



Strategic Planning
Doulos Discovery School
Jarabaoca, Dominican Republic

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Background:

Though we are 13 years old as a school, we have struggled to build momentum and reach long terms goals due to the regular turn over of our missionary staff. Upon being hired as the School Director at Doulos Discovery School, I was excited to lead an organization in which I was already so passionately invested. I believed future sustainability was something that required serious attention from the new leader and was one of Doulos' greatest opportunities for growth moving forward.

Being a young director with limited experience, however, I quickly found myself overwhelmed. I struggled to identify what needed to be addressed first. It felt as though I were drinking from a fire hose. Following the transition of the founder and a major turnover in experienced staff, I realized that much of what occurred at the school was based on tradition rather than procedure.

We were struggling to operate with consistency month-to-month and year over year. My uncertainty of where to start was exacerbated by the limited resources we had in place to clarify our framework for making decisions. As I began considering plans for the future, things became increasingly foggy. As a school we needed to be thinking about growth and expansion, but had limited bandwidth in such a tangled day-to-day reality. I longed for clarity as a leader and desperately wanted to provide the same for my staff, but did not know where to begin. What is more, with two boards and a new staff, I felt like there were very few people within the organization who knew the extent of the disorganization or even recognized the need for long term planning.

I repeatedly entered seasons of doubt (of self, staff and feasibility of our school's mission). I constantly questioned if I had what it took to lead Doulos into the next chapter of maturity and sustainability. Even if I was able to pull it off in the short term, I wanted to be more than just "a flash in the pan" for Doulos and longed for lasting organizational change. As a school we needed structure and though I felt confident in my ability to establish it, I worried that is might be lost were I to leave the school in the future.

I was at a crucial point in my life, my leadership, and my ministry. I moved to the Dominican Republic as a missionary with Doulos as a newly married, 25 year-old instructional coach, and within a year I found myself in the position of School Director. I quickly found myself at the end of my rope. I was desperately seeking training, mentorship and the establishment of an educational network to live more deeply into God's vocational calling for my life. Upon hearing about the Van Lunen fellowship, I reached out for help, not only for the future of Doulos, but for my future as a leader. My continuing in the position was highly reliant upon the training and equipping I hoped to receive through the program.

The following is a summary of the experiences and support I received through the Van Lunen Center.

Phase 1: Determining a Focus - *Where do we start?*

Through the Van Lunen program, I began to understand the extent of my role as School Director. Understanding the responsibilities of my position enabled me to clarify a vision for what our school could look like. I became more convinced than ever that as an organization we needed to address several issues simultaneously. Many of these issues, however, were long-term projects and required a multi-year plan to be achieved. It was this realization that led to the decision to create a strategic plan.

Out of all the projects I could select, the strategic plan was the clear choice. It would have the deepest impact, rippling throughout our organization with positive change, enabling us to solve a variety of problems in a systematic way. With the high turnover of a largely missionary staff, I knew that without a strategic plan, many of the goals established in isolation would get lost in the shuffle of transition and the school would not advance. We needed a clear direction, well-defined action steps and multiple layers of accountability that would last despite staff turnover. A strategic plan would provide the structure and clear objectives necessary to usher in new staff while keeping us rooted in our mission and committed to furthering it rather than merely sustaining it year to year. The development of a three to five year plan is an important next step towards organizational clarity and long-term sustainability, allowing us to grow in maturity and impact in the upcoming years.

I did not, however, feel confident in our ability to develop this plan alone. It was then that it became apparent that working with a consultant was the lynchpin for Doulos' success in the strategic planning process. After much prayer and conversation, Jim Marsh joined us as a consultant to guide us through the planning process. He walked alongside us in establishing the collaborative planning process, ensuring the inclusion of a wide variety of goals and ultimately the development of a well-rounded strategic plan that allows Doulos to steward the various opportunities for growth we have moving forward.

Phase 2: Collaborative Planning- *What do we do?*

Jim Marsh served as an incredible resource in the planning process and helped to establish the process we would use. He engaged with us through phone conferences, campus visits and regular email communication.

Jim's first visit was in November of 2015, during which we introduced him to Doulos, our leadership team and local board. He led us in professional development sessions and also directed our first collaborative planning event in which we discussed our dreams, questions, fears and hopes for the future of Doulos. The first event consisted of a variety of stakeholder voices including leadership team members, teachers PreK-12, administrative staff, board members, parents and even Doulos alumni. The energy was palpable as we got together to dream about the future of Doulos and share the ideas we had for advancing the school's vision. Based on these conversations, we combined our thoughts to form five priority areas for growth including board governance, evaluation of our mission, financial sustainability, expansion and staff retention.

Jim then visited in March of 2016, to again meet with our local board members and leadership team and to direct our second collaborative planning event. In the second event, we listed each priority area and asked for ideas and strategies to reach each of the goals. The room was buzzing as so many distinct voices converged to share ideas and perspectives. As a follow up to this strategic planning event I clarified each of the priorities and listed strategies for achieving each of them.

