

Briefing Notes:**Strategic Planning versus Strategy Making in Higher Education**

In our work with higher education institutions, we have come to believe that there is a critical distinction between strategic planning and strategy making. The former aims to be comprehensive but often, in the pursuit of an integrated plan it is undermined by abstractions, by “too true to be good” expressions of vision and mission, and by a wish to suppress all differences of interest and opinion in order to create a consensus document. Moreover, a strategic planning process is often built upon the formal organization design—there are the appropriate representatives from schools and departments. But increasingly, there are powerful actors in centers, institutes, and among innovators whose actions may have a great impact on the future of the university. In a strategic planning process the focus and energy shifts subtly from ***actions to be taken*** to the ***document itself***.

Often faculty members join these deliberations with high expectations. But as the planning process becomes increasingly focused on the document (and time consuming), they soon come to feel that it lacks vitality, that they are engaged in shadow boxing, that real decisions are being made elsewhere, and that they are not using their own time productively. Paradoxically a process that starts in the hope of building trust through inclusion and participation may actually reduce trust. And much scholarly research suggests that ultimately, behind and beyond structure, trust is the coin of the realm and is the only basis upon which meaningful planning can take place.

Vital strategy conversations

Such conversations have the following features.

- They are issue oriented.
- They have implications both for near term and longer term action.
- They are informed by emerging strategic themes and outside perspectives and internal pilots.
- They consider and work on the important institutional tensions; for example, to secure the eminence of our faculty do we tolerate a skewed distribution of faculty compensation?

- They focus on and help make explicit the “mental models” people have of a presenting situation.
- They ensure that the collection of data is based on hypotheses, that all research work is hypothesis driven.
- They create a climate of safety within which people feel free to express their interests.
- They are informed by an historical perspective, not in the sense of protecting traditions, but in the sense that any thoughtful group can learn from its history of past efforts.
- They make use of disinterested outsiders who can provoke and evaluate options and choices.
- They make use of multiple forums with diverse perspectives. Deliberations are stitched together across a “moveable feast” of conversations and dialogues.
- They frame up real choices in the context of constrained resources.

Our experience is that in creating vital strategy discussions the details, the settings, and the timing really do matter. Less PowerPoint presentations, more broad engagement, more use of innovative analytic and multiple disciplines within the academy and seminar-like settings to engage diverse perspectives. One of the greatest occupational hazards of formal strategic planning is that both participants and leaders treat these conversations as ordinary, or even worse as ritual that can consume much more of scarce attention and time than the value they deliver.

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