

Lessons in Strategic Planning Learned the Hard Way

Educators at Bowling Green State University found that trying to apply a corporate model of strategic planning in a college environment is not all that simple.

As organizations, schools and colleges differ in many respects; but they also have much in common—like the problem of managing change. In the hope of exercising greater control over the direction of change, schools and colleges are beginning to plan strategically. Of course, strategic planning can create distinctive problems in educational settings. This was certainly the case when our college at Bowling Green State University implemented a strategic planning process.

Our purpose in this article is to share three important lessons we learned from trying to plan strategically. We believe these lessons are applicable to strategic planning in schools. And they may help schools avoid the pitfalls that we encountered.

Lesson Number One: Watch Your Language

Strategic planning first gained credence in business and industry, and educators now draw from models used in the corporate world. However, in following examples from corporate America, educators often find themselves subject to subtle influences that could dramatically alter the character of their institutions.

This is not to suggest that schools and colleges should ignore the contributions of business and industry in furthering our knowledge of strategic planning. In the corporate world, strategic planning models have proved

successful in stimulating production, enhancing worker satisfaction, improving product quality, and ultimately increasing company profits. Since they promise similar benefits in schools and colleges, these models are attractive to educational administrators.

But models are metaphorical representations of reality, used to create concrete structures for what is largely an abstraction or image. A model either creates its own language or incorporates the language of another entity. Eventually, this new or incorporated language becomes an accepted form of communication among those implementing the model, and a new reality is created from the use of the

language. The previous structure has been replaced. Thus, rather than simply reflecting a reality, the model actually creates a new reality.

In education, for example, the dominant metaphor for the student in the late 1800s and the early 1900s was that of the liberally educated scholar. By the 1950s and 1960s, this metaphor had been replaced by that of the generally educated student. Currently, the dominant metaphor is that of the professionally or vocationally trained worker. As the metaphoric model changes, so does the language and, ultimately, the reality.

Given the student metaphor that is currently shaping reality, it is not surprising that institutions of higher education, and very possibly K-12 schools as well, find themselves borrowing the metaphorical language of business and industry. However, our experience at Bowling Green soon taught us that using such language communicates its own message about the direction in which the strategic planning process may be taking us.

When we began to create a planning model that would carry the college successfully into the 1990s and beyond, many members of our planning team expressed misgivings about the language of strategic planning. We finally decided, nevertheless, to maintain the metaphorical language of corporate planning since that language seemed integral to thinking and planning strategically. (See, for example,

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Below et al. 1987). Thus, the team began to use, and the plan to reflect, a metaphor couched in terms of products and services, market and customer needs, production capability, technology, methods of sale and distribution, size/growth, and return/profit.

The faculty's initial response to the first draft of the plan, as the team might have anticipated, centered upon the language rather than the substance of the plan. For the most part, their criticisms focused on the corporate language our plan used to describe educational phenomena (teaching, learning, students). Faculty members were quick to point out the numerous instances throughout the document in which metaphors distorted or replaced the phenomena they were intended to describe. Of particular concern was the use of language that implied students are products, not persons; teaching is a service, not an art; the professionals we serve are customers, not professionals; and our knowledge and expertise are production capabilities, not distinctive qualities and characteristics. Images of profit and loss, quantitative measures of success, and mechanistic performance directed toward the creation of a specific product prevented many faculty members from even considering the plan itself.

To some extent, the natural fears and anxieties associated with any change model were played out in the campus discussion about the language of our planning process. But we have no doubt that the dominant metaphor of corporate management made things worse. The problem of choosing the right language is enormously important. Although the college did finally adopt a model that incorporated much of the corporate metaphor, many of us continue to fear the effects of that language upon the reality we are creating through our strategic plan.

Lesson Number Two: Anticipate Undesirable Side Effects

Certainly, the advantages of having a well-defined course of action for shaping the future of an organization make strategic planning a powerful idea. With

the multiple demands and economic uncertainties that characterize both schools and colleges, it is not surprising that administrators often view strategic planning as a necessity if they are to guide their organizations successfully.

But top management must translate its belief in the value of strategic planning into action through some decision-making structure in the organization. That decision-making structure can either facilitate or impede the development of an effective strategic plan, as we learned the hard way.

In the course of developing a strategic plan, two decisions are paramount. First, who will formulate the plan? Second, who will review and approve the plan?

In many strategic planning models, the primary responsibility for developing the strategic plan rests with senior management (Below et al. 1987). Consequently, the team that formulates the plan typically consists of the chief executive officer and the key administrators who work directly with this officer. Other individuals, such as experts or middle managers, may be involved when specialized assistance is needed. Once the strategic plan has been developed, the next step is to review and approve the plan. "The board of directors, higher-level corporate management, a legislative body, or an internal management group that has approval authority" (Below et al. 1987, p. 113) then acts on the recommended strategic plan. Following approval of the plan by the authoritative body, the leaders communicate it to additional levels of management in the organization, and the units within these levels begin development of unit-specific plans that fit within the broader plan as a whole.

We chose not to follow this model, because we believed that if college administrators tried to develop a plan without the direct participation of faculty, the plan would be immediately suspect and doomed to failure. Moreover, in our case there was no single authoritative body within the college that clearly had the authority to approve a plan. Thus, we felt it necessary to employ a decision-making structure that would allow for the

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representational democratic involvement of all constituents.

