



## WHAT PARENTS REALLY WANT!

MARK VINCENT

Since 2000, Insight Plus has been involved with a market research program conducted in schools throughout Australia and New Zealand. The Community Perceptions Index provides individual schools with definitive feedback on perceptions held by parents, staff and students. Insight Plus is then able to benchmark the findings of the survey against aggregated results achieved in competing and/or comparable schools.

At a recent seminar, organised by Insight Plus, where the focus was on advanced selling and communication skills for Registrars and Directors of Admissions, we revealed, in rank order, the complete list of requirements that parents have of schools. Parents had been asked to rate, on a 10 point scale, the importance of 55 attributes of a school's offering. The results were aggregated from more than 2,500 responses over the past two years.

**The top five attributes parents seek in a school are:**

1. Students feeling safe while at school (9.6)
2. Competence of teaching staff (9.6)
3. Fostering respect for self and others (9.4)
4. Provision of opportunities for students to reach their potential (9.4)
5. Development of self-esteem and confidence (9.3).

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## 20 Problems in strategic planning and how to address them

Over the years, Insight Plus has worked with more than 80 schools, universities and educational organisations. In that time we have observed many problems that relate to strategic planning. Twenty of these problems are outlined below with brief thoughts on how to avoid or overcome them.

**1. Strategic plans and strategic planning can be more of a public relations exercise than a conscious endeavour to adapt to change or to implement change.** The amount of gloss is inversely proportional to the depth of the thinking. Cut out the colour, beef up the content.

**2. Many plans are simply an extension of the school's Mission Statement or Charter.** The purpose of planning is not to articulate what you already do or to document the status quo. Ensure your plan demonstrates how your school will be substantially different and more effective than it is today.

**3. Many plans do not address the future adequately.** At some point the planning group needs to ask *"If we had access to a genie whose predictions are known to be absolutely accurate, what three questions would we most want to ask?"* Build these questions into the planning process.

**4. Often plans fail to provide stretch.** If there's no excitement in a plan there is minimal engagement. A good plan has people saying, *"Yes, that's where we want to get to but we'll never get there by doing what we're doing today"*. In examining your plan, would your stakeholders make a similar comment?

**5. The plan contains relatively little contrast between the school now and in five years time.** We plan because we recognise that change is inevitable and therefore necessary. Prepare a column listing your school's attributes now – enrolments, structure, offering etc. Draw a second column and, based on your plan, list the attributes you expect to see in place in five years time. Minimal contrast means little change is required, so why bother with strategic planning?

**6. Failure to consult adequately or efficiently.** The boldest thinking comes from the least expected quarters. Your students better understand their future than your Board. For students the future is now. Draw on their thinking. Examine your parent list. Ignore names, look for occupations. Build a planning team around the best brains in the parent community – they won't always be found on committees. Capacity for work does not always equate to wisdom.

**7. Too much focus on the planning process rather than implementation.** The excellent execution of an average plan is far preferable to the average execution of an excellent plan. Make your strategic priorities your top agenda items for Board meetings. Track progress.

**8. Lack of discipline in implementation.** Delegate tasks widely. Your plan represents personal growth opportunities for those charged with its implementation. Demand progress reports. Review your plan rigorously at least every semester, preferably every term.

**9. Absence of key priorities.** Too many plans focus on Key Result Areas which are filled with actions – many not critical. Instead, identify the half dozen major priorities (macro, long term, significant impact) and underpin them with appropriate actions.

**10. A focus on 'action outcomes' rather than 'performance outcomes'.** It is all too easy to tick off actions that you implemented (action outcomes). Ask what effect those actions had (performance outcomes). It's not that you 'did it'; it's that you did it and it worked as planned.

## 20 Problems in strategic planning and how to address them (continued)

**11. Scant attention paid to Key Performance Indicators.** What you can measure, you can manage. Identify the half dozen measures critical to success. Focus on them.

