

Strategic Planning for a Better Society

Strategic planners must have the courage to imagine the world they want their children to live in, then find practical ways to achieve their vision.

Strategic planning is "in." Most educators, following the lead of industrialists, sooner or later will find themselves planning strategically. In its most powerful use, strategic planning identifies results, based upon an "ideal" vision, to be achieved at three levels: individual, organizational, and societal. Some strategic planners are apprehensive about addressing societal outcomes and often ignore them or assume they will happen automatically. Instead of first defining the vision of the world in which we want our children and grandchildren to live, they divert attention to courses, content, and resources, under the blind assumption that societally useful results will follow. When this happens, so-called strategic planning goes no further than short-term, stop-gap objectives; and the true strategic plan is never developed or put into action.

We'd like to share our views about several planning concepts. Then we'll explain why we recommend a mega-level planning model to ensure that learners and society are well served. The strategic planning framework presented has been used in several educational systems, including Leon County Schools in Tallahassee, Florida (see articles by Woolley and Croteau, p. 9, and Millett, p. 11, this issue).

A Practical Model

The strategic planning model we recommend helps the planning partners to contemplate societal outcomes in a practical way. Applicable to all educational operations and levels, it provides a process for defining useful objectives and then linking those with tactics to meet them. Using the frame-



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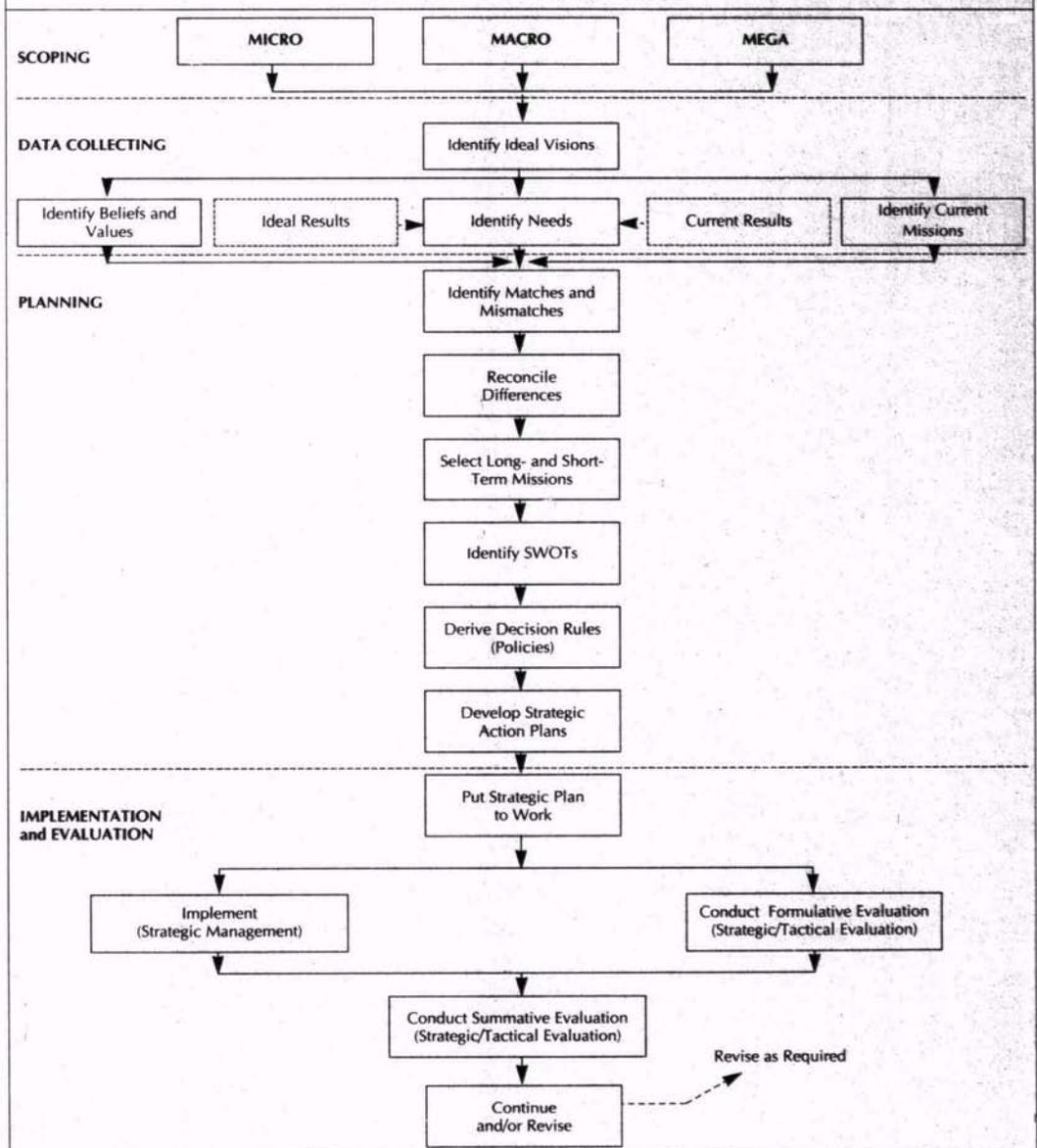
work (fig. 1), planners move through four major clusters of activities: scoping, data collection, planning, and implementation and evaluation (based, in part, on Kaufman and Herman 1991, Kaufman 1991, and Kaufman et al. 1990).

