

Sowing Many Seeds

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Background:

Providence Christian School is a Pre-K to eighth grade school with a population hovering around 200 pupils and it is situated near Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. It is in a rural setting and we have experienced 35% growth in the past 5 years. With that growth has come opportunities as well as challenges for the school. The focus for the project was to complete a strategic plan to help our school navigate these opportunities and challenges with our mission, vision, and core values at the center.

Method:

Throughout this summary a metaphor will be used to help illustrate what was done, what was learned, and what the next steps may be. The metaphor of sowing seeds and harvesting will be used and for each item that was addressed. The metaphor will outline what was learned as planted, what was done with the learning as the growing crop as well the harvest, and what next steps we will need to take for the next season.

Sowing Seeds, Harvesting the bounty:

Coming into the Van Lunen Fellowship I had the idea that I would initiate and complete a strategic plan for Providence Christian School (PCS). What I ended up doing was totally different. With each session, faculty address and special speaker I was inspired to kick start more and more initiatives at PCS. In doing so, there are many things that we have started and we are already beginning to cultivate the harvest. Do not get me wrong, we also did initiate and complete the strategic plan but there were steps that we had to take first to prepare the field for planting and there were many other opportunities for seeding.

One of the biggest areas that we tackled at PCS was work around governance. Henry's presentation that had to do with the different hats and the different scenarios he had us work through

were good precursors of what was to come. At PCS we had over half of our Board of directors as new recruits. With five new Board members at the start of the school year it was clear that much work needed to be done in the area of maintaining the institutional memory of the school and building capacity in the current board. Henry's presentation planted a seed of good governance and the materials he provided included a Board member handbook. With so many new board members it was not only a challenge but a real opportunity to reshape and refine our governance at PCS. One of the biggest changes we made in our governance and the direction of our meetings was moving from a standard or traditional agenda to a consent agenda. This expedited the reporting process and allowed the board to carve out time for the strategic plan and to think more strategically in general. Having the board focus their energy on strategic thinking has already started to bear fruit in our school and it primes the field for ongoing growth. I will touch on this later on as well.

Last July, during some of the first sessions at the Van Lunen Center, we read through the book *Switch*. Working through that book we were encouraged to identify the rider, the elephant, the path and the destination in regards to our leadership at the schools we serve. The seed was sown. I learned a great deal from this session about change management. I was able to use some of the steps outlined in this session to plant the seeds of direction for staff. Clearly marking the path and pointing to the destination was invaluable in assisting them to embrace the changes at our school. In fact, later on I used my new found knowledge to lead workshops for other leaders in creating a school wide work plan for their own organizations. I am thankful for the harvest of leadership development.

Christine Metzger highlighted a few pieces from the *Strengths Based Leadership* book. We were loosely gathered in groups to discuss some of our strengths. We were asked to consider how we saw these strengths play out in our leadership roles. This planted another seed that would be the source of my own development. I was eager to share some of these insights with my staff so I had them read

Teach with Your Strengths and take the Gallup test. I had planned to work with staff and explore their talents early in the year but the timing did not work out and I think providentially so. Later on, in January, we met with the Fellows again and at this session we were able to take the strengths finder results and apply them to a new model called Core Clarity. Core Clarity helped put all the talents into various types and it helped clarify how the different talents and types of talents work together to shape who I am. Having to wait to dive deeper into the talents of the staff gave me the confidence to speak coherently to their situation as well. Core Clarity was a highlight for me personally and it helped shape me as a leader. It helped organize leadership teams at school.

During the July session we were also prompted to look at and evaluate our website design and traffic. There was one example during the slide presentation in particular that referenced a website that was stuck in the past. Sadly, it was a website that looked much like ours. The seed was planted. We initiated a full redesign of the website and when it was completed I asked Jim McKenzie to review it and give some feedback. Through his direction we were able to refine our website and sign up for the email marketing campaign he was promoting. The fruit of our labours was a more friendly, accessible, and marketing driven website. It is now online, www.providenceschools.ca.

In conjunction with the website redesign was promoting the idea that you need to get prospective parents into the building and have them experience the culture of your school. In meeting with the parents the most effective means of communicating during the first meeting is to use the SPIN model. I knew that our success in closing enrollment increased exponentially if we got them through the door. The SPIN technique formalizes the meeting with the family and directs the focus towards the right kinds of questions and conversations. Another kernel was planted. After using this technique during campus visits it has increased our effectiveness to communicate who we are and how we can

partner with families on this journey of Christian education. The harvest is plenty and I am thankful for this tool.