**12. Little attention paid to the value proposition.** You can't be all things to all people. There's an old saying, "*You have to be better. If you can't be better, be different, because if you can't be different you can only be cheaper*". Strategy is about establishing a competitive advantage. Constantly ask, "*Where will our point of difference lie five years from now?*"

**13. Failure to cascade the plan down.** Few schools require their faculties or departments to prepare strategic plans drawing on the key thrusts of the 'corporate plan'. Business unit plans are demanded in the commercial world, why not in the education sector too? Planning at departmental level should be mandatory. It also provides a learning opportunity for staff.

**14. Planning Retreats for Board members with little involvement from senior staff.** Planning Retreats for many Boards are often nothing more than a junket – a reward for people who attend a lot of meetings and receive insufficient recognition. The plan should be prepared by a broad management team and then presented to the Board. Not the other way round, as often happens.

**15. Lack of accountabilities and delegation.** Too often where accountabilities are assigned in a plan, they fall to the Principal. Delegation doesn't just make sense from a time management perspective, it is an important part of any individual's personal growth and development. Plans include major projects. Major projects allow for major growth.

**16. Failure to take a long-term perspective.** If 60% of the actions in your plan are scheduled for the next 18 months, you don't have a strategic plan. You have an operational plan. Think long term, even if what you plan changes due to changed circumstances.

**17. Meaningless SWOT analyses.** SWOT analyses (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) are central to strategic planning but most often they are done as an exercise with little linkage to the rest of the plan. For every force, trend, event identified you must ask "*What?*" "*So what?*" "*Now what?*"

**18. Lack of integration between the Strategic Plan and the Master Building Plan.** Too often Master Planning for the campus has little obvious linkage with the Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan must drive the Master Plan – strategy, subjects, staff, structure and the site should be the order of thinking.

**19. Too much detail.** Often plans (if they don't fall into the glossy PR category) run to too many pages. A one-page, poster-size overview is best. No plan should extend beyond ten pages.

**20. The business card test.** Try this test. Have your Board members write what they think is the school's current strategy on the back of a business card. There is an old adage that if you can't write your strategy on the back of a business card, it's probably too complicated. Keep the strategic thrust relatively straightforward.

MARK VINCENT  
& NATASHA ANICH



## Change Management – Key Points

NATASHA ANICH

- ✓ People will respond to change in different ways and need to be coached through it differently.
- ✓ Target the heart – people's need for purpose and direction is emotional, not rational. Communicate change emotionally as well as rationally.
- ✓ Get people involved – people will be much more committed if the change is "their idea." Provide opportunities for involvement.
- ✓ Allow more time than you think you need to communicate your vision and get everyone on board.
- ✓ Develop a "passion statement" – help people to articulate what they really care about for the organisation and discuss how to achieve or maintain these outcomes.
- ✓ Change regularly – the best time to change is when things are going well - people are more confident and secure. Challenge processes and priorities regularly.

## CHANGE – TAKING THE TIGER BY THE TAIL

PETER LENNOX

It is a cliché that the only constant is change. Critics have labelled schools as one of the few remaining bastions of 19th century practices. The reality is that modern schools are exposed to all the forces that impel change and all change affects the people concerned.

My favourite metaphor for organisational change is that it involves a journey with a destination. If change is not to be for the sake of change, forming a picture of the proposed destination is vital. Various planning methodologies, such as futures thinking, scenario planning and envisioning, can help schools to look, and plan, ahead.

It has been reported that in the business world (which has long been more enthusiastic to embrace change than schools) almost two-thirds of all major changes fail to achieve their intended outcomes. Educators would probably reach a similar conclusion regarding the plethora of changes that have been tried in schools during the past generation.

There are many reasons for failed change. Some are rational (e.g. lack of vision, poor communication, inadequate resourcing). The most important are emotional and involve people. Change processes demand that we inspire, gain commitment from and support the people who are affected. People resist change for many reasons – a reluctance to admit the inadequacy of the present, the vested interest that some will have in the existing state of affairs, a genuine fear of the unknown, and the hard work inevitably required to implement and sustain change.

So, what can be done to raise the success rate for change efforts?

Change is about 5 “P”s: Purpose, Point of departure, Planning, Putting a plan into action, and People.

