

STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A TIME OF FLUX

A Human-Centered Approach

*A White Paper
January 2022*



LEADERSHIP+DESIGN

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PROLOGUE: HOLDING OURSELVES CAPABLE

It isn't common to be flexible, adaptive, and curious in times of stress, disruption, and change. As people and as organizations, we default to a stress response.

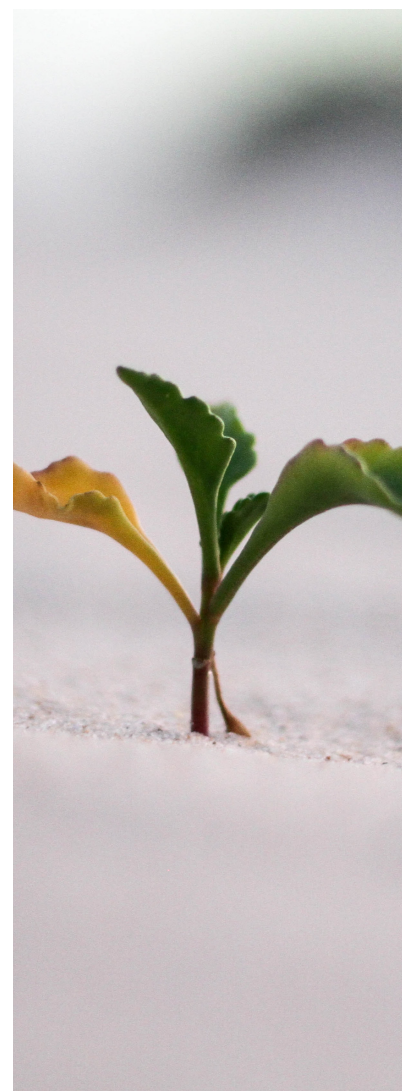
That's why we need tools, habits, and mindsets to help us take advantage of these rich and complex times of flux.

We all saw the ability that schools have to pivot over the last 18+ months. Times of disruption are opportunities to plan for the future because they offer a small window where people are emotionally in contact with the ineffectiveness of their past ways of being. This is exciting. If we are able to arm ourselves with optimism, hope, and curiosity, we have the chance to springboard from this time into a human-centered future.

The post-March 2020 era has shown us that we need to consider multiple scenarios, stay (or become) agile, practice cycles of experimentation and iteration, and expand our sense of what's possible. We need to be intentional about our future, even (especially!) when the future is uncertain.

We offer this white paper as a reminder that fear isn't the only fuel capable of helping organizations manage times of change. We shouldn't need another pandemic to maintain this sense of openness and possibility. We need to hold ourselves capable of doing so.

If schools commit themselves to maintaining a sense of openness and possibility as things change around them, what would it mean for strategic planning? In an era where things can change dramatically in a single year, is a full-year strategic planning even worth doing?



THE PITFALLS OF THE OLD MODEL

In a time of rapid change – which is not over for the schools we work with – the pitfalls of traditional strategic planning become even more acute:

- **Opportunity Cost:** In the traditional model, strategic plans are time-intensive endeavors that consume significant bandwidth from leaders over a full school year, delaying other major initiatives or rendering other initiatives less valuable. Justifying this opportunity cost sets a high bar for the benefits a school should get out of the process. Can you rally your community, your board, your leadership team to envision a future beyond just getting through the week?
- **Assumption of Stability:** Traditional models for strategic planning assume that you know something about the state of the world five or so years after it is adopted (which is to say, six or more years since when you start). In VUCA periods – that is, in periods in which the environment is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous – you run the risk that changing circumstances render your plan irrelevant.
- **Unoriginal Thinking:** Traditional models for strategic planning often draw the school's priorities from constituent surveys, therefore restricting the range of possible futures to what is already known, anticipated, or imagined within the community. Alternatively, they often crowdsource ideas from the same limited groups (e.g. trustees, senior leadership) who are already included in these discussions. Maybe that's why strategic plans often recapitulate the same set of priorities from school to school: attract and retain the best faculty, improve facilities, achieve financial sustainability, and progress on DEI goals. While each of these goals are laudable, when they're the same at every school, it makes one wonder whether all of that work was really necessary.

