

A “Collaborative” Strategic Planning Process

A 5 Phase Model

This article describes a five phase, “collaborative” strategic planning process that has worked in a variety of institutions (Saint Joseph’s University, Bellarmine University, The University of the West Indies) in higher education. The process is highly engaging and inclusive in nature and efficient in its execution. The process is designed to create commitment to the implementation of the strategic plan from the very beginning. It is consultant “lite” and utilizes a highly credible internal planning task force as the driving mechanism for the entire process. It taps into and builds the capacity of the institution to think and plan in collaborative and inclusive ways. Campus stakeholders feel heard and valued as their meaningful involvement helps create a bright and robust future for the institution.

Biography

I am the president of The Sanaghan Group, an organizational consulting firm specializing in “collaborative” strategic planning and leadership transitions in Higher Education. I have worked in over 40 campuses throughout the country. I help teach the NACUBO Integrated Planning and Budgeting Seminar. I have written two books on planning and change management and many articles on leadership transitions and organizational behavior. I am co-author of a book on Presidential Transitions in Higher Education that will be published by ACE this year.

Key Words

Collaborative Strategic Planning/Concept Papers/Vision Conference/Consultant “Lite”/Stakeholder Review/Engagement/Preferred Future

The 5 Phases are:

1. Getting Organized
2. Data Gathering
3. Sensemaking
4. Vision Conference(s)
5. Goals Conference(s)

Guiding Principles/Essential Elements

1. Meaningful engagement of institutional stakeholders is at the heart of the process. By engagement we mean face-to-face interaction and discussion.
2. Information gathered throughout the planning process is shared with everyone. Transparency is essential.
3. The role of the consultant(s) is to help tap into and build the capacity of the internal stakeholders and guide the planning process not direct it.
4. Attention is paid to the external issues and trends in higher education throughout the process so that institutional stakeholders don't focus too much on their own world. (We call this listening to yourself too much)
5. External stakeholders (alumni, community, business) are an important part of the process and are engaged in several phases of the planning process. This creates a well-informed and robust plan that intelligently responds to the pace and complexity of change and responds to the different stakeholder interests that surrounds every institution.

I. Getting Organized

It takes effective planning and organization to operationalize a collaborative strategic planning process. Good beginnings are essential to the success of the process; therefore, the president must do several things to ensure that an effective and efficient planning process takes place:

- A. Communicate to the campus that the strategic planning process is important to the future of the institution and show their real interest, if not, enthusiasm for an inclusive, participative and transparent process. This has to be done throughout the process and not just at the beginning.
- B. Establish a highly credible strategic planning task force (PTF).
- C. Commit the technological resources to the planning process to ensure that everyone knows how to be involved, can contribute their ideas and feedback to the process and be fully informed through planning updates.
- D. Clarify his/her role in the planning process as a champion and supporter but not a driver or controller of the process.
- E. Visibly and authentically support the process by attending training sessions, communicating with the diverse stakeholder groups throughout the campus about the process and, most importantly, listening to people's concerns and aspirations.

Establishing the Planning Task Force (PTF)

The key to the success of a collaborative strategic planning process is a highly credible task force. The composition of the PTF will make or break the planning effort. Each task force member must have an excellent reputation and be willing to work hard over the course of the process. The PTF is both a thinking and doing group.

It is best to have two co-chairs, preferably a faculty member and a high level administrator (e.g. CBO, Vice President). Selecting

the co-chairs is the first strategic thing the president does and will communicate volumes about the importance of the planning process and its potential for success. Choose wisely. The external consultant talks with the PTF co-chairs weekly to ensure quality communication.