We considered and rejected the notion of developing an elaborate new structure specifically for this purpose, as is commonly done in higher education (Aggarwal 1987). To superimpose another layer of decision making over the extant structure would, we thought, only complicate our already circuitous decision-making channels. So, rather than have senior management assume the responsibility for developing our strategic plan, we assigned the task to a team of faculty and administrators, nominated and elected by faculty.

This team, under the leadership of a member of the administrative staff, was charged with drafting the strategic plan, a process that required about four months. The draft was then reviewed by various college advisory groups and by the faculty as a whole. Each individual or group was encouraged to suggest needed modifications in the plan. After incorporating these suggestions, the planners again disseminated the document to all faculty, who could then make further recommendations for modifications through several key advisory groups. Ultimately, the revised plan was accepted and approved by the dean of the college.

The use of this structure ensured participation but resulted in a few

adverse side effects. First, the strategy and related objectives evolved from a series of compromises that accommodated the diverse interests of faculty, rather than from comprehensive strategic analysis. Second, the process for approving the plan became very time-consuming. By the time the plan was finally adopted, many faculty were questioning whether strategic planning was worth the effort. Thus, in employing a broad-based decision-making process, we traded substance and credibility for consensus. Had we anticipated these side effects, we might have been less reluctant to risk using a management-oriented approach.

Lesson Number Three: Create a Need to Know

A strategic plan, once conceptualized, poses even more challenges in terms of implementation. As we indicated in the previous section, the decision-making structure of an organization can make the development and approval of a strategic plan long and arduous. It can also significantly alter that plan so that it is no longer strategic in the fullest sense. Likewise, the structure can facilitate or impede subsequent action in implementing the plan.

But, regardless of the decision-making structure, a strategic plan can be effective only when key individuals truly understand the nature of strategic planning and do not allow day-to-day demands to take precedence over actions required to carry out the plan. This, we found, is one of the most difficult aspects of strategic planning.

Unfortunately, the academic and experiential backgrounds of the team members as well as many of our administrators and faculty had not adequately prepared us to understand what is involved in good strategic planning. In trying to formulate the plan, team members found themselves grappling with, but not fully comprehending, the concepts of *environmental scanning*, *issues evaluation*, *trend analysis*, *forecasting*, and *strategic analysis*. This lack of understanding affected the substance of the proposed plan. Also, this unfamiliarity made it difficult to gain widespread support

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for the plan, since these concepts of strategic analysis were foreign to many. Thus, the faculty made their decisions about accepting the plan from a variety of narrow perspectives, rather than from a collective strategic perspective stemming from the identification and evaluation of important trends and issues (Cooper 1985).

Many faculty members continue to question the worth of our strategic plan, particularly when recommended actions threaten vested interests. Units remain caught up in the immediate problems of the day-to-day operations of the university. In the eyes of many, planning has little to do with keeping the "ship afloat." It is not yet considered instrumental in changing the realities of organizational life. Therefore, it is not an activity considered worthy of serious investment or sacrifice. As a result, the planning capabilities of units within the college remain underdeveloped, and their decisions do not consistently reflect the overall direction of the college as charted in the strategic plan.

Financial exigencies or other conditions that may threaten the survival of an organization clearly facilitate a "need to know" about strategic planning. In the 1980s, such conditions

were a major factor in stimulating administrators and faculty in higher education to learn more about strategic planning (Cope 1981, Ishler 1981, Keller 1983). Fortunately, our college is not confronting dire circumstances. Unfortunately, this may have hampered our "need to know." In the meantime, lack of widespread understanding of the concepts associated with strategic planning remains a great barrier to overcoming the business-as-usual syndrome and, ultimately, to our success in managing change.

Before Taking the Plunge . . .

In light of the lessons we have learned, we advise others to take the following steps before plunging into strategic planning:

1. Examine various metaphorical models that might be used to frame the language of strategic planning. Rather than the corporate metaphor, consider what other images might be followed. Models derived from the arts, biology, literature, medicine, politics, psychology, or some other domain of language may be more appropriate in educational settings. Language problems may still arise despite the metaphorical model selected—consider how these might be overcome.

2. Consider the possible side effects of organizational decision-making structures in developing, gaining approval of, and implementing the strategic plan. What side effects might be anticipated, given the structure? What structure will yield a plan that represents the very best effort of the organization to think and act strategically?

3. Educate as many constituencies as possible about the intricacies of strategic planning. Recognize the complexity of thinking and acting strategically as an organization, and foster an understanding of the importance of using relatively sophisticated forecasting and analytical techniques to identify and evaluate issues and events that can influence the organization. A clear awareness of what is actually required to make strategic planning work is very important.

Had we recognized that these were vital steps to take before developing

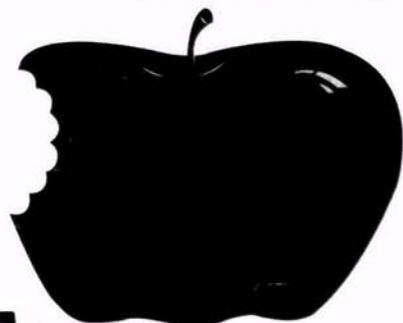
our strategic plan, our progress in learning to think and act strategically would have been greatly enhanced. As it is, we are now modifying the implementation process to offset some of the problems caused by the pitfalls described earlier. We no longer draw from corporate models in framing our language. Management of the implementation of the plan has been entrusted to the dean of the college and a steering committee that includes all key college administrators. Throughout the college we are trying to develop better understanding of the concepts and techniques of strategic planning.

Climbing out of pitfalls is much more arduous than avoiding them. We hope the lessons we learned the hard way will ease the path to effective strategic planning for others. □

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