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Thinking Strategic

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Today's extraordinarily dynamic marketplace is causing a renewed interest in strategy and strategic planning. With that in mind, I wanted to outline, in broad sweeps, just what it means to be strategic. This article will build on previous articles in *QuickTakes* that defined strategy.

First, being *strategic* involves choosing how best to respond to a dynamic and sometimes hostile environment. Colleges and universities have many choices, often tough choices, in the face of tough economic times, funding availability, competition, and other factors. Being strategic requires recognizing these dynamics.

Second, strategy involves being *systematic*. It requires that the internal stakeholders examine past experiences, test old assumptions, gather and incorporate new information about the present, and anticipate the environment in which the organization will be working in the future.

Third, strategy involves *choosing specific priorities*; making decisions about ends and means, in both the long term and the short term and then sticking to those priorities. Being strategic means being able to focus more resources on fewer things.

And finally, strategy involves *building commitment*. Systematically engaging key stakeholders in the process of identifying priorities allows disagreements to be engaged constructively and supports better communication and coordination. The process allows a broad consensus to be built, resulting in enhanced accountability throughout the organization. This commitment ensures that a strategic plan will actively be used for guidance and inspiration, instead of serving as a dust cover for a remote corner shelf.

A colleague once said that strategy is all about helping an institution achieve a "willed future." In other words, it is all about being deliberate.

Acting Strategic

Let me briefly outline seven ideas and concepts that will help you think and act more strategically.

Understand the Basic Troika

It works like this. Your mission is where you came from and what's important to you as an institution. Your vision, compelling to both the internal audiences who strive to achieve it and external audiences who must pay for it, is what you want to look like in the future. It is the puzzle box top that guides your actions. In the broadest sense, strategy is how you orchestrate internal resources and talent to achieve your vision. **The key:** Strategy must follow a compelling vision. It can never precede it.

Hope, By Itself, Is Not a Strategy

It is one thing to hope for a better future, but it is quite another to plan for it. That hope must be built on a realistic assessment of the opportunities in the marketplace and be tied to a well-reasoned and well-funded strategic plan. But simply hoping is a foolish waste of time.

The key: Hope first. Plan second.

Outside in Thinking

Most of us are familiar with SWOT; a planning approach that requires that institutions consider and evaluate internal strengths and weaknesses and look at external opportunities and threats. The problem with SWOT is that it tends to focus on the inside more than the outside. Recently a client completed a situation analysis

that used an OTSW orientation: an appraisal of opportunities and threats followed by a look at strengths and weaknesses. The client said, "Beginning with the external orientation is the fundamental difference between true strategic planning and dangerous navel gazing."

The key: To avoid distortion, look out before you look in.

Important, Believable, Distinctive, and Emotionally Engaging

There are four attributes that truly strategic thinkers refer to often. Those words: important, believable, distinctive, and emotionally engaging become the litmus test for actions they are contemplating. Let's detail those four attributes. First, is the action truly important to its most significant external and internal audiences? Second, is that action believable? In other words, do audiences believe you are capable of delivering on that premise or promise? Third, will the contemplated action lead to the institution being more distinctive from your true competitors? And finally, does the contemplated action grab the hearts and minds of your internal and external audiences.

The key: You only have so much bandwidth, so focus on those things that are truly important, truly believable, truly distinctive, and truly emotionally engaging.

Differentiate on a Point of Significance

Your future does not depend on you doing more or doing better. Rather, as noted in the paragraph above, it is about being different from your competitors in ways that your audiences value. There is almost no way to overestimate the importance of legitimate differentiation on a point of significance.

The key: Use research to find that point of significant differentiation. And when you do, execute. You will have unparalleled market advantages.

Focus, Focus, Focus

The future belongs to those institutions that relentlessly focus on a particular kind of student, a particular geography, a particular way of teaching, or a particular discipline. Their goal at all times is to swarm resources around their particular focus, and in this manner be, and be known for, doing one thing better than anyone.

The key: Focus like a laser on that one valued thing you do well that your competitor does not do.

What and Then How

Finally, remember the difference between strategy (the "what") and tactics (the "how"). There is great danger in just doing without a clear sense of the larger purpose. Too often we become so driven by the need to do something; sometimes anything, in the hope that it will advance our cause. But without an overarching strategy, it almost never does. In fact, it can distract, deflect, and give us a false sense that we have accomplished something.

The key: Don't be in a rush to "do" without a strategy clearly in mind.