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Strategic Planning from the Bottom Up: Visioning a Future While Building Morale and Investing in the Culture of Success

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Strategic Planning from the Bottom Up: Visioning a Future While Building Morale and Investing in the Culture of Success

Abstract
The words “Strategic Plan” bring to mind, almost immediately, a process by which the leadership of a business, university, or other establishment organizes its thoughts and actions for its future, and plans how it will allocate its resources to achieve the goals and strategies upon which it decides. Often the process of planning is indeed best carried out by leadership, who has the greatest likelihood to understand the business and its component parts as a functioning whole from the 30,000-foot viewpoint.

Keywords
Strategic Planning, Visioning, Culture, Morale

Disciplines
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Comments
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STRATEGIC PLANNING FROM THE BOTTOM UP: VISIONING A FUTURE WHILE BUILDING MORALE AND INVESTING IN THE CULTURE OF SUCCESS

The words “Strategic Plan” bring to mind, almost immediately, a process by which the leadership of a business, university, or other establishment organizes its thoughts and actions for its future, and plans how it will allocate its resources to achieve the goals and strategies upon which it decides. Often the process of planning is indeed best carried out by leadership, who has the greatest likelihood to understand the business and its component parts as a functioning whole from the 30,000-foot viewpoint.

Howard Rohm describes a typical business strategic planning process this way:

Here’s the typical strategic planning process: once a year, David organizes, with senior leaders’ blessings, an executive retreat for 20 managers and leaders to create the annual strategic plan. The workshop meetings go something like this: first, a vision statement is written (or, more likely, “the one we have is good enough,” or “we really don’t need one of those, do we?”). Second, a mission statement is prepared (or, you guessed it, “the one we have is good enough”). Third, a few core values are picked from a list of many possible values. Fourth, somewhere between six and twelve strategic goals are identified. Fifth, programs, products, services and projects currently supported are dropped into one of the goal “buckets” to show how each goal will be achieved … If your organization is like many, the scenario described above is pretty close to the process you use. It’s called the strategic planning process, but it’s really more of an annual justify what I’m currently doing process.¹

It may be true that, as the words “Strategic Plan” is spoken, eyes roll, and excuses for conflicting time obligations come to mind. Still, the process is necessary periodically, and if done well serves to direct the unit undertaking it toward a healthy and constructive future.

Most strategic plans are undertaken by management who know the space and its history. But in a situation in which new leadership has arrived to a business (or in the case of this article, an academic unit) or at a time when morale is low, employee buy-in to the management vision has vanished with the past administration, and the new leader acquires a unit in disarray, a strategic planning process can actually serve to re-engage employees, build morale, and heal a unit while focusing energies upon a potential future rather than a sullen past.

In a case such as this, the process should change completely. If a prior leader has eroded trust over a period of time, the initial view from employees is that the unit cannot function well with any leadership. Such was the work environment I encountered a couple of years ago when my Provost tasked me to assist an interim dean in planning for the future of an academic unit while rebuilding its morale and work culture. The interim dean had many issues that were critical to address: cleaning up incomplete projects and line items and ensuring the unit ran its daily operations smoothly. So when the strategic planning project came up early in the year, and I volunteered to lead it, my offer was met with a ready approval.

What I hope to accomplish in this article is to communicate both the story and the process that resulted in a transformed academic unit, and to convey my conviction that, though cumbersome, a strategic planning process that begins from the grass roots can arrive at a product not dissimilar to one a management team might create, and yet gains the emotional investment, trust, energy, and commitment of a large number of employees in the process.

Background

As I began work, morale in the unit was at a low ebb. According to staff, the prior dean had been autocratic, secretive, retaliatory, and stuck in a past model of work they felt was disadvantaging the unit’s competitive edge going forward. Many were looking for jobs elsewhere. Others were bitterly resigned to a predictable future. The administrative cabinet was engaged and qualified, but staff did not always trust them. They, too, had years of experience, yet tended toward doing things as they had done them, perhaps because they had evolved a method that worked under the prior leader.