Despite the limitations that exist with traditional strategic planning, we believe that a creative, human-centered strategic process offers a unique opportunity to schools ready to rally their community around a vision of their future while simultaneously building the excitement and energy they'll need to get there.

Here's why: longer strategic processes are a unique opportunity to rally a community around a vision of a school's future. It's not (just) about the final document. It's about the way that strategic planning can build enthusiasm for and clarity about your school's future. It's about the opportunity to engage a diverse set of constituencies, hear their voices, and create a container where humans co-create their futures.

By elevating strategic work above an individual conversation or engagement, you can ask better questions and set more insightful goals. In a human-centered design experience, these insights and goals generate raw, organic buy-in. Strategic planning should produce more than a document. It should produce a palpable human energy to roll up one's sleeves and get to work.

If you can do that, we believe it makes a full-year strategic process worthwhile.

FIVE IDEAS FOR STRATEGIC PLANNING IN A TIME OF FLUX

In this white paper, we outline five principles for strategic planning in an era of rapid change, and a high-level overview of our process and timeline for strategic planning.

Idea 1. Embrace the Expedition as Metaphor

How can schools think strategically in a time of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity (VUCA)?

In their book *Whiplash*, Joi Ito and Jeff Howe outline nine organizing principles for navigating these tumultuous periods. When it comes to strategic planning, one of the most important is this: “compasses over maps.”

Maps offer known routes to a particular destination. You can look at a map and see that there are many ways to get from Point A to Point B. But maps rely on an understanding that the territory has already been traversed; others have done what you're trying to do, and you should just learn from the best of them. Who made the map, when it was made, or the current changes to the landscape may actually render the map irrelevant. In a rapidly changing landscape, a road map has a short shelf life and could be not only inaccurate, but lead you to obstacles, detours and dead ends. They represent the territory in a limited way, but they don't represent the fullness of the territory itself.



A compass, on the other hand, will help you set a direction, even if it sends you somewhere no one has ever gone before. They acknowledge that new opportunities and roadblocks will emerge along the way, requiring a change of route on your way to a destination. They also acknowledge that you might learn more along the way and end up deciding to head somewhere somewhat different. Finally, compasses are also best when you're trying something new; after all, if no one has made it to your destination, then there's no one best path to follow.

If we really embrace the mantra of “compasses over maps,” a new organizing metaphor emerges for your school's strategic journey: an expedition.

In an expedition, you arrive somewhere new that was only imagined before, and are transformed as a result. You are not transformed only because of the destination you arrive at, but also by the process of getting there.

The journey to the future of your school is an expedition.

If no one has made it to your destination, there's
no one best path to follow.



Your community can do this work, despite the challenges, and emerge stronger. Schools can be more human, joyful, and creative. Systems can become more resilient and adaptive. Institutions can be healthier and better able to live their missions.

What that looks like for each school is different, and you won't know exactly what it looks like until you get there.

What we do know is that the landscape doesn't stay the same for any of us. Each school will make a journey regardless of their intention, but those that plan together using an expeditionary mindset have the potential to thrive along the way.



Idea 2. Uncover Needs Before Offering Solutions

We have found that most schools start talking about “what to do” too early. Early strategic planning meetings are bubbling with energy and enthusiasm for the ideas we have, but after sharing those ideas, the people in the room get stuck.

Why does this happen?

We focus on solutions too early because we live in a pragmatic culture and talking about what we’re going to do has an appealing, “let’s cut to the chase” ring to it. After all, isn’t that the point? Aren’t we here to decide what to do?

We also focus on solutions too early because people come with ideas they’re already excited about. They may see the process as an opportunity to advocate for that idea, or to represent a constituency that needs a voice.

