

**When Good is the Enemy of Great:
Developing a Strategic Planning Process
for a School that is Succeeding**

by

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Background

Saskatoon Christian School (SCS) is a K-12 faith-based school offering Christian instruction in full compliance with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education's Goals of Education and Curriculum Policy.

From humble beginnings in 1983, SCS opened with 33 students and 2 staff, operating a K-8 program out of 3 rooms rented from a local school. Today, 30 years later, SCS has a growing enrollment of over 370 students and 50 staff. It offers a fully accredited K-12 curriculum from modern facilities situated on its 37-acre campus.

SCS has all the hallmarks of a good school. Enrollment continues to grow, with waiting lists in several grades. Staff turnover is virtually non-existent. Academic ranking compared to other schools in the province is high based on standardized testing. Government funding to support operations is relatively secure. But is SCS a great school?

The Challenge

To write his book, *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001), Jim Collins spent five years examining the 40-year performance of 1,435 "good" companies to find out what it took to become a "great" company. The domain for his research was the "for profit" sector so Collins differentiated great companies from good companies based on cumulative stock return performance.

Obviously social sector organizations like schools cannot be measured by some financial return on investment but the concept of good versus great, and the desire to transform from good to great, should be no less important because the stakes are far higher than financial profits. "More than any institution except the family, schools can provide the environment and conditions that foster resiliency in today's youth and tomorrow's adults". (Henderson & Milstein, 2003)

SCS does not exist simply for itself – it exists for a purpose outside itself and that is to be a great school worthy of God's Kingdom. And as much as strategic planning is all about achieving an organization's purpose, defining that purpose is all about governance. The very term "governance" is derived from the Latin root, *gubernare*, which means to steer or pilot (as in a ship). This maritime reference is supported scripturally as James 3:4 (KJV) states: "Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth." For a corporate organization, the responsibility of governance rests solely with its board, hence the term *board of governors*. The International Federation of Accountants defines the term *those charged with governance* as "the person(s) with responsibility for overseeing the strategic direction of the entity and obligations related to the accountability of the entity" and points out it "encompasses the term board of directors". (IFAC)

Returning to the maritime theme, consider the analogy of SCS as a merchant ship. The school is seaworthy, operated by a competent crew, with students as its valuable cargo and their parents as the owners of both the ship and the cargo. Fast and sleek and well managed, everyone familiar with the ship agrees it is a good ship and naturally expects it to deliver the cargo to its intended destination. But even if the ship is well maintained, the cargo well attended, and the crew well trained, without a pilot and a plan the ship may never achieve its purpose (to arrive at its intended destination in the most effective and efficient manner). For it is the pilot who sets the direction and steers the ship in such a way as to best navigate the tides and dangers and seasons between the ship and its destination. By

monitoring the data and interpreting the results, the pilot is able to judge a threat or risk to the vessel, the cargo and the crew. If the intended destination is to be a great school, SCS' future depends on the long-term planning and goal setting that effective governance demands.

To make the transition from good to great, the board must be committed to planning and prepared to establish a culture for change. And therein lies the challenge. SCS is a good school so there is no urgency to make essential organizational change. Despite long-term planning being one of the board's most important fiduciary responsibilities (and the way to maximize its contribution to the school), after 30 years in existence, the board continues to operate SCS without a formal strategic plan. Although the true cost of operating without a plan is difficult to assess, if strategic planning is "a systematic way to manage change and create the best possible future" (Sorkin, Ferris, & Hudak, 1984), imagine the possibilities of what SCS could have accomplished over those three decades if it had operated with an actionable plan designed specifically to achieve its best possible future.

This is a sad but all too common example of when good is the enemy of great. Settling for good creates organizational lethargy and apathy. To help overcome this dysfunctional inertia, management must convince those charged with governance of the value of change and equip them with the necessary tools to manage it.

The Solution

Almost 5 years ago, the SCS board of directors realized it was no longer capable of effectively "managing" the school because of its growth in size and complexity. The board hired an experienced operations manager as executive director to perform this function on their behalf but was slow to make the transition from "management" to "governance". Failing to define the role of the board from that of management made it difficult for the board to stay out of operations which had the unintended consequence of undermining the authority of management.