At the time I was given the strategic plan to develop, I asked if they would allow me the latitude to try to create it unconventionally. My idea was to consult staff at all levels of the organization about what their vision, dream, hope for the unit was. In five years, what did they hope the unit would become? Some research had indicated that colleges and universities possess such a different culture than American businesses that they stand to lose the best planning results if they follow a business model during the planning process. In the words of David Leslie: “[At a university] strategic planning works best when seen as a continuous process of experimentation that allows multiple decisions to emerge on many different fronts simultaneously.”

Even though the process I proposed seemed cumbersome, I was given an OK. Instead of a strategic planning committee, I proposed three committees of eight

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to 10 people each. I wanted to see if complaints, hopes, and ideas from all staff had any uniformity across the independent groups. I also wanted to hear as many voices as possible, and knew that a single large and unwieldy committee would never get off the ground. Enough employees from across the unit were interested to serve that I was able to populate three committees — in all, over 20 people were involved.

**The Initial Phase**

To keep this retelling concise, the beginning was, of necessity, a lancing of the boil. The question, “What do you see as prime contributions to low morale across the unit?” elicited numerous and varied responses — from personnel issues, to a perceived misalignment of the unit with individual visions, to the unit’s perceived lack of competitiveness, its bureaucratic hierarchy, to a litany of “we need to do more of …” or “we don't do enough of …” observations. Additionally, there were many good ideas framed as “Consider doing x” or “Find ways to create y.”

Clearly statements such as, “We need to recognize and reward staff excellence,” along with the quotes above are not strategic. Nevertheless, they spoke instantly to the reality that staff felt undervalued, unappreciated, and perceived that their good ideas for a better unit had not been heard for some time. These statements helped ensure that I listened attentively, took notes, passed the notes back to the committees so that they saw their concerns and ideas in writing, and tasked the committees to rework the statements into more strategic ones. (In due time, we also did reward the staff who had participated in this process.)

In a situation where morale is low, one of the first and most important exercises is to allow the affected personnel time to express their concerns openly and honestly in an environment they come quickly to realize is trustworthy. Had the interim dean led the planning process, the responses might have been less forthcoming, so one suggestion to readers considering this kind of approach to strategic planning is to find a lead person from *outside* the unit (as I was) who can claim ignorance of the historic issues, who is known to the unit’s leadership to be able to hold confidences, who can be clear upfront that issues will be communicated to leadership, yet *without* attribution, and who will absolutely maintain that integrity from start to finish. A loss of trust threatens, obviously, to derail the entire process.

Senior leadership invested itself at this time in the process by commissioning an off-campus agency to survey the staff. The survey was in two principal parts and provided considerable useful information. The first part surveyed workplace attitudes — questions addressed employees’ sense of cooperation
within work groups, employee accountability, job fit (were people placed into work that fit their skills and talents?), confidence in the leadership team, and alignment of the unit’s current mission vision and values to its daily operations.

The second part of the survey process gave employees a chance to understand their work personas through a test (entitled Proscan®) that clarified their basic natural selves, their level of patience, social/relational characteristics, orientation to conformity (preferring to follow established systems or pursue freer, more independent thinking and work models). While there was some skepticism among staff as to the benefit of another survey (it is well known that survey burnout is high in higher education), there was also interest in learning whether one’s work profile fit one’s actual job and close collaborators’ profiles, and what the consensus perceptions of the unit were.

What were the principal benefits of phase one of this nontraditional process? Twenty members of the unit began to feel their voices had an ear, felt empowered through their participation, shared a multitude of ideas (some of which might not have occurred to the top level of administration), and shared their experience of the process with their colleagues who were not active participants on the planning committees. Through the surveys, employees learned more about themselves, the collective opinions of the unit, and gained additional confirmation that the leadership was invested in change and in understanding the complete organization from bottom to top. I can say here it was never a perfect process. But its advantages in culture building outweighed its unwieldiness.

**The Components of a Strong Strategic Plan**

I and the members of my three committees initially were all inexperienced in strategic planning, and yet, had I been experienced, I might not have chosen the process as I did. Once one “knows” how a thing is done, it is often challenging to reinvent it against the raised eyebrows (both your own and other’s) who know how it is “traditionally accomplished.” An outside person who is less senior, but motivated, may offer a better success rate with this kind of strategic planning, especially with some oversight, based upon what I am suggesting here.