It was also in July that we had sessions with Zach Clark. During the evening reception I was able to chat with Zach and with his friend Phil Cohen from St. Louis. I mentioned my reluctance to sit across from someone and ask them for money. Phil Cohen responded with these wise words, "Do you feel you are doing what God has called you to do?" After my affirmation of that statement he went on to say, "If you really do feel that way then there is no reason to feel apprehension. You are just doing what God wants you to do." The seed was planted. After the session with Zach I created materials, a case for support, for our upcoming campaign for a renovation at the school. Using the materials that I had generated I was able to meet with donors and sit across from them and see how they could partner with us to make the necessary changes at our school. The sessions we had with Zach and the donor panel were integral to the work that was accomplished during the active phase of our campaign. Phase 1 is now complete and we are heading into Phase 2 this summer. I am thankful for what these seeds are producing. I am excited to see what the next steps might look like in this area and what may be in store for me in the area of development work at PCS.

I don't think anyone went in to the sessions at the Van Lunen Center thinking that they were going to develop a project in the area of soul care but I am sure that each person in the fellowship was touched by Dr. Bruce Hekman and his session "Leadership Comes from the Inside". Bruce challenged each of us to create margin in our lives. Creating margin allows us space to deal with the unexpected, the weighty, or heavy things that may arise in our leadership. If we do not have the capacity to give an ounce more than we risk collapse when something comes that requires from us its pound of flesh. Since that seed was planted, it has become a project of mine. The sessions in the desert, the time of rest and renewal, were especially powerful and poignant to me. It inspired me to read the book *The Rest of God*

and take to heart the need for Sabbath rest. That time in Arizona was about renewing margin in my life and sharing these insights with the staff have become a priority of mine so that they have enough margin to pour into their students as well.

The sessions with Bruce and Christine led directly to a staff development day. I booked a retreat center for the staff so we could go offsite and experience something different. We ended up Mount Mary Immaculate Retreat Center. We started the day with a chapel, like we do when we get together as fellows. The next part of the morning we spent looking at how God has uniquely gifted each of the staff members using the strength finder assessment and that piece went over really well. The second half of the day we participated in an Emmaus walk and I presented on the book, *The Rest of God*. The staff had time to engage in silence and solitude and truly experience God's gift of rest. It was an amazing day for our staff and it was inspired by my learning at the Van Lunen Center. As Bruce pointed out in his presentation, "When the shepherd is starving, he or she might start devouring the sheep." Ensuring the staff is fed so the students and community can flourish is part of what we are called to do.

After the sessions in January it was time to take the next step with the Board of Directors. The Van Lunen Center required us to read the book, *The Advantage* by Patrick Lencioni. I challenge the board to read part of the book with me and spend some time identifying the core values of PCS. The seed was planted. The first area to address, from the perspective of the book, was to build a cohesive leadership team. In evaluating the situation at the school, it was more important for us to nail down our core values to help inform our hiring practices. We have hired some amazing people to work at PCS and we are coming to a time where, in the next year or two, we will need to replace two people on the Administrative Council. Two of our veteran teachers are retiring. We had to recognize how we behave and what is important to us to inform our hiring practice to fill the needs of the vacant positions on the Administrative Council. We worked on "How we behave" as an organization. This comes from chapter 2

of the book. I created a presentation for our Board and took them through Board training around strategic thinking and pinpointing our core values. I had engaged the staff in this discussion earlier in the year and we had their input in front of us when we set out to drill down and explore the key characteristics and qualities that could be identified as our core values. After spending a considerable amount of time in discussion we were able to identify the core.

It was one thing to identify what the core values are and it was yet another to put it in language that was not overly wordy, cliché, or boring. In the end I decided to work with one metaphor and develop phrases that would best capture the sentiments expressed by Board and staff. After a few drafts and the assistance of the Administrative Council, we settled on a set of values that have been approved by the Board and will now help inform our practice, our policy, and guide our next steps as an organization. With each statement or phrase there is also an accompanying graphic to help illustrate the concept and give clarity to the core value. This will not only give guidance to our hiring practices but it also informs our strategic planning process as well.

In the end, through the restructuring of our board meetings, we were able to complete and get ready for publishing our strategic plan that will help give direction to the growth and opportunities. As a next step there are a number of other seeds that have planted that will need to be tended over the next few years. We will have a large leadership transition, an additional campaign for more renovations, and working with staff that will include some crucial conversations and some necessary endings. I am thankful for the planting season, the growth, the maturing, the ripening and the harvest that we have experienced through the blessing of the Van Lunen Fellowship. We look forward to many more seasons of God's faithfulness to PCS and many more opportunities to engage the rich learning experiences of the Van Lunen Center.

Documents available upon request:

- Core Values Document
- Strategic Plan
- Case for Support