

## **The Awesome Grant That Wasn't: What I learned About Necessary Endings**

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Project Title: The Awesome Grant That Wasn't  
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School Background: Bethany Christian Schools serves students in grades 4 through 12 and is owned by the Indiana-Michigan Conference of Mennonite Church USA. Historically the bulk of the students have self-identified as Mennonite, and local congregations support students and the school through tuition subsidies and “soft” recruitment. However over the last two decades or so, Mennonite student enrollment and church support has steadily declined.

The Plan: The Awesome Grant Program is an initiative designed to:

- enhance internal marketing efforts to build a “vibrant” school culture,
- engage young alumni in the school and to develop a habit of philanthropy,
- Help students appreciate and demonstrate creativity and artistic expression<sup>1</sup>

The basic premise of the plan is that a panel of young alumni will partner with the school to create a granting organization to fund student initiatives. The initiatives are designed to help build a vibrant school community by “doing fun stuff, for the sake of fun” and “creating art for the sake of art”<sup>2</sup> This program is part of a larger initiative that includes internal marketing, board training and school wide strategic visioning.

The Beginnings: The original idea for Bethany’s program came from a seed planted by community activist and author Peter Kageyama whom I heard speak at a community event. In his book *Love Where You Live*, Kageyama postulates that vibrant communities are characterized by support for the arts and plenty of recreational or “fun” activities. He further noted that in vibrant communities, a small group of community activists can create change and maintain momentum. The entire time I was listening to Kageyama speak I was thinking these principles also apply to the school community. One of Kageyama’s anecdotes was about a

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<sup>1</sup> “Appreciate and demonstrate creativity and artistic expression” is a component of one of our core values, academic excellence.

<sup>2</sup> From Bethany’s Awesome Grant prospectus purpose statement

grant program that two young entrepreneurs came up with the idea of “awesome grants” as a way to have fun and give back to their community.<sup>3</sup>

Several months later I was visiting in-laws in San Antonio, Texas when I came across an 8 foot metal Bruin<sup>4</sup> for sale at a local shop. My first thought was, I ought to buy that thing and place it in the courtyard at school, that would be awesome. Except, I soon found out that the bear was \$2,400, not a sum that I could hide from my wife! Almost immediately the thought came to my mind that if our school could set up an awesome grant program, we could use that to obtain the bear.

I soon developed a prospectus and ran it by the other administrators and a couple of board members, who I believe supported the idea, and not to merely humor the new guy. Next I approached three alumni who I felt had the proper mix of aptitude and contacts and irreverence to advance the program. Two of the alums enthusiastically agreed but insisted we change the program initiative name from the “Awesome Grant Program” to the “Kick-Ass School Initiative” (KASI). For sure I got the irreverent part right and we slightly reworked the “unofficial” prospectus. (see appendix A). We never officially launched the program so I am still looking for a good name.

The details of the grant program were reworked again after I discussed the program with Van Lunen instructor David Hahn. As it turns out his school was running a remarkably similar initiative for teachers. He kindly shared the Long Island Lutheran “Academic Initiatives Program”

So what happened to the Awesome Grant? I thought I had a great idea, I really did. I was going to get young alumni involved in the school through philanthropic connections with students, creating a habit of giving at the same time as supporting the arts, and enhancing internal marketing efforts to building a vibrant school community that would increase enrollment.

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<sup>3</sup> The original grant has morphed into the Awesome Foundation with chapters in nearly 100 communities. <<http://www.awesomefoundation.org/en>>

<sup>4</sup> Our school mascot is the “Bruin” which is an alternative name for Grizzly Bear.

The short of it is that the Awesome Grant program never really got off the ground. I made contacts with a few young alumni who I thought might be interested in helping launch the program and there was much initial excitement. Then the realities of everyday life happened and the program started to falter. The alumnus that was initially most excited took a new job with the Indiana Democratic Party that required a big time commitment, i.e., the presidential election. The other alumnus started a new business venture.

As the alumni connection to the program started to flounder, I was increasingly losing confidence in the person leading the development office. One of our major barriers in development was summed up by a 2011 alumnus who told me “you need to stop doing fundraising like it’s the 1990’s. I’m not going to respond to fundraising letters by sending a check or filling out a bunch of stuff on the school’s website. I don’t own a checkbook, never will. If I can’t give immediately from my phone, then forget it.” When I related this anecdote to our Development Director, his response was simply “you’re wasting your time trying to get money from millennials, they don’t give.” That response was the prompt that should have led to my first crucial conversation with that individual.