The third collaborative planning event was held in May of 2016 and was a time for me to present the final product of our combined efforts to stakeholders. I shared the strategic plan we developed and we celebrated the things we most enjoyed seeing in the plan. There was also a time to voice any further questions that still existed.

June of 2016 will be the first combined national and international board meeting in the history of Doulos. The board unification process was an initiative that came from this strategic planning process and is already well underway. I am excited to present the strategic plan for approval at this meeting. This plan will serve as a valuable tool for communicating the school's priorities and for holding leadership accountable to meeting the goals outlined within it.

The major priorities for the next three to five years for Doulos are as follows:

1. Strengthen the DDS governance structure and decision-making process.
2. Advance the vision and mission through regular evaluation and collaboration with a network of partners.
3. Ensure financial sustainability through the work of the Development Director and a robust alternative revenue stream.
4. Pursue long-term stability through increased enrollment, campus growth, and development.
5. Recruit, train and retain high quality teachers and administrators.

Phase 3: Impacting the Future- *How did it change us?*

The Van Lunen Center helped me to better articulate what was (and was not) working within my school context. With the involvement of a both an international and a local board, each having hired separate directors, and each with its unique perspective on organizational priorities, to say that things were messy would be an understatement. Van Lunen helped our school shape an understanding of what healthy executive school management could look like. As a result, we are moving forward with positive changes to impact our school community and are better equipped to respond to the evolving needs of the families we serve. In just the span of a year, we are in a radically different place, due in large part to the training and support received through the Van Lunen Center. It would be difficult to imagine where we would be were it not for the guidance we received as a school in general and that I have received as an individual.

Organizational Future:

In launching this project, my desired outcome was a framework from which decisions could be made and the establishment of a shared vision, which would result in intentional and sustainable action. Through the development of a strategic plan, I gained exactly that. Rather than being reliant on a single leader or needing to determine the organizational focus on a year-to-year basis, a strategic plan establishes the structure for accountability and growth for the next five years. As an organization we are becoming more future-minded and better equipped to steward the gifts and opportunities God brings.

Not only does having a five-year plan in place provide leadership with clear direction and measures for accountability, but a variety of stakeholders have had their voice heard and validated throughout the strategic planning process as well. The planning has cultivated a collaborative culture that has inspired our school community. Prior to our planning events, I was not aware that so many others were ready to discuss opportunities for expansion and growth. Parents and staff members are excited for the goals that lie ahead and have demonstrated an increased investment in the school's future initiatives and changes.

Despite the progress, there is much still to be done. For example, we will be launching the board unification process in June and will be holding our first combined meeting to select a new chair and approve guiding documents. We have received the resignation of our Executive Director who will transition out at the end of this school year. Ultimately, I do not believe that God is calling me into the next season with Doulos Discovery School either. I see my role as having served as a stabilizer and a bridge from the past to the future. I have helped to create structures, systems, to clarify the vision and direction of the school, and to empower school and board leadership. Beginning this summer we will begin the hiring process to find a single director to guide Doulos in the realization of the priorities outlined in the strategic plan.

An additional challenge moving forward will be to continue fostering opportunities for connection between Dominicans and Americans. With unique language and cultural barriers this will require a great level of intentionality and care. This will be essential as we continue to shape our school's future and evaluate the progress along the way.

We recognize that no matter the stage of maturity at which we arrive, there will always be challenges to overcome, tensions to manage and problems to solve. Despite the challenges, there is no doubt that our school is more unified and prepared to take them on than ever before. Throughout the year, we have engaged in important conversations, made difficult decisions and are ultimately working towards increased clarity and sustainability as an organization. Not only are we set up for success in the upcoming year, but we have crafted a plan to guide our future actions as well. This plan will serve as a tool for whomever steps into leadership in the next phase of Doulos, ensuring that we remain rooted and grounded in our mission and engage in the regular evaluation and reflection of progress.

Personal Future:

Aside from the significant success this has led to as a school, participation in the Van Lunen Center was transformational for me as a leader as well. I went from feeling in over my head, and as if the weight of the school was mine alone to bear, to having a renewed sense of direction and purpose for my leadership and a shared understanding of our school's future goals. The Van Lunen Center helped me to expand and deepen my understanding of school leadership and education through a distinctly Christian worldview. I truly believe that I would have left Doulos two years earlier (and potentially the field of educational leadership altogether) had it not been for the ongoing support of the Van Lunen Center.

The training, mentorship and encouragement I have received have been a major catalyst for continued perseverance and affirmation of God's call on my life. I have felt empowered to make big, yet needed, changes within my school setting and within my own life, not just professionally, but personally in areas of work/life balance, protecting "the soul of my leadership," increasing margin and rest, and better pastoring my staff, students and families.