We’ve found that when groups focus on solutions too early, they get stuck. They can’t agree on a set of solutions because they don’t agree on a set of problems or opportunities. Or, just as bad, they reach consensus too early.

The risk is failing to think deeply in a rush to ratify the conventional wisdom within the community. Given that lack of insight, plans usually fail to signal a clear strategic direction.

At Leadership and Design, we believe that great strategy doesn’t capture consensus – it creates it. Creating a new consensus means getting your team to engage in real inquiry together. That process of inquiry shouldn’t presuppose what the answer is (which would open us up to all kinds of confirmation bias.)

The mantra we've taken up is "needs before solutions." Does your team understand the needs that are present in the community? Do they understand the possible opportunities for the school? Before you seek answers, have you found the right questions?

Our recommendation is to break the process into two phases: roughly half the time exploring what's needed and what's possible, and roughly half the time deciding what to do. This is commonly known as the "Opportunity Space" on the first end, and the "Solution Space" on the second.

When groups do this, they are more creative and they forge greater clarity as a team. The result is that any time you have "lost" by focusing on possibilities is more than made up when you get to solutions. It truly is an example of "going slow to go fast."

Idea 3. Collaborate Deeply With Your Community

When many stakeholders participate in an intentional and substantive way, it helps the strategic planning team explore the school's position through multiple lenses and perspectives.

We believe this leads to better thinking. A diversity of perspectives forces you to check your assumptions and your blind spots. An idea may seem easy to execute when the folks who would need to implement the idea aren't in the room; an idea may sound equitable until you check with the folks who have lived a different experience.

It's also true that people believe in what they help create. By engaging with your community deeply, you spark better thinking from your team — and better buy-in from your community.

When you share the plan with the community, how will they feel? Will they be prepared to act on it? Will they understand — and accept — the tradeoffs it requires?



While a diverse, core strategic planning team can and should provide a throughline in the planning process, you can and should design touchpoints for community involvement.

As you do so, it's critical to think beyond the survey. Ways we have engaged school communities include:

- Conducting design thinking-inspired “empathy interviews” as a way to better understand the variety of lived experiences and needs that are present in your school today.
- Running open invitation “Think Tanks” with students, employees, and families to identify challenges and opportunities, as well as possibilities for the school’s future.
- Organizing a large “Community Day” where we share identified needs and opportunities and organize invitees to form teams and engage in a design sprint to prototype possible solutions.
- Curating an open, TED-style community event where education thought leaders or community leaders talk about the challenges and opportunities facing schools.
- Sharing drafts of strategic plans with key constituencies to get feedback and identify potential obstacles before approval by the board.

Taking time to do this work changes the quality and the tenor of your strategic planning work. It makes the process a true community experience that lays the groundwork for positive, substantive, and sustainable change.



Idea 4. Think Like A Futurist

We all know that we need to be ready for the future. We've witnessed changes in our markets and our communities. We've heard the hoary old chestnut that today's students are likely to have jobs that haven't even been invented yet. We may even believe it.

Despite this, most people in schools – including trustees, despite their strategic and generative roles – tend to be focused on the present...or even the past. That's where our rich, sensory, and emotional experiences of school have happened.

As a result, it's hard for strategic planning to focus on the future in meaningful ways. It's natural to prepare for a “future” that's really just today with a cost of living adjustment. It's easy to lose sight of emerging ideas and trends that may disrupt the experience we've grown attached to, as well as possibilities that are infrequent, difficult to anticipate, but highly impactful – like global pandemics.

To be ready for a range of possible futures, strategic planning teams need to “think like a futurist.” Thinking like futurists allows teams to consider a longer term direction and be more likely to shape the future rather than simply react to it.

There is no singular recipe to long term existence and evolution, and adaptation looks different in different industries, but, trustees should be thinking about playing the long game, and thinking like a futurist is a mindset that they can develop, practice and apply to their work.

