic planning for faith-based schools, but also how it fits with the apostolic, pedagogical, community and business aspect of the school.

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