

ADVISORY

A WISE BOARD'S FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING AND PLANNING STRATEGICALLY

by Christina Drouin

You are a head of school just starting to implement a new strategic plan. Maybe you're in the middle of one. Or perhaps rounding third. You take seriously planning and thinking strategically. And so does your board. But who does what when it comes to the planning process, its implementation, and ongoing strategic thinking? What are the opportunities facing school leadership when it comes to strategy design? Where are the land mines? Here is a framework for success in adopting a posture of ongoing strategic thinking at the board level including six key roles wise boards can play and a list of key questions boards can ask to keep planning and thinking strategically on track.

Six Leadership Roles the Board Plays and How These Work with Administrative Leadership

1. Preservers of institutional truth with relevancy to today

A board of trustees is the guardian of a school's enduring truth as it is embodied in core values and mission. This truth shapes the school's unique identity and transcends governing bodies, administrations, and market conditions. As a school grapples with its strategic issues, it must hold onto

these defining elements. A successful strategic plan resolves the school's strategic issues while bringing its actions into closer alignment with its core beliefs and purpose. In a word, a successful strategic plan makes certain that the school is worthy of sustainability by ensuring the continued relevancy of its mission. The result is a healthy institution, clear about what it stands for and why it exists, and equipped to think and act strategically to secure its future while remaining true to itself. By holding onto core values and mission, a wise board works to make sense of new contexts while preserving institutional truths.

Six Key Board Roles When Planning Strategically

1. Preservers of truth
2. Generative thinkers and arbiters of vision
3. Empowerers
4. Partners in change
5. Evaluators
6. Champions and ambassadors

The head of school and administration are responsible for living the values and mission of the school on a daily basis. A values-based strategic plan is a management tool for decision-making and action in all areas of campus life. With the strategic plan as a guide, faculty, staff and administration can make decisions independently across departments and divisions, confident that their decisions are consistent with the school's strategic direction and congruent with school values and mission.

2. Generative thinkers and arbiters of vision

A strategic plan is, by definition, a change plan. This makes it a framework for ongoing strategic thinking and an indispensable tool to keep the institution's feet on the path to sustainability. The leading edge of a plan, its vision, challenges the school to stretch and move forward, while goals and strategies describe what's needed to get there and how. However, the chosen path to the future may need adjustment from time to time as macro shifts in the environment impact and change what once was important. The destination itself may even change. The board takes seriously its role in ensuring the continued relevancy of the school's current strategic plan and devises structures and processes that test the accuracy, necessity, and sufficiency of the assumptions made about the future when the plan was developed. The vision may be what is pulling the institution forward, but is it still where the school needs and wants to go? By being open to ambiguity, change, and a continuous flow of information, a wise board can think generatively about where the institution is going and lead change.

The head of school and administration are key resources and conduits of strategic information for boards, particularly in the areas of peer institutions, benchmarking and best practices, and trends and issues in pre-collegiate and collegiate education. Working in collaboration with the board, the head of school and administration can help identify the big questions the board should ask to ensure the school's future sustainability.

3. Empowerers

The school's strategic plan gets its direction from vision and its torque from resources. A board committed to the school's future will make certain the school has what it needs to get where it's going. By developing an accompanying five-year financial strategic tied to vision, a wise board not only fulfills its fiduciary responsibility to the school, but also empowers a sustainable future.

The head of school and administration are key resources in providing the information a board needs to know in order to develop a five-year financial strategic plan. By developing a financial model with school-based sensitivity factors, the school can assist the board in financial strategic planning by projecting the relative significance of a series of key variables on future sustainability.

4. Partners in Change

Each year the board identifies its priorities based on the current strategic plan. Working from these priorities, the board sets annual goals and performance measures, and tracks progress based on target areas it identifies in the plan. Some initiatives are its alone to accomplish. Others would benefit from collaboration. By acting on its work as defined by the plan, the board fulfills its responsibility to advance the school's strategic agenda and sets a standard of performance others can emulate. In addition to advancing the institutional strategic plan, many boards today develop focused board-based strategic plans anchored in board core values and mission, and addressing the board's own growth and development. This is a valuable continuous improvement tool that a wise board can use to assure alignment in future trustees, excellence in future strategic performance, and the development of a culture of leadership that will ensure future sustainability.

