

## Does Your School District Have a Real Strategy?

I have spent my career working with companies around the world to improve their performance, as a consultant, executive, and director. For more than a decade, I have also invested all my volunteer time in the cause of K-12 performance improvement, at the school, district, and state level, in New England, Alberta, and now Colorado.

One issue that has repeatedly struck me is how few school districts have a strategy that guides the use of limited resources to achieve their most important goals. Students, employees, taxpayers and many other stakeholders are paying a high but hidden price for this critical omission.

With that in mind, in this column I'll help you understand what strategy really is and how your district can develop one.

Let's start with a definition: "*Strategy encompasses choices about the most important goals an organization must achieve in order to survive and succeed, and choices about how to achieve those goals using scarce resources, based on an inherently uncertain assessment of how the current situation could evolve in the future.*"

A strategy therefore includes four key elements:

- 1) A forecast of the different ways in which the situation facing a district could evolve;
- 2) Given this inherently uncertain future, a clear statement of the most important goals the district must pursue, and the time frame in which they must be achieved;
- 3) An overview of the district's financial resources and distinctive organizational strengths; and
- 4) Choices about how these scarce resources will be used to achieve the district's most important goals.

Choices are the creative heart of any strategy. Making good ones is the result of a simple but uncomfortable process:

- As Marvin Cohen, Roger Martin and others have recommended, these alternatives should take the form of short, logically consistent stories rather than generic buzzwords or lofty aspirations. It is important that

one of these stories describes how the district's current strategy will achieve its goals.

- The second step is to specify what would have to be true (or not true) in order for each story to result in the successful achievement of the district's goals. Put differently, this step explicitly identifies the critical assumptions that underlie each story. Applying this step to a district's current strategy is always an interesting exercise, because many critical assumptions are often implicit or hidden.
- The third step is to examine the key assumptions that underlie each story and ask this question: "How will we know if this assumption isn't valid?" Put differently, how could we test and falsify it? This approach is far more efficient than the typical strategy process that searches for confirming evidence and endlessly argues over which assumptions are best supported.
- The fourth step is to implement these tests and seek disconfirming evidence for each assumption. In some cases, that evidence may be available today. In other cases, it will only be available in the future. This step should result in the elimination of some strategy stories from further consideration.
- The last step is to choose between the ones that remain. Logically, the story that is based on the fewest and least uncertain assumptions is the one that most likely to succeed.

To what extent does this describe your district's strategy, and the way it was developed?

If your answer is, "not at all", you aren't alone. From what I have seen over the past decade, in far too many school districts "strategy" amounts to an aspirational vision statement and/or the roll up of multiple school and head office departmental plans. But plans are not strategy. Plans implement strategy.

Even more insidious is the way too many school districts approach the question of scarce resources. Rather than explicitly acknowledging this constraint and intentionally designing solutions that overcome it, they either assume it away (e.g., "don't worry, more money will be available in the future") or make it their primary focus (e.g., "our strategy is to convince the voters to give us more money").

Finally, there is one last part of a high-quality strategy that you almost never see in school districts: a realistic assessment of the risks they face, and how to minimize their potential impact.

A simple way to approach this is by using the “pre-mortem” approach invented by Gary Klein. It works like this: Tell members of the district management team and/or school board to assume that it is three to five years in the future, and the district’s strategy has completely failed to achieve its goals. Then ask them to anonymously write down the answers to these questions:

- How did this failure happen?
- What critical assumptions turned out to be badly wrong?
- What warning signs did we miss?
- What could we have done differently?

Collate the answers, give them back to participants to read, and then discuss them as a group (ideally using an outside facilitator). This discussion is guaranteed to be interesting, and is often contentious. But it never fails to reduce the chances that a strategy will fail.

Many commentators have observed that faster economic growth would make it much easier for our nation to solve the problems we face today. As Eric Hanushek has shown, more than ever before, that growth now depends on the accumulation and application of cognitive capital, and therefore on better K-12 performance.

Creative strategies are critical to meeting this challenge. Unfortunately, too many school districts still lack them.

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