I had already read *Necessary Endings*<sup>5</sup>, though I hadn’t yet read *Crucial Conversations*,<sup>6</sup> so I didn’t realize initially a crucial conversation was happening. For reasons that are somewhat convoluted to relate here, I ended up having a series of crucial conversations centering on job performance that resulted in improvement plans, unmet goals and finally a necessary ending. I found Cloud’s book *Necessary Endings* very helpful, particularly chapter 11. “Having the Conversation: Strategies for Ending Things Well.”<sup>7</sup> All in all it was a good ending, as far as unwanted endings go. I managed to remain empathetic but focused on the end goal. Knowing the individual still has a son at our school and that I would cross paths with him frequently, it was doubly important to leave “an impression and real understanding that you are someone who is kind, honest, and respectful.”<sup>8</sup> Though there may be some initial disappointment and anger, the

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<sup>5</sup> *Necessary Endings: The Employers, Businesses, and Relationships That All of Us Have to Give Up In Order to Move Forward*, by Henry Cloud

<sup>6</sup> *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking when the Stakes are High*, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillian, & Al Swtzler

<sup>7</sup> pp 199-210

<sup>8</sup> *Necessary Endings*, p. 210.

former employee has expressed that he is excited about his new work, and the school is in a better position moving forward.

During the process of ending our working relationship with the Director of Development, I sat down and started listing all the characteristics of the person we would need to hire for Director of Development. Soon I realized that we had the right person on staff in our Enrollment Director. After consulting with a couple of current and former board members, and a couple of key donors with whom I have a close relationship, and several Van Lunen colleagues, I made the decision to reconfigure the administrative team. We created a new position, Director of Advancement that would provide oversight for, alumni and donor relations, fundraising, enrollment, and marketing. The Enrollment Director became Director of Advancement and we added an Advancement Associate and increased the hours of a part-time administrative assistant.

Though I believe that the new Advancement Director is just the right person for the position, there is a learning curve. And, before we hired an associate, there was a period of time when the New Advancement Director was still primarily responsible for enrollment. So we sat down together and tried to prioritize and redistribute tasks. Reading *Necessary Endings* helped me realize that an important part of the process was going to be deciding what we need to eliminate in order to create room for other strategic investments.<sup>9</sup> In the words of my Van Lunen mentor David Hahn, we needed to decide what to “delegate, defer or delete”. We decided to defer the Awesome Grant Program.

Other Vibrant School Community initiatives that are on track: Meanwhile school kept going. In the fall of 2015, the first year of my tenure as head of school, the administrative team and board worked together to assess the health and future direction of the school. We began this process using Independent School Management’s (ISM) stability markers. A notable shortcoming of our school was that we had no long-term strategic vision for land and facilities use.

Of course to create a land and facilities use plan, it is most helpful to have a strategic vision. We embarked on that process in the fall of 2016. Through a series of stakeholder meetings the administration and board identified 14 potential strategic initiatives, some of which would require developing a careful land use plan. (e.g., adding a k-3, updating athletic facilities, building a

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<sup>9</sup> *Necessary Endings* pp 46-50.

performing arts center). This spring we engaged a design company to help us develop the strategic land use plan. We anticipate that process to be finished in early Fall 2017.

Concurrently I am working with the new Director of Advancement to put together a new Comprehensive Campaign fundraising strategy to fund some of the initiatives. The basic structure was borrowed from a presentation at the Maroon Platoon winter meetings. In Scottsdale, David Hahn shared a strategy for rolling annual fund and campaign fundraising together. We believe the new model will help us keep donors engaged and enable us to meet our fundraising “stretch” goals. We are in the process of vetting some of the particulars with key donors. At this time we plan to roll out the new strategy during the 18-19 school year.

Perhaps not surprisingly, one of the most difficult aspects of the strategic visioning process has been to effectively communicate what is happening and why it is happening. I have found Patrick Lencioni’s book *The Advantage*<sup>10</sup> helpfully informative. The rumor mill very quickly amped up, e.g., “I heard we are going to build a soccer stadium”, or “performing arts center”. To communicate clarity we starting sending regular *What’s Up Brief* to staff. This process also helps the administrative team all be on the same page with our communication.

Awesome Grant Postscript: I recently met with a young Bethany alumnus (class of 2013) who graduated from college in 2016 and has been doing development work for Habitat for Humanity. He heard from another alumnus about the (suspended) Awesome Grant program and contacted me with a proposal. He affirmed that it would likely be difficult to run the program strictly with volunteers. He has proposed that we pay someone (him) to institute the program. After a series of conversations, we settled on a plan that may work.

Personal Thanks: I would like to thank all the Van Lunen instructors for their valuable teaching and mentoring and the staff for helping it all come together. I did not list David Hahn as a consultant on my original project proposal, however, David’s advice and counsel has been invaluable.

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<sup>10</sup> The Advantage: Why Organizational Health Trumps Everything Else In Business, Patrick Lencioni