To help the board distinguish its new role in governance from its previous role in management, the executive director undertook a deliberate and sustained campaign to educate and inform the board on the value of effective governance. The executive director also researched the necessary resources to equip the board to shift from management to governance. After 3 years of extolling the virtues of effective governance and making the necessary resources available, the board evolved from management to governance.

The length of time it took the board to make this shift may seem ridiculous but it serves to highlight a practical challenge endemic to non-profit boards. Turnover is a reality for all boards but the rate of turnover is far higher on non-profit boards. And although some turnover is healthy in terms of securing fresh perspectives, too much turnover interferes with continuity and can undermine longer term board commitments.

In this case, the investment of time and effort was significant but the resulting role definition means both the board and management are better empowered to do their jobs - the first step in the transition from good to great.

The shift to governance has placed a greater emphasis on the strategic leadership role of the board, including the determination of the long-term vision for the school and the creation of goals to achieve that vision. The next step in the good-to-great transition is for the board to develop a strategic plan.

Approaching the issue of strategic planning in the same way as the shift to governance, the executive director researched the planning process and sought advice from several specialists as part of the Van Lunen project. This research which will be used to educate and inform the board on the value of developing a strategic plan as well as the steps necessary and resources available to help the board plan strategically.

Selling the Value: Strategic Planning 101

According to common definition, success is “the accomplishment of a goal or objective”. So, in order to be successful, there must be goals. And, in the context of an organization, those goals should be directly aligned with the organization’s purpose or reason for existence, as defined by its mission and vision and values. In fact, goals should be realistic targets that an organization needs to accomplish to achieve its vision. And, as such, the goals of an organization should be defined by the ownership or, in the case of corporations, by the board of directors entrusted to represent the ownership.

With the goals defined, the likelihood of accomplishing them increases in direct proportion to the effectiveness of the process used to accomplish them. Although a goal can be accomplished without plan, devising one is generally far more effective and efficient. Perhaps this is what Abraham Lincoln intended when he said, “If I had six hours to chop down a tree, I’d spend the first four sharpening the axe.”

The process an organization uses to develop a plan to help accomplish its goals while ensuring congruency with its corporate purpose is referred to as **strategic planning**, “a creative process for identifying and accomplishing the most important actions in view of strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities.” (Sorkin, Ferris, & Hudak, 1984)

This type of long-term planning helps an organization answer 4 questions: Where are we now? Where do we want to go? How do we plan to get there? When do we want to get there? There are many styles and forms of strategic planning but the fundamentals are essentially the same:

- obtain feedback from stakeholders - the people and groups most involved with, or affected by, the existence of the organization;
- analyze the feedback in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT);
- confirm the organization’s purpose (vision, mission and core values);
- identify organizational goals for the near future in light of the SWOT analysis and the organization’s purpose;
- develop/prioritize action plans to achieve goals;
- incorporate monitoring to ensure action plan accomplishment;
- repeat, as necessary.

The desired outcome of the this process is a **strategic plan**, a step-by-step guide to show how an organization will achieve its corporate goals by defining or clarifying the vision (the ideal future state of an organization), mission (how the organization will achieve its vision), critical success factors, strategies and actions for implementation, and a prioritized implementation schedule. A strategic plan offers many benefits, including:

- Effectively identifying and cogently communicating the vision for the school

- Setting direction & priorities congruent with the school’s mission and vision and values
- Creating a common foundation that integrates all school activities into one complementary system
- Simplifying and prioritizing decision-making
- Ensuring all aspects of the school are aligned with its goals

Conversely, an undesirable consequence of not having a strategic plan is management being left to make crucial decisions which can influence the school’s mission and determine its future. Once the board appreciated the value of strategic planning, it recognized the need for a formal planning process tailored to the particular requirements of a Christian school operating in Saskatchewan.