About three weeks into the process the complaints and suggestions began to coalesce into a motivation to move the process forward on the part of each of the three committees. I had prompts from administrators not to let the process bog down, but the committees also felt the first stage of the process had aged and were ready for phase two. We researched and discussed
how to begin. The principal components of a strong strategic plan typically include the following:

- **Core Values** statement — a list of the unit’s principal orientation and motivators
- **Mission Statement** — what the unit currently does—its role and purpose
- **Vision Statement** — what the unit will look like at the completion of its strategic plan period
- **Strategic Priorities** — goals, changes in approach, structure, focus, to get the unit to its future self
- **Tactics** for each strategic goal — how the unit will accomplish the goals set forth
- **Metrics** for each goal — how the success of, or progress toward, each goal will be measured
- **Timeline** — the time frame for achievement of each stated goal

**Phase Two**

We had surveyed the unit’s current attitudes and heard concerns directly from the committee members. Phase two culminated in drafting an initial strategic plan (we called it the embryonic plan) and ensuring it covered as many bases and topics as possible, knowing it would surely be consolidated as we edited it. But we first needed data — data concerning perceptions from within our own academic unit doing the planning and from without, and data from similar academic units that were excelling already elsewhere in the nation.

The dean agreed to fund several off-campus reconnaissance trips in which staff traveled to another university to interact with staff there and study the success model each university employed. Applicant teams of typically three members submitted a proposal in which they were asked to:

- provide a ranking of their top three choices of university to visit and why
- state at least one contact name at that university
- state what the focus of the group’s study at the university would be
- provide a rough budget — airfares, hotel, per diem estimates, and ancillary costs.
We specified teams of three to four persons for each trip in order to create a collaborative work experience among those traveling.

**Proposal for travel to visit off-site universities (1-2 pages)**

Applicant: 

Team membership: 

Please provide a brief description of what you plan to accomplish during your visit. For example, with whom will you speak and what will you bring back to share with ISU staff?

University ranking for your visit:

1) 

2) 

3) 

Rationale for ranking:

Anticipated Budget:

Airfare travel costs: $ 

Hotel estimate: $ 

Per diem estimate: $ 

Anticipated auxiliary cost estimate: $ 

Estimated Total: $ 

Contact name(s) and institution(s):

**Application Example**

On campus, we coordinated with individual departments to attend their meetings and ask their perceptions of the services our unit offered — how we excelled and how we could improve.\(^3\)

Within six weeks staff had collected considerable data on how our unit was viewed by others and what we saw as good models from visits to other universities. Additionally, we consulted accrediting agency guidelines and the strategic plans of similar units at other universities to craft solid language and to ensure no leaf was left unturned. Going into writing the plan, we had internal opinions from staff, external opinions about us from across our university, research about excellent units elsewhere in the nation, and strategic plans from peer universities.

My role at this time was to solicit, in one-to-one interviews and at cabinet meetings, the staff and senior administration’s views on the planning process. The dean scheduled a retreat as well for the administration’s own brainstorming session. No plan will go forward without senior leadership on board, but we all saw the value of bringing ideas from the totality of the unit to the table as a culture and morale-building tool. The goal was to knit together the leadership ideas with those from the unit at large and create a

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\(^3\) This endeavor might be less useful for a review of a discipline-specific department. Our unit served multiple departments, and so their opinions were valuable.
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document in which the entire unit felt invested through their work and their voice being heard.

As I write this, it is important to be transparent and admit that hiccups happened. Senior leadership was initially wary of the idea of three staff committees, feeling it to be inefficient and a time waste. They also were not always excited to hear some of the concerns I brought back to the cabinet meetings early on, although they were not always surprised by them. Staff also had an initial lack of confidence that their involvement would transfer to a final product, or that management would listen. I needed to be a messenger and assure everyone that I, at least, was invested in this experiment. I promised to find a way to ensure their work and their voice stayed with the strategic plan.