To begin with, as the planners proceed with the scoping activities, they consider three levels of strategic planning and thinking: micro, macro, and mega, which incorporates the micro and macro levels (see fig. 2). When planners select mega-level planning, the three types are integrated, and they increase the likelihood of achieving success in the educational system.

There are three possible client groups for the strategic plan: (1) the community and society to which learners go when they have completed school, (2) the educational system itself, and (3) individuals or small groups. Our view is that practical strategic planning should target the community and society as the primary client. The practical benefit of this choice is that educators, after first defining the required societal payoffs, can make sensible decisions concerning curriculum, content, and methodology.

In addition to the level selected for conducting strategic planning, there are two modes, or orientations, for

Fig. 1. Framework for Strategic Planning



planning. One emphasizes *proactive* planning in order to build a missing future, while the other is interested only in repairing and fixing, *reactively*, a current problem or crisis.

Reactive planning, the usual mode, responds to after-the-fact pressures and stresses. This mode might be triggered by public pressure for higher test scores, less drug abuse, higher wages, or shifting politics. Proactive planning seeks to create an improved reality—even if that involves modifying organizational objectives—before pressures, crises, and problems surface. The three types of strategic planning—mega, macro, and micro—may be pursued in either a reactive or a proactive mode.

A Holistic Proactive Process

The use of our model ensures a proactive mega-level strategic planning approach. Here is the method we propose:

Scoping. As we have seen, this function involves considering the three types of strategic planning based on who the primary client is and who benefits from what is planned and delivered. Those who don't select the mega level assume the positive societal consequences will surely flow!

Data collecting. At this first data-collecting step, the planning partners identify and define what should be and what could be. First, the planners define the ideal vision. It is important to set an ideal vision first, *before* restricting the group's imagination with "real-world" data. It may be typical to identify values and beliefs first, but we prefer to define the ideal vision first, to allow planning partners to be unencumbered by unexamined values and beliefs.

The planning partners imagine the world in which they want their children and grandchildren to live, what types of organizations they would like to work in, and what they as partners would like to create. If we want a world in which there is peace, no drug addiction, no welfare requirements, no disease, no crime, and no infectious diseases, these objectives should form the vision. Issues of practicality should not enter here—otherwise we would limit ourselves to what we are currently achieving. If we don't stretch ourselves toward a better future

through strategic planning, how will we ever begin the journey? Then, after identifying the ideal vision, the partners can set useful objectives for the short term, such as for the year 1995 or 2000, based upon current data.

Beliefs, values, and wishes are usually strongly held and unexamined—our "philosophies" of life and education. These should be formally identified and shared, and consensus should be reached on commonly held beliefs. The success of the entire planning process may well hinge on the partners' abilities to consider new philosophies and/or basic beliefs about people, prejudice, education, health, and what education should accomplish. With an ideal vision already set, the previously unchallenged beliefs and values will be moderated.

Next, the planners identify the current missions and rewrite them in terms of results, including measurable indicators of "where we are going" and "how we will know when we have arrived."

The group then identifies needs. Defining a "need" as a gap in results, the planners compile existing needs information (including performance and perception data) and scan both the internal educational organization and the external society and communities. In this way, the gaps between the current and the ideal status can be harvested, and the gaps will exist at each date from now until the achievement of the "ideal" (2000, 1995, next year, and so on) can be identified.

Future trends and opportunities are identified and documented (such as those identified by Naisbitt and Aburdene 1990 and Toffler 1990).