The ideal number of task force members is somewhere between 20 & 30 highly credible individuals. Although we have worked with task forces of 60+, it can be challenging to work with such a large group. Advice on selecting PTF members:

1. The composition must reflect the diversity of the institution.
2. Try and avoid the “usual suspects” and include some individuals who rarely are asked to the table.
3. Include “informal leaders” who may not have a title, but have huge peer influence.
4. Each member should have an excellent reputation and respect for the institution.
5. The “mix” should be about 60% faculty and 40% staff and administrators. It is essential that faculty believe that they are well-represented or your planning process will fail.
6. Try to include one or two “curmudgeons”, those individuals who are known for their skeptical attitudes and are most willing to share them. This will help provide rigor and credibility to the process. Do not have deeply cynical individuals on the task force. They will never be convinced of its authenticity and will only drag the process down. Skeptics are welcome, cynics need not apply.
7. The President’s Cabinet should be well-represented on the task force because, at the end of the day, they will be charged to implement it.

Initial responsibilities of the task force include: 1) establishing a calendar of events for the year; 2) developing a communication plan, 3) identifying forums for engagement and data gathering (e.g., faculty senate meetings, staff and administrative councils, student government, etc.) and; 4) learning about collaborative planning and meeting designs that engage stakeholders thinking and passions.

II. Data Gathering and Engagement

The heart of collaborative planning is the meaningful engagement of stakeholders throughout the institution. Engagement means face-to-face interaction, discussion and dialogue. Although surveys have a role in any planning process, they are secondary in this kind of planning.

At the beginning of the planning process, a consultant works with the entire planning task force for two full days and shares a wide variety of highly interactive planning activities. Each of the activities creates real data from PTF members and teaches them how to utilize the activities. It is expected that once the PTF members experience the effectiveness and efficacy of the planning activities, they will then go out and engage a variety of stakeholders throughout the institution. A Stakeholder Review is conducted to provide a clear picture of who needs to be connected to and informed about the planning process as it moves forward.

Before the end of the second day, task force members organize themselves and create an engagement plan for the next two months. They will work in pairs to support each other and will engage faculty, staff, and administrators throughout the campus as well as external stakeholders. It is rather easy to meaningfully engage well over a thousand people over the course of two months. (Recently, we were involved with a regional university where 5000 stakeholders were engaged.)

Building the capacity of the task force members to implement the collaborative planning process does several things: 1) the task force members “own” the process because they are at the heart of it; 2) internal stakeholders witness their own people working hard to create an effective planning process; 3) it builds tremendous credibility for the planning process because it is

something that is led by insiders and not by outsiders; 4) it builds the ongoing capacity of the task force members to continue to do collaborative planning in their own departments (e.g. self-studies) and administrative units after the planning process is completed and; 5) it saves a lot of money because insiders not consultants do most of the work.

III. Sensemaking

After the PTF has conducted dozens of interactive meetings throughout the campus, there will be a great deal of information generated. All the data that is gathered goes into a centralized database for planning task force members to review. At this stage, the PTF spends a full day reporting out their findings and agree on the strategic themes for the planning process (e.g. Academic Excellence, Diversity, The Role of Research, Community & Culture). Selecting the themes for planning is a transparent process that involves the entire PTF. Usually, 5-8 themes are selected to help focus the planning process.

After the strategic themes have been agreed upon, Concept Papers are then written to describe the strategic themes and their importance to the institution. The writing of the concept papers does several things: 1) they put some boundaries around the most important issues that need to be in the institution's strategic plan (everything cannot be in the plan); 2) it distills the information gathered during the planning process into "chewable chunks" so that stakeholders can be informed about the issues and not deluged with too much information and; 3) they are used to educate attendees at the future Vision Conference.

Concept papers are approximately five pages in length and lay person friendly. Their purpose is to educate people about a particular issue, not dazzle them with big words or complicated explanations. The papers provide a historical context about the issue, identifies regional, national and, if appropriate, international perspectives about the issues and clearly describes how campus stakeholders see the issue from all the data gathering that has taken place.

The concept papers are generally written by PTF members but they can utilize outsiders to help write them. All concept papers are reviewed by task force members and then sent out to the community at large via the campus intranet. During the writing of the concept papers there is a great deal of discussion and dialogue between PTF members. When the concept papers are finally produced, there is clear ownership of the information.