Futurists do not predict the future. They aren't telepathic, they have no crystal balls, and they don't rely entirely on quantitative data to envision the future. Scenario planning is designed to help you understand what's possible, probable, and eventually, what is preferable, not determine what will actually happen. By “keeping all scenarios alive,” you increase the odds that your plan will set the conditions for your success under multiple scenarios and you may also have greater agency in the final outcome.

How can you imagine what's possible? Well, what's already happening at the margins – as a niche practice, immature technology, or in other markets? Often, the future is already here, it's just ignored. New behaviors are emerging but countercultural; new technologies are present but yet “ready for prime time”; new markets are emerging, but not yet profitable. Like Kodak once upon a time, your current market may be dying, but still too profitable to let go of.

Future-ready schools spend time listening for “the signals in the noise” – looking for trends that are currently on the margins, and understanding the implications for their school if they move to the center.



Idea 5. Focus On A Few Winning Hands

Strategic plans of the past were designed to be comprehensive and detailed road maps of all of the things a school was working on. They often had eight or nine areas ranging from curriculum to faculty and staff to the business operations of a school.

The warning sign? Bullet points that began with language such as “we will continue to,” “we will maintain,” or “we will enhance”...often attached to a program we were sure to declare was “already strong”!

This type of strategic plan was confirmatory, written to showcase and instill confidence in what the school was already doing. Much of what was included was operational, filled with the kinds of things high performing schools do every year to operate at a high level. In other words, they weren’t really strategic.

When we work with clients, we find ourselves continually asking them to find a limited set of ambitious, institutional goals that sit at the

intersection of their mission and their market. In other words, an organization’s strategy needs to help distinguish it from the competition and it needs to help it live its mission more fully.

Focus is the result, and focus is what makes schools indispensable. This is what we mean when we talk about “Winning Hands over Table Stakes,” language we learned from our collaborator, Christian Talbot, of Basecamp.

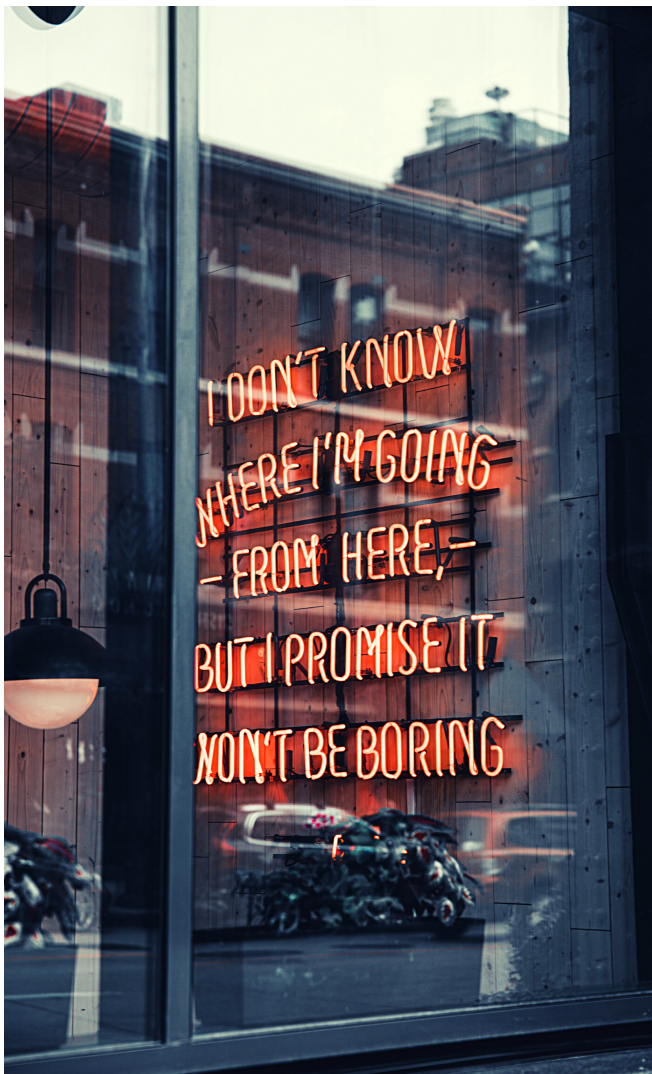
“Table Stakes” are things a school does to be a great school, but that don’t really have a large impact on market position. The impact of working on table stakes is incremental at best. While there might be an investment of some time and resources, table stakes don’t usually require much change in mindsets or behaviors in a school. Table stakes are rarely aspirational. This doesn’t mean they aren’t important...just that they shouldn’t be the focus of a strategic plan.