Planning. Once the group has completed its list of needs, it moves next to identify matches and mismatches among the vision, beliefs, needs, and current mission. This step often involves going back and comparing data from the statement of the vision, beliefs, and needs with the existing mission. Part of the task is to reconcile differences by finding the common ground. The group uses the collected data and information to negotiate to do what is right, not just what is acceptable.

Next the planning partners select long- and short-term missions. The long-term mission involves the organizational and societal world they would like their children to live in. Short-term missions are written to form the stepping-stones for achieving the long-term mission. A mission defines "where we are going," plus "how we will know when we have arrived." For example, a short-term mission could be "at least 90 percent of all learners will graduate." The longer term mission would be that they would be self-sufficient citizens, as indicated by their not being on public support. In contrast to simply accepting the current mission as is, this is a commitment to a better future that discourages simply drifting in the same direction as the organization is now heading.

The planners can prioritize needs on the basis of discussions about *What*

Fig. 2. Basic Strategy Planning Questions

	TYPE OF PLANNING	PRIMARY CLIENT
1. Are we to be concerned with the current and future self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and quality of life of the world in which we and our learners live?	MEGA	SOCIETY
2. Are we to be concerned with the quality of that which our organization delivers to its society?	MACRO	SCHOOL SYSTEM
3. Are we to be concerned with the quality of that which is turned out within our system and is used by internal clients as they do the business of the educational system?	MICRO	INDIVIDUAL OR SMALL GROUP

The Pony Express: Lessons for Modern-Day Restructurers

Roger Kaufman

The year is 1861, and the Board of Directors of the Pony Express calls a strategic planning meeting for June 4th, a nice warm day. Although the mail service has been operating for 14 months—the envy of the modern world—there are rumors of problems, even competition!

"There is talk," the chairman of the board announces, "perhaps more than chatter, that cities will be linked by some contraption that a certain Sam Morse has been playing with, called the 'telegraph.'" Our task, before any of us leaves, is to recognize threats to our operation and plan to overcome them. Strategy!"

He looks over to their consultant—a professor from a prestigious university—who slowly uncoils from his slouch and explains about "SWOTs": Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. "But before we identify these," the academic notes, "we have to create a vision, a broad statement of our purposes and direction. Then we must have a mission statement."

Creating a Vision

The board breaks into small groups to brainstorm ideas for the mission statement. Before lunch, they agree on one: "Excellence in Delivering the Mail." They break for lunch.

Returning to the boardroom, they examine their SWOTs. They find their *strengths* easy to list: letters between St. Joe and the coast in 10 days, reliability, positive image. *Weaknesses?* Well, being made up of two operating companies, there is some loss of efficiency in trying to serve two masters. *Opportunities* include the possibility of turning the Pony Express into a public utility and doing some research to develop faster horses. They might get into a new business, one person suggests, or convert the current horse stops into a franchised chain of boarding houses. *Threats* are tough for them. After much soul-searching, they admit that the new competitor with wires and poles could possibly deliver messages in less time (if, of course, this just wasn't a flash-in-the-pan). Cautiously, one board member remarks that they might want to consider going out of business while they're still making a profit. He is ignored.

The group turns to developing a strategic plan based on the SWOTs. The creativity blazes, ideas flow. "Six-legged horses." "More rest stops to increase energy and cut down on fatigue." "More riders." "Streamlined harnesses and saddles." "Expand service to New York." "Get rid of the unions." "Higher wages." "Get a law passed that restricts communication services to the Pony Express." "Increase options: let clients select their rider, the routes, time of pickup and delivery."

Deciding to Restructure

After generating all these ideas, the board decides to *restructure*. This will help them make a better future for their com-

pany. Within two days they generate a restructuring plan. It includes (1) the immediate addition of services to New York and Boston, (2) more riders and support staff, (3) mandatory attendance at a highly recognized "quality" seminar, (4) improved whips, (5) more frequent departures, (6) more options to clients, (7) incentive bonuses to workers for higher productivity, and (8) the new banner "Unlimited Pony Service (UPS)."

The board votes almost unanimously for the plan; only one person dissents, saying that "the restructuring plan fails to account for the changed realities of the world . . . the idea of horses delivering the mail is as dead as, well, as dead as high-buttoned shoes and celluloid collars."

On June 15th the restructuring plan is put into operation with vigor, energy, and hope. In October the Pony Express closes as a result of the overwhelming pressure of the competition from the Pacific Telegraph Company, which had strung wires along the paths where their horses raced.