Begin by defining what it is that you want to change and why. Form a vision of the future. Then do several things that are not necessarily linear in sequence. Review and try to understand where things are and where your people are at. This helps in planning the strategy and the specific actions to be used. Any strategy will be unique to the school involved.

Carefully consider the all-important period of transition that will occur once we let go of the present and begin to swim toward the future. Put in place the people who will lead the change effort. Naturally team effort is desirable but you must have a Change Champion and a Change Agent. The Change Champion will almost certainly be the Principal: change efforts not actively championed by the school’s leader are at risk of failure. The Change Agent will more likely not be the Principal, except perhaps in a small school. Communication to all concerned stakeholders is a matter of high priority; provide information, generate feelings of inclusion and recognise efforts to achieve the desired change. Focus on the culture of the organization. A truly collaborative culture will handle change more effectively than a culture in which competitiveness or individualism prevails.

We cannot turn our backs on the need for change, however, change need not be a haphazard process in which chance determines the outcomes. The cautionary point is that before we tug on the tiger’s tail we should inform ourselves of what may lie ahead and plan for what we intend to do when we wake the tiger.



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## Strategic Thinking – Self-Assessment

Using a scale where 5 = Completely true, 4 = Generally true, 3 = Somewhat true, 2 = Only partially true and 1 = Not at all true, rate your school on its capacity for strategic thinking.

1. We systematically gather data to help us understand what is happening around us.
2. We gather data from a range of sources to give us a comprehensive picture of what is happening.
3. Data that is gathered is not left in isolation but interpreted in terms of its implications for our school.
4. At most meetings, some aspect of the school's strategy is discussed; we do not reserve such discussions for annual workshops alone.
5. We seek opinions from across the school and outside it.
6. There are no 'sacred cows' in our school – people can challenge or question any aspect of what we do.
7. The focus of our strategic thinking is on those few things that we will do better than or differently from our competitors.
8. The school's priorities can be distilled down to no more than five key imperatives in any one year. Direction is not lost in detail.
9. If asked to describe our strategy for the next three years, most stakeholders could articulate it in one or two sentences.
10. We consult extensively before developing our vision and strategy.
11. People in our school are motivated and empowered to achieve outcomes
12. The leadership team delegates challenging tasks and uses processes to ensure accountability
13. Members in our team know and use a variety of leadership approaches
14. In our school we regularly review the implementation and achievement of our strategy.
15. The key strategic initiatives are supported by carefully thought-out budget allocations.
16. Our processes for allocating budget to priorities are transparent and fair.
17. Our plan has a financial focus appropriate to the nature of the school.
18. People regularly discuss changes in the school's environment with a view to determining how our strategy needs to change.
19. We are not wed to our plans; if an innovation or initiative emerges we will seize on it, provided it fits broadly with our strategic intent.
20. Change is an issue that is frequently discussed and people are prepared for it.

## Ten tips for producing a more professional looking strategic plan or prospectus

The following tips have been provided by World Wide Online Printing - South Brisbane.

1. Keep the design simple.
2. Use a design-based software package  
- not Microsoft platforms.
3. Do not use solid colours to the edge if the document is to be digitally printed. Always supply a file with bleed and crop marks
4. Keep text away from the edges.
5. Keep all images at 300dpi and avoid metallic colours and gradients where possible.
6. Keep fonts consistent and ensure readability. Supply the fonts you use to the printer
7. Supply the printer with a PDF copy – it is the first test of good design.
8. Thoroughly research all finishing options e.g. binding, before going to print.
9. Never proof the document from a computer screen and have at least two people proof.
10. Involve the printer as early as possible in the process but be patient – allow four days for design and five to seven days for printing. Digital printing does take less time.

*If you would like a **FREE** copy of the booklet '101 Insights into Strategic Thinking' produced by Insight Plus and printed by **World Wide Online Printing - South Brisbane**, please call George Bacic or Paul Anich on **07 3004 7600**. Talk to them about this month's **SPECIAL DEAL** on printing and mailing for all readers of Insights for Educators.*



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