On the contrary, “Winning Hands” are market differentiators. They often take advantage of emerging trends and shifts in context. Sometimes they amplify something a school is already doing, but with a kind of “10x” impact.

Winning Hands are not universally understood when they are first explained. They may make portions of the community a little uncomfortable and challenge some of the underlying systems and structures that prop up the status quo in a community. For these reasons, they often take 3-7 years to really make a difference: they require a substantial shift in mindsets, behaviors, or resource allocation. However, because of the potential payoff, they're worth the effort...it's those few hands where a school should metaphorically move its chips to the center of the table.

A truly strategic plan should contain fewer table stakes and more winning hands. This usually means that "less is more." While schools can certainly talk at length about all the things they do in perpetuity to be high performing schools – from supporting teachers to mapping curriculum to enhancing programs, the strategic plan should be more focused on the 3-4 areas the school really sees as differentiating terrain.

After all, strategy isn't just about what you choose to do. It's also about what you choose not to do.



Contact us about a strategic plan at your school.

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Future-Focused Strategic Planning: Process and Product

Throughout this white paper, we have focused on ideas that we believe a strategic planning group needs to consider as they prepare to engage in the strategic planning process. But what does this look like on the ground?

There are six stages to Leadership and Design's strategic planning process. If you follow a school year calendar process, it might look like the following:

- 1. Pre-Planning (Summer):** Ensuring your core team is in alignment about the process and its scope. Create an inclusive, well-balanced core team or committee. Gather relevant data. Communicate with your community about what's coming.
- 2. Exploring The Opportunity Space (August-October):** What are the needs in your community? What are the opportunities? What's possible? Gathering a broad range of insight from your internal and external communities to understand what issues should be considered.
- 3. Converging on Inquiry Areas (November-December):** Where should the school focus its next plan? Guide your team to a thoughtful distillation of salient themes based on your exploration. This results in a focused, manageable set of Inquiry Areas to focus on without predetermining what the school will do in each area.
- 4. Exploring Possible Solutions (January-February):** Generating a broad and innovative set of potential approaches to each challenge. Research here can expand your sense of what's possible and avoid trapping ourselves in minor changes or already-known alternatives. It's a good moment to explore how schools in other markets have approached similar challenges/opportunities. This is also a good moment to invite the broader community to participate in the process and design potential solutions collaboratively. The more divergent you can be in generating potential solutions, the more insight you'll have as a team and the more options you'll have to select the solutions that fit well with your school.
- 5. Selecting Desired Solutions (March-April):** Narrow on a final set of future pathways in each Inquiry Area, and flesh out what each will look, sound, and feel like when it's complete.
- 6. Iteration and Delivery (May-Summer):** One final round of input to ensure you're on the right track – and preparing the final document for the community. This should include development of a 12-18 month action plan at the administrative level, which is a great project for a summer leadership event.

Are you interested in seeing what this process might look like for your school? Ready to move to timelines and the nitty gritty of your school's culture and context?

Contact us at info@leadershipanddesign.org for a conversation.

ABOUT LEADERSHIP+DESIGN

Leadership+Design (L+D) is a nonprofit organization designing experiences for the people who design the future of teaching and learning. Through strategy, developing leaders, building teams and culture, and leading program innovation, we help schools make the shift to their futures successfully.

Our clients represent a wide range of schools throughout the country.



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