The head of school and administration have their own work as described by the strategic plan. Through a dynamic implementation plan, the head of school identifies who will do what by when toward



what outcome in order to advance the strategic plan. Some initiatives may require board partnership.

5. Evaluators

The board sets forth clear expectations of performance outcomes that will form its basis for measuring the strategic plan’s success, and relies on the head of school to develop an appropriate system of prioritizing, tracking, monitoring, and reporting progress. With an evaluation system that works, the board is always aware of the status of the plan’s initiatives, can leverage successes, and correct any deficiencies before they can negatively impact the plan’s goals. By evaluating the plan annually, a wise board fulfills its responsibility to make certain the school advances the agreed upon strategic agenda.

The head of school and administration’s annual goals - and those of faculty and staff - are derived from the vision, goals and direction set by the strategic plan, and are congruent with its desired outcomes. Through ongoing communication, the head keeps trustees informed of the school’s progress in accomplishing annual priorities. A written annual end-of-year report helps the board evaluate and recognize the head’s leadership effectiveness in reaching the goals outlined in the plan and assist in identifying and filling gaps that may require its support.

6. Champions and ambassadors

Trustees serve an important leadership role as champions and ambassadors of the strategic plan. They are aware of, promote, and advance the school’s vision at every opportunity. And there are many. The committee on trustees, for example, can use the strategic plan to identify, cultivate and recruit prospective board talent aligned with values, mission, and vision,. It can also use the plan to help set and evaluate annual board goals, and meet board development needs. The board chair with the executive committee can use the plan to drive the board’s strategic agenda. Also, standing committees can adopt strategic initiatives from the plan to promote and advance. By emphasizing and using the plan to inform its work and decisions, the board

leads by example, supports the head of school’s role in implementation, and sends a message of solidarity to the rest of the campus community.

The head of school, based on the breadth of his or her relationships and interactions with a broad range of the school’s constituencies and publics, is the lead vision bearer and key communicator of progress on the strategic plan. Through regular and frequent communication about the strategic plan, the head can inspire support and compel action.

Key Questions a Wise Board Asks

About Values and Mission

- What are our school’s core values? Is there shared understanding in every corner of the ideals we say we stand for?
- Are we aligned? In other words, to what degree can we demonstrate that our structures, processes, behaviors, and culture are aligned with our values?
- Is our mission statement exemplary? Does it present a compelling and enduring rationale for our existence or is it an uninspired, undifferentiated chronicle of what we do? Could every Trustee state the mission if asked?

About Strategic Issues and Future Direction

- What is important today in the areas of mission and identity, governance, product and service development, constituent and market development, competition, and finances?
- What is our current strategy in each of these areas? Is it working? How do we know?
- What might be important in five years in these same areas? What might be our strategy in each? What, if anything, might need to be changed as a result?
- What has changed in the external environment that can impact profoundly in a positive or negative way our mission and the value we create?



- Are we heading in the right direction?
How do we know?
- What is the most important thing for us to accomplish in the next five years?
Ten years? Twenty years?
- What value do we create that ensures our continued relevance?
- What is our way of gathering and assessing new strategic information?
- Are we asking the right over-arching questions? How do we know?

About Plan Performance and Relevancy

- What will we see when we reach our goals?
- What is our expectation of the performance of our current strategic plan?
- Have we made our performance metrics clear to the head of school and administration?
- Are we using the strategic plan to inform not only the head's goals, but also those of the board?
- Are we regularly testing the assumptions underlying our current plan?
- Do we have reliable structures and processes to get into our system new strategic information and a strategic dashboard to gauge potential impact?
- Are we supporting the head by providing leadership and resources to accomplish the plan?
- Are we communicating the value and outcomes of our school's strategic thinking and planning to a broad audience so that we continue to build public trust and confidence in our institution?

A good board knows that vision, goals, strategies and initiatives of a strategic plan set direction, and define and generate what work will bring the school to its desired destination. But a wise board knows more and will use the strategic plan as a framework for ongoing strategic thinking. Provocative questioning, robust debate, assumption-testing, and a spirit of open inquiry scaffold a dynamic tension between what is and what might be. The wise board, concerned with what Peter Drucker called 'the futurity of present decision-making,' uses this dynamic tension to assure that what will matter in the future matters today.