Providing the Resources

The executive director provided the board with information regarding some of the practical considerations involved in the strategic planning process, along with any recommendations.

a) Facilitated or Solo

Although an organization may be capable of creating a strategic plan on its own, the use of a skilled, independent facilitator is highly recommended. A facilitator is uniquely qualified to:

- manage strong opinions and a variety of views
- validate a fair and representative sample of viewpoints
- provide neutral party guidance to encourage participation in difficult but essential discussions
- supplement a lack of internal experience or expertise
- create external motivation for ensuring accountability when monitoring accomplishments

For a Christian school community, the credibility of the planning facilitator in educational leadership and planning development must be complemented by the maturity of their faith. SCS has selected a facilitator who is a “declarative Christian” and not only a licensed teacher but a university professor of both educational administration and public policy. He has a MEd and PhD in educational administration from the University of Saskatchewan as well as a post graduate diploma in Christian Studies from a graduate school of theology and a Doctor of Divinity from a leading bible college and seminary. SCS plans on retaining the facilitator for one year initially with the option of a further 3-year commitment.

b) School Stakeholders

In addition to reinforcing the fundamental reason the school exists, the value of the planning process depends on the genuine consideration of the wishes and desires of those most affected - the school’s stakeholders.

SCS has a corporate responsibility to not only see itself in the context of the membership society for which it operates but also as an integral part of Christian society in Saskatoon and beyond. SCS does not exist in isolation but depends on relationships with students, families, staff, suppliers, donors and partners. When identifying stakeholders, the planning process must consider the significance of the effect of the school from the view of the stakeholder, the importance of the stakeholder group to the school, the risk of getting incomplete information by excluding a group, the opportunity to access new ideas, and any statutory requirements.

c) School Effectiveness Review

To answer strategic questions like “where are we now?” and “where do we want to go?” the board will need to seek input and feedback from the stakeholders of the school. Gathering this information in a systematic way from potentially hundreds of people will be challenging but, thankfully, there is a specialized tool available for this purpose – the school review.

School reviews provide comprehensive SWOT analyses tailored for the school setting. In Saskatchewan, the provincial university hosts a professional leadership development agency with extensive experience performing a specific type of school review called a School Effectiveness Review (SER).

The SER provides comprehensive data on the perceptions of staff, students, parents and other stakeholders concerning the effectiveness of the school in the following areas:

- Responsive Curriculum and Instruction (Academic Emphasis; Instructional Expectations; Resources)
- Caring and Respectful School Environment (Positive Climate; Physical Environment)
- Assessment for Learning (Consistent, Fair and Timely Feedback; Varied and Appropriate Assessment Strategies; Authentic Assessment; Student Achievement Results)
- Adaptive Leadership (Vision and Purpose; Leadership Style; Professional Community)
- Authentic Partnerships (Student, Parent and Community Involvement; School-linked Services)
- Comprehensive Prevention and Early Intervention (Identification processes; Prevention programs and Intervention)

The correlates used in the SER are standardized (based on the provincial Ministry of Education’s school effectiveness and improvement initiatives), but SELU has agreed to supplement the review with local adaptation questions to address a Christian distinctive as well as “positive psychology” questions related to the dimensions of hope, well-being and engagement.

Next Steps

Once the stakeholders and stakeholder groups have been identified, the dialogue can truly begin. Stakeholders will participate in quantitative and qualitative surveys, interviews and focus groups during the SER to ascertain viewpoints from a SWOT perspective. Appropriate stakeholders will be assigned to the strategic leadership and planning teams. And the results of the review as well as the details of the strategic plan will be shared with all stakeholders.

The school effectiveness review will commence in September 2013 with the results available to the school’s leadership within 3 months. The facilitator will incorporate the review results into the ensuing strategic planning process and confirm the vision, mission, and values of the school. This data will then be used to set priorities and goals for the school, with action plans created for each goal. Action plans are broken down into a logical sequence of steps and include the cost to complete so, once finalized, the school will be able to develop an overall implementation schedule and budget. It is this compilation of prioritized action plans that form the school’s overall strategic plan for the next few years.

By introducing the board to *the value of a strategic plan* and *the resources available*, the SCS board is embarking on a formal, long-range planning process for the first time in the school’s history.

Works Cited

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