From strategy to implementation:
Developing strategies that work

Strategic plans are a necessary preoccupation for administrators and managers at many levels in higher education.

Some of the real difficulties associated with strategies, however, centre on making them work realistically and ensuring that they receive the attention they deserve. This is especially the case for strategies or plans that might be below the usual corporate radar: for example, sub strategies or service strategies informing a broader strategic framework for the institution.

Disjointed strategic development across an organisation can lead to silo strategies that bear little reference to corporate mission or wider institutional objectives, that are ignored or undervalued and that may not be developed within the context of the bigger picture macro issues such as market change, policy and political shift or competitor action.

JUST WHAT ARE THE SUCCESS FACTORS FOR STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT?

To keep on track, consider the ten key elements, below:

[1.] WHAT TYPE OF STRATEGY?
Strategy needs to fit with corporate and institutional planning. Before you develop your strategy, be confident that you know how and where it will fit with the bigger institutional picture; for example, you need to know whether it is:

- A visionary strategy: i.e. is it going to stimulate major institutional changes?
- A stepping stone strategy: is it integral to, or a component of, the success of other corporate initiatives?
- An update strategy: is it simply enabling the organisation to keep pace with changing markets or inevitable sector progress?
- A critical intervention: i.e. an unavoidable response to a crisis or other threat?

Awareness of the level of strategy you need will inform how it is developed and how to present and promote it within the institution.

[2.] BARRIERS TO STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT
Many barriers to strategic planning exist in higher education, as within other sectors, but watch out for:

- Resistance to change: "We've always done it this way; no need to change, now!"

- An internal focus in some areas of the institution: this will make it difficult to respond to the bigger picture issues that could affect the organisation as a whole, rather than specific areas or departments, for example.
- Low awareness of market forces: for example, lack of knowledge regarding emerging competitor threats etc.
- Distraction factors: other things may seem more important or command greater attention.
- The hierarchy of decision making: this can make it difficult to get the strategy on an appropriate decision making agenda.

[3.] WHO ARE YOU?
If you hope to champion a strategy throughout the organisation, engage stakeholders and effect real change, your colleagues and the relevant bodies/committees within the organisation need to know and understand:

- Who you are.
- Your core objectives.
- Your motivations for championing the strategy.
- The relevance of your strategy to themselves, their areas of interest and the institution as a whole.

Without this understanding, achieving interest in, and support for your strategy will be difficult. Develop and manage your professional profile to ensure decision makers and influencers are primed about your interests and concerns and, of course, how they relate to their preoccupations.

[4.] BEWARE MYTHS AND LEGENDS
Myths and legends suggest that:

- Strategies are big and cumbersome.
- They need to be all about the vision, rather than how to achieve it.
- The more details and statistics the better!

[5.] BE REALISTIC
Reality and experience suggest that:

- Strategies need to be succinct.
- They need to be brief and accessible.
- They need to be in synergy with corporate goals.
- Colleagues need to know what their role will be in delivery.
- The succinct strategy document needs to be backed by implementation plans, appropriate data, market intelligence and evidence.

[6.] CYCLICAL STRATEGIC PLANNING

Formal strategic planning methodologies are well documented, but remember, it is a cyclical process:

- Analyse the objective or issue that will be the focus of the strategy.
- Analyse the institution or department's place in the sector or market, relevant to this issue.
- Understand the institution's strategic imperatives.
- Understand its stakeholders, the micro and macro context.
- Match the strategic plan's objectives, activities and budgets to the required outcomes.
- Map the strategy's implications for the department or institution.
- Develop the strategy.
- Manage implementation.
- What action will be required and by whom and how and why might it make a difference?
- What resources are required to achieve these objectives: for example, people, services, budgets, time?
- Evaluate performance and impact. Consider how your strategy will be evaluated. I.e. how will you and others know you have been successful?
- Report back and refine the strategy, accordingly.

[7.] IMPLEMENTATION SABOTAGE FACTORS

There are many sabotage factors to consider, but these occur frequently:

- A top down approach: i.e. a suggestion that the strategy will be imposed, without appropriate consultation.
- Misunderstandings about what colleagues do and, therefore, inaccuracies regarding how the strategy may affect them.
- Perceived lack of relevance of the strategic plan to key colleagues or departments.
- Low author profile: i.e. the plan's key advocate is relatively unknown to decision makers and influencers.

[8.] EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION FACTORS

Remember:

- As with most things, only promise what you can deliver!
- Ensure that stakeholders understand the plan's objectives.
- Focus on specific advantages and benefits for the institution as a whole plus for key stakeholders.

[9.] CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

For example:

- Ensure that the strategy is measurable, deliverable and that implementation is resourced appropriately.
- The strategy should be time scheduled with realistic delivery dates, KPIs and milestones to flag incremental success.
- You will need to delegate effectively: for example, know when issues are your problem and when they would be most effectively managed by others.

- Articulate the plan's synergy with corporate strategy clearly and effectively to engage a wide range of colleagues.
- Seek out project champions and advocates who will act as positive ambassadors for the plan and its implementation.
- Keep the plan relevant: demonstrate the practical outputs and benefits as a constant priority.

[10.] FUTURE PROOF THE STRATEGIC PLAN

- Keep it live, active and relevant.
- Map policy and infrastructure change that could exert an impact on your progress.
- Build in review cycles to sense check any market or sector changes and to keep pace with corporate strategy shift.
- Showcase results, to build confidence and engagement and to secure long term commitment.

THE STRATEGIC PLANNING CHALLENGE

Strategic plans will always be a factor within higher education management, but real success lies in developing and managing them to bring tangible and understandable benefits to both the institution and its stakeholders.

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