

Strategic Planning for Educational Excellence

By William Bozeman and Janet Addair

STRATEGIC PLANNING IS ESSENTIALLY A PROCESS

that enables an organization or unit within an organization to chart where it is going over the next three to five years, how it is going to get there, and how to know if it, in fact, got there. When Associate Superintendent Janet Addair and the Orange County Public Schools Career and Technical Education (CTE) Department embarked on the development of its strategic plan in December 2008, her belief was that a sound strategic plan is the single most important element in achieving educational excellence.

This premise in no way diminished the significance of faculty, administrators and support personnel, appropriate curriculum and instruction, adequate facilities and services, a supportive climate, and other crucial areas. Long-range planning, however, could provide the unique opportunity to view the system holistically, with a principle focus toward the whole organization rather than isolated and seemingly independent components.

Addair also had several important goals. First and foremost, the plan should guide educators toward improvement and excellence. Such a plan must be operational and sensitive to community and district-specific needs—not just a collection of platitudes and jargon that would never provide real direction. Secondly, it was essential that stakeholders be involved throughout the planning process. In fact, those persons involved should include not only CTE personnel, but also other district educators, students, business leaders and government officials. Additionally, the leadership did not want to spend

“WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU'RE GOING, ANY ROAD WILL GET YOU THERE.” LEWIS CARROLL FROM ALICE IN WONDERLAND

months in a formal needs assessment and analysis of areas potentially in need of improvement. The associate superintendent had conducted preliminary evaluations and was already aware of several areas where change and development might be required.

After a brief period of pre-planning, the CTE department initiated its planning activities guided by a process termed “Breakthrough Thinking” under the direction of William Bozeman. “Breakthrough Thinking” is a systems planning process developed by Gerald Nadler, professor emeritus of systems engineering at the University of Southern California. The strategies employed in “Breakthrough Thinking” recognize that leaders and managers have been instructed in planning and problem-solving processes derived from classical scientific methods. While such processes can be invaluable for certain activities, notably research and systems analysis, their very nature (that emphasizes examination of components) can hinder one’s seeing the complete and true picture. “Breakthrough Thinking” is an alternative to the classical problem-solving method, offering a systematic approach to planning, problem solving, change and improvement. The strategy involved five intuitive phases:

1. Purpose determination. What specific function will the solution

system achieve based on beliefs and values of the stakeholders?

2. Possible solution generation.

How can the function be achieved if no constraints with regard to resources, time, feasibility, or others, are forced upon the design?

3. Target plan selection. This phase shapes the ideas from Phase 2 into a somewhat idealized plan or solution system.

4. Details specification. The purpose of this phase is to develop details of the target system and to accommodate exceptions to the rule.

5. Implementation and evaluation. Action plans may include the development of operational components, specification of timelines and performance criteria, and consideration of political forces.

A set of general principles guided the planning process and strategy:

- Ascertain the purpose of what is being done. Continually ask: “Why. . .?” and “What is the purpose of that?”
- Direct efforts toward the development of the “ideal solution” or “solution after next” rather than toward repairing what exists.
- Devise a target plan at which to aim.
- Try to include in the process as many people as possible who will be affected

by the plan.

- Do not worry about everything at once. Different activities have different purposes and may be treated separately.
- Gather information and data only as needed to answer specific, essential questions.

These principles, whether considered individually or collectively, are generally accepted by successful leaders and professionals in all fields without question or argument. In real-world planning, they are generally not followed because of an absence of a well-defined, purpose-oriented strategy, and belief in a “business as usual” problem-solving management style.

Developing the Plan

The CTE department’s strategic planning began with the formulation and conceptualization of mission, beliefs and values which lead to purposes and plans. The initial phase was a two-day meeting involving 46 members of the schools, student body and community. The four target areas selected for planning were: data management and analysis; program development and review; student success; and marketing, recruitment and enrollment management.

The group then engaged in a modified nominal group technique and small group dialogue regarding their beliefs about CTE. Beliefs were defined to be essential, fundamental values and convictions and should provide the context within which teaching and learning occur. These discussions yielded 123 belief statements. The large group was then divided into four subgroups that refined and discussed beliefs that appeared relevant to their respective target area. These discussions yielded five to six beliefs per target area.