As we began to draft an embryonic plan, we quickly saw the value of beginning with the mission and vision statements along with a list of core values. How can one really strategize if one has not got a launch pad for the future, or if one does not intimately know oneself? A unit must know who it is, what it values, and what its vision is first; the strategic plan exists within the space of these statements.

Putting these three brief sections into writing was not without difficulties. (All committees struggle when writing a joint document as wordsmithing clogs forward progress.) But within several weeks each of the three committees had drafted language with commonalities between them, and had proposed unified versions, some of which were accepted, and others modified yet more.

Phase 3

If the initial phases of a bottom-up culture-building process necessarily involve a wide array of inputs and people’s invested time, as the process reaches its final phase, it becomes critical to narrow the input. At this time I thanked each of the three committees for their service and asked the most productive and invested members from each committee to form a new group to finish the task. At this time I showed our first draft to the administrative cabinet for the most humbling, yet humorous moment of the months-long process. During a cabinet meeting they wrinkled their noses and said things like, “It is not very strategic,” or, “its tone is too colloquial, and it lacks metrics and tactics for some of the ideas you have in it.” Points taken, and returned to the consolidated committee.

Within a week a transformation happened resulting from their expertise and time commitment that turned the embryonic plan into something workable. Again, this transformation came from staff, none of whom was among senior leadership. They saw the value of the plan as it was taking
shape; they had enough time now with me and with the process to know they were not wasting their time, and that the final strategic plan would be seriously considered by management. Their concerns, originally voiced a couple of months earlier, were now transformed into positive strategies — with tactics and metrics associated — into a document that would lead their unit forward. One could sense the pride they had in the product.

Once again wordsmithing rose to clog the speed of the final product, but it must always do that. All people have their way of saying something, which is why committees exist to begin with — so all may have a moment to express a view. But we got past that, and the next document taken to the administrative cabinet had them smiling. It was now time for their opinion to be heard, for their input to affect aspects of the plan. There were some changes, as was to be expected, but it was gratifying how, over time, the concerns, complaints, and hopes of all the unit’s staff who participated in the process transformed and congealed to create a positive document that the entire unit could get behind.

If a strategic plan is to be part of a healing process — a culture-building endeavor — then it is crucial to thank and honor publicly those whose time investment and expertise shaped the finished product. The dean funded a unit-wide reception for all staff and faculty at which we presented a simple certificate of appreciation and gift card for a modest-yet-reasonable sum to the university bookstore/coffee shop. It surprised me actually how the staff beamed as they came up when their name was called to accept these tokens of appreciation. I still see the certificates in their offices a couple of years later.

Key Takeaway Points

Returning to Howard Rohm, he writes: “Thinking about strategy requires thinking vertically, from high altitude to low altitude. Strategy looks at effectiveness and success through the eyes of customers and other stakeholders who are receiving a product or service (customers) or who
impact the delivery of a product or service (stakeholders).”

I would offer that if culture building is paramount, think vertically from the bottom to the top instead. Use your stakeholders and employees as an initial resource to inform, if not envision, your future.

Rohm continues: “It takes several perspectives to understand an organization as a system … Think of perspectives as different lenses through which strategy can be viewed.” This multi-perspective approach, derived from so many points of input in the strategic planning process described above, yielded a strong gain in culture, morale, and staff purpose, while accomplishing what the administration desired all along. Not every time will the process work as well as it did here, but I maintain it is worth a try. Naysayers will likely fall to the side because the process ultimately focuses upon a positive outcome for the future, not a flawed structure in the present. Additionally, because such a diverse and complete sense of the unit as a whole is collected during Phase 1, and because voices are heard that need to be heard and want to contribute, it is likely that morale will improve, cohesion will grow within the unit, and the final product will move the unit to a future that is embraced by all, or at least a happy majority, of its constituents.

Jonathan Sturm is president-elect of the Iowa State University Faculty Senate, a position to which he has been elected now for a second term. He has written previously for JPALHE on an Open Access research publication model, on the workload realities for music professors in higher education, and on cost versus content in university music majors. Sturm also serves as concertmaster of the Des Moines Symphony, has toured internationally as the violist in the Ames Piano Quartet, and is professor of music at Iowa State University.

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