This restructuring was well-intended, but the planners assumed that all that had to be done was to make the operation work better and people work harder. They failed to consider new realities and opportunities, so they couldn't generate fresh goals, objectives, and missions.

Fighting the War at Hand

One hundred thirty years later, schoolchildren still read the romance of the Pony Express. Others wonder if there are lessons to learn from that historic experience. Well there are a few:

1. Missions should be related to reality and results, not just to ringing rhetoric.
2. Working smarter is much better than working harder.
3. Restructuring, or change, should be based upon the realities of the future, not just the facts of the past (most generals fight the last war, not the one at hand).
4. No amount of good intentions can substitute for useful consequences.
5. Create the future you want, not the one that already is.
6. Don't keep riding a failing horse until it drops dead under you.

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do you give, what do you get? Key to this process are the skills of preparing measurable performance indicators and writing mission objectives for specified results at appropriate (and selected) levels (Kaufman 1991, Kaufman and Herman 1991).

The next step is to identify SWOTs: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. The planners use internal and external scanning to unearth the system's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats, and then analyze them. It is important to ensure that

scanning includes all the SWOTs. So that all partners in the system have the same marching orders, the planners derive decision rules, that is, results-referenced policies such as "all course objectives will link to school, system, and societal objectives." These deci-

sion rules provide strategic objectives, complete with measurable criteria.

In the last process of this stage, the planners develop their strategic action plans based on the SWOTs and the decision rules. During this step, they strive to answer the key questions: *What? How? Who? When? Why? Where?* They then identify and select (from alternatives) the tactics and approaches (or methods and means) the plan will employ; they also set operational, or in-process, milestones for monitoring implementation. It is here the curriculum for tomorrow is developed.

Implementation and evaluation. During this stage, the planners put the strategic plan to work; they strive to (1) design the response, (2) implement what has been planned ("strategic management"), (3) conduct formative evaluation ("strategic/tactical evaluation"), and (4) revise as required while implementation is being carried out. By comparing goals and objectives with results, the planning partners can make decisions about what to continue and what to revise.

Avoiding Mistakes

Most planners encounter pitfalls; perhaps a word to the wise can prepare those new to the process to sidestep

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such errors. Avoiding major mistakes can mean the difference between creating just another dusty document and creating a revitalized educational system.

Mistake #1: Planning at the micro or macro levels rather than the societal—mega—level. Education is chartered to provide learners with the abilities to be successful contributing citizens. If we don't aim for future societal success, then we are simply assuming our plan will be useful. But can we assume that? How successful is our current curriculum and educational system?

Mistake #2: Preparing objectives in terms of means, not results. Objectives tell us where to go and how to know when we have arrived. If we set our sights only on processes (using computers) or resources (higher wages), we put the educational-methods cart before the expected-results horse.

Mistake #3: Developing a plan without the input of representative educational partners. A small group may put a plan together more quickly than a large group, but the product won't be accepted by those who weren't asked to contribute. When all partners contribute to the plan, the plan is more representative.

Mistake #4: Selecting solutions before identifying destinations. Just about every activist group, good or bad, has a favorite solution or quick fix. It is a good idea to resist picking a solution or resource until you know where you're headed and why.

Mistake #5: Setting objectives that are based solely upon the perceptions of the planning partners, not anchored in performance realities. People know what they want, but they don't often know what they should have. They also don't know much about gaps between current results and required ones. Planning partners should be provided with the realities of future trends, opportunities, and consequences.

Mistake #6: Skipping some of the steps of strategic planning. There are a number of steps, and leaving out even one will diminish the quality and usefulness of the plan. Review the model (fig. 1) and the questions (fig. 2). Which steps and questions can really be omitted?

Mistake #7: Assuming that all strategic planning approaches are either basically the same or are nothing but

common sense or intuition. All models aren't the same. Most are reactive *and* start at too low a level (for example, they attempt only to improve courses or increase graduation rates—micro or macro levels—rather than turn out learners who will be successful citizens—mega level). Remember: if intuition were enough, the schools would be wonderful just as they are.

Making a Better World

Any board of education that intends to help learners fashion the kind of world we all want to live in can use this generic process to design an educational system to help make that world a reality. Educators and their planning partners can choose now to think and plan strategically. Much of our society's health, survival, and future well-being depend upon our making this conscious and conscientious choice. □

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