The next phase of planning was directed toward purpose determination. Essentially, target area subgroups were asked to develop a manageable set of pur-



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poses that present the reason, utility, need or mission of the area as shaped by the expressions of beliefs and values. In a sense, the groups were answering the questions, “Do we really know what we are trying to accomplish?” and “Who are our clients?” Working on the right purpose replaced the conventional tendency to work on a perceived problem. These discussions yielded four to five clear and succinct

purpose statements per target area. Then, for each purpose, the four target area groups developed a rationale statement. This served as an explanation for the fundamental reason or principles behind the respective purposes and, again, was shaped by beliefs and values.

Given the refined sets of purposes for each target area, the group members were challenged to develop strategies for each

purpose. In this application, strategies are basic directional decisions on what should be done to accomplish the purpose. This work resulted in a total of 57 strategies for the four target area groups.

Based on the strategies, the four groups considered action plans associated with each strategy—the important actions necessary to realize these directions or strategies. Each strategy, as shaped by purpose, led to numerous action items that included details such as work to be performed, personnel responsibilities, evaluative measures, and timeline for implementations.

At this point group members sensed a need to map their plan so that it aligned with the school district's five goals associated with its own mission statement as well as the Florida Board of Education's strategic plan. This proved to be a productive task as it offered an opportunity to not only revisit work to date, but also identify redundancies and omissions. This was accomplished by inserting the codified action plans into an Excel spreadsheet to facilitate organization. The crosswalk of the two documents to the

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teams' original purposes, strategies and actions were documented to ensure the integrity of the process.

Interestingly, the final plan was not organized by the original four target areas, but by the district's goals: (1) Intense focus on student achievement, (2) High-performing dedicated team, (3) Safe learning and work environment, (4) Efficient operations, and (5) Sustained community engagement. This linkage provided an effective way to articulate the strategic plan to the superintendent and his leadership team as well as to the CTE department and other stakeholders.

A Plan in Action

Schematically, the overall process resembled a tree. The trunk of the tree was the values and beliefs of the community. Limbs which grew from this "beliefs trunk" were purposes as supported by rationale statements. Branches from the "purposes limbs" were strategies to accomplish the purposes. From the "strategy limbs" produced, in turn, multiple branches of action plans. Ownership, involvement and commitment are three fundamental values that educators, parents and community members must recognize in order to bring about continuing educational change and improvement in their schools. If these parties do not embrace the strategic plan, even the best efforts will be doomed to failure.

In addition to a sound strategic plan, two additional outcomes should be mentioned. In terms of team building, stakeholder collegiality, cohesion and communication were visibly enhanced during the

planning process. Secondly, in regard to time efficiency, one cannot conduct a true A/B comparison. However, the volume and quality of products developed in a matter of weeks was truly impressive.

At the end of the day, planning, change and improvement are not just about goals, objectives, strategies and evaluation. They are about relationships among people, harnessing individuals' talents, skills and intellects, and leading a diverse population within a complex 21st century environment.

The CTE Strategic Plan is now a roadmap and timeline to improve offerings, increase student success, increase enrollment, and serve the central Florida community with relevant career and technical programs. Is the work complete? *Never*. An effective strategic plan must be a living document, continually edited and updated. If the members of the Orange County CTE Department accept this premise, the plan can indeed guide educators toward improvement and excellence for many years. **I**

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2010 ACTE Election – YOUR VOTE, YOUR VOICE

The 2010 ACTE Board of Directors Election will be held from February 1, 2010 – February 26, 2010. This year we will continue to have a completely electronic election. ACTE will post all candidate background materials, including biographies, platform statements, and video clips on the Web site for members to review prior to voting.

Please note that to simplify the process and help alleviate technical difficulties, your username will be your member number and your password will be your last name.

Survey and Ballot Systems will again be the election vendor facilitating the process, and by the end of January all eligible members will receive an e-mail with voting instructions. **I**