IV. The Vision Conference

The Vision Conference is a highly interactive, one day meeting involving somewhere between 50-75 stakeholders. Attendees at the conference are 60% internal (all the planning task force members attend) and 40% external. The main reason you invite external stakeholders (e.g. alumni, business community, neighborhood leaders) is to ensure that the institution has an external perspective in the room as they think about the future. In a large institution, you would have several one-day vision conferences rather than a large one with 100+ participants.

There are three distinct elements to a Vision Conference:

1. Review of the Concept Papers and Discussion

A highly engaging meeting design is utilized so that all conference participants have a chance to review the concept papers and glean the essential themes from each one. This usually takes two hours and helps ensure that all participants are well-informed about the institutional issues before they think about the future of the institution. A Vision Conference is not a blue sky, brainstorming session. It is grounded in quality information and institutional realities. The Concept Paper Review creates a shared experience and database for participants and helps set the stage for creating a "preferred" future.

2. A Stakeholder Review

The main reason you invite a diverse set of stakeholders to the Vision Conference is to be informed by their unique and distinct perspectives. The more institutional leaders understand how different people see the institution, the more informed they are. You want to paint a robust future picture of the institution and that can only happen if a wide range of perspectives are shared and understood.

A Stakeholder Review involves the different stakeholders at the Vision Conference (faculty, students, business, community, etc.) organizing themselves and having a discussion about how they see the institution's future. The output of their discussion is 4-5 important ideas and themes from their unique stakeholder perspective that they would like to share with the other participants at the conference. Sharing the very different perspectives expands participant's thinking, creates the opportunity to understand what is important to others and develops a more robust thinking pool of ideas.

Sidebar: At one Vision Conference, the business community communicated that were happy with the intellectual skills of the graduating students at the university but that they needed more students who could work effectively on teams and build relationships with others. The information greatly influenced the future pictures of the institution.

Sidebar: At another conference, the business community communicated that they wanted a more assertive presence of the university in their organizations. We don't just need graduates; we need research, new business models, strategies, consulting, etc.

3. Creating a "Preferred Future"

The culminating exercise of the Conference is creating share pictures of the future. We have found that utilizing a five year framework seems to work best because it allows participants to do some horizon thinking while still grounded in current reality. Participants work in small (6-8) diverse groups (e.g. faculty, business, students, staff, etc.) and create shared pictures of the future based on the strategic themes from the concept papers. If Diversity is a strategic theme, we would ask them to describe what diversity really looks like on our campus five years from now. If Research is a strategic theme, we would ask them to identify the new research areas we have explored over the past five years.

After the Preferred Futures are created, each group makes a presentation to the whole group. (With large conferences, 75-100, a design is created so that the small groups work with another group to share their future pictures and agree on a shared picture together. This way you avoid 10+ presentations.) After the presentations, a facilitated discussion helps identify the many common ground ideas and themes from all the shared pictures. These elements are used to create a draft Vision Statement for the institution that goes out to the campus for review and refinement.

The planning task force usually charges a small group to write a draft vision statement and take responsibility for incorporating the feedback that is received into a final vision statement

V. The Goals Conference

Approximately one month after the Vision Conference, the planning task force convenes for 1-2 days to create a broad implementation plan for the institution. At this time, other stakeholders outside of the PTF are invited to lend their expertise and energy to creating the goals. Often, these are individuals who will be charged with implementing the strategic plan.

Participants utilize the new vision statement to create a set of strategic goals for each of the strategic themes (e.g. Diversity, Academic Excellence, Research, etc.). After the goals have been agreed upon, Action Plans are created for each strategic goal. Feedback processes are built into the conference to make sure that all participants share their advice and ideas in creating the Action Plans.

If there is not enough time to complete the Action Plans, a process for completion is established before participants leave the conference. The draft Action Plan usually goes to the President's Cabinet for discussion and review. It usually takes another



month or so to produce a detailed Implementation Plan.

Summary

General Timeline – 1 Year

Consultant Time		
1. Organizing the Process	2 months	2 days
2. Data Gathering & Engagement	3 months	1 day
3. Sensemaking	2-3 months	1 day
4. Vision Conference	1-2 months	1 day
5. Goals Conference	1-2 months	1-2 days