

What is Your Strategic Vision?

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A familiar Biblical Proverb states: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” I would argue that this principle is true for communities and organizations as well. Perish may be too strong a word, but I do think we could say something like, “when a community or organization has no vision, they are prone to stagnate, go nowhere, or decay.” Does your organization have a strategic vision? What about your community?

I have been serving for several years now on the board of directors of a local charter school, the last year and a half as chair. The school has gone through a lot of change in the past several years, and one thing that became painfully clear as a board was that we had no clear vision for the future. We had a mission statement, and beyond that, a strong culture at the school around that mission. But with growth and change came inevitable pain and discomfort, and a sense that we (as a school community) could possibly lose what made the school special if we were not strategic in how we navigated that change.

A lot of folks talked about aspects of the school they did not want to lose, but what was lacking was a vision, a shared image of the school in the future—a destination we wanted to navigate the school toward.

Faced with divergent paths, Alice in Wonderland asked the Cheshire Cat which path she should take. Do you remember how the cat responds? The cat asks, “where do you want to go?” Alice responds: “I don’t know.” “Then it doesn’t matter which path you take.” That question, where do you want to go, is critical! And yet, many organizations and communities don’t have a shared sense of where they want to go.

A community with no vision is like a sailing ship with no destination. That ship may have fine sails and a strong rudder. It might have an able crew and favorable conditions. But if the captain and crew don’t know where they are going—i.e., they have no vision—then the ship can maneuver to stay afloat, but it really isn’t going anywhere; it is just going with the flow, or where the wind decides to take it.

At the school we embarked on a yearlong process of gathering community input and having

community conversations around the vision question. Where do we want to go? What do we want the school to look like five years from now? While much of that vision entailed articulating aspects of the school we didn't want to lose (i.e., part of the desired image of the future was having certain aspects of the school remain in place), we were also able to think about our strengths and the desires of the community to craft an image of the school in the future that could serve as a guide for decision making.

The National Defense University's extensive resource on strategic leