

Mega-Planning for Online Learning and Technology Change

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INTRODUCTION

If online learning and technology are going to add value to learners, institutions and our shared society, we should first ask “if these are the solution, what’s the problem?” Success is best achieved by linking everything an educational agency uses (including online learning and technology), does (such as distance learning), produces and delivers to adding value to all internal and external partners. We define and provide a Mega-level planning approach—that we suggest as a useful North Star—that focuses on society as the primary client and beneficiary.

In addition to a case-in-point from the implementation of a major distance learning program at a university, considerations of change management, change creation and contributions of technology—all related to adding societal value—are provided.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

As we consider the question introduced in the introduction, other serious questions requiring definition and answers come into sharper focus. What value do we, as institutions of higher learning, add to society, our learners, our associates, and fellow citizens? To what problems are we the solution? Do online learning and technology add value to all stakeholders? Will distance learning provide greater opportunities resulting in learners being successful in school and in life? Indicators for success include measures of the extent to which those we serve are self-sufficient, self-reliant, and add value for their families, associates, employers, and communities.

In practice, basic and simple intents are rarely formally defined by higher educators, considered, or

used when we design, develop, deliver, improve, and manage education and educational technology. Instead, we look at the pieces and parts of our educational enterprise—faculty, learners, facilities, online learning, technology, computers, equipment, funding, curriculum, delivery modes, unions, research, and administration—and often miss the key focus required to be effective leaders and practitioners—a focus on internal as well as external stakeholders’ value added. Thus, we often go wrong in education by picking the solution, such as online learning, before defining our measurable obligations and opportunities.

How do we keep from selecting solutions in search of problems? We do this through rigorously asking and answering the “right” questions—questions such as “if we are the solution, what’s the problem?” This is best done through strategic thinking and planning (Kaufman, 2000; Kaufman & Lick, 2000; Kaufman, Oakley-Browne, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003; Lick & Kaufman, 2000). It is imperative that we define our destinations in rigorous, measurable, and precise terms. Setting and justifying direction are the primary functions of useful strategic planning.

ENDS AND MEANS: MORE THAN A TRIVIAL DIFFERENCE

There is a serious confusion in our culture between Ends—results, consequences, impact, and payoffs—and Means—activities, processes, programs, projects, teaching, service, and researching. Both are important. But Means must be related to desired Ends, otherwise one doesn’t know what to do or how to do it. Ends define purpose, while Means define how to achieve purpose.

STRATEGIC THINKING AND PLANNING

What gets called “strategic planning” in education, business, and government is usually tactical or operational. Strategic planning identifies and justifies where your organization should be headed and why it should get there in terms of societal value added. (Note: If we are not adding societal value, we might be subtracting value. Education should be a useful means to societal ends.) Tactical planning identifies and selects the best ways and means to get from current results to desired ones—to be tactical. Operational planning builds on the strategic and tactical objectives and assures that our path and work are on target.

Strategic thinking is the way in which everyone in an organization, as well as its external stakeholders, focus first on value added for external clients and society and then (and only then) defines what the organization should deliver, produce, do, and use.

AN IDEAL VISION

Basic to useful strategic planning is using external societal value-added as the primary definition of what an organization’s mission should be. One cryptic illustration of an Ideal Vision that should drive all organizational purposes is the kind of world we want to create for tomorrow’s child” (Kaufman, 1992; Kaufman, 2000; Kaufman, Oakley, Brown, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003). One basic example of this Ideal Vision (op. cit.) is based on perceptions of people, almost worldwide, who were asked to define the kind of world they would want to help create for tomorrow’s child:

No person will be under the care, control, or custody of another person, agency, or substance. There will be no losses of life, nor elimination or reduction of levels of well-being, survival, self-sufficiency, or quality of life from any source or intervention.

These researchers provide a number of interacting variables and criteria.

The useful grounds for creating or ratifying an Ideal vision are: (a) only include ends and not means and (b) all results must be at the societal or community levels.

THREE LEVELS OF PLANNING AND RESULTS

There are three levels of results tied to the three levels of planning. Although this seems like a lot of terminology, being precise about terms is central to useful strategy and thinking. We will begin by defining the elements that all organizations must use, and then relate them to a framework called the Organizational Elements Model (OEM). First, the three levels of planning and the associated three levels of results are defined.

Mega-Level Planning: Outcomes

Strategic thinking and planning starts with an Ideal Vision that must be ratified or modified by the educational partners that can and will be impacted by any program, project, or activity. It states, in measurable terms, where we are headed and how to tell when we have arrived in terms of societal value added. This level of planning and focus starting with an Ideal Vision is termed Mega-Planning (Kaufman, 1992, 1998, 2000).

In Mega-Planning, the primary client and beneficiary is society and community, NOT the organization itself. Results at the Mega level are called Outcomes. Thus, any educational organization is actually a means to societal ends.

Macro-Level Planning: Outputs

From the Mega level and the Ideal Vision, the organization determines what its’ mission objective is to be. A mission objective states where the organization is headed and how to measure when it has arrived. An organization’s mission objective measurably states what part or parts of the Ideal Vision it commits to deliver and move ever closer toward. Results at the mission-objective level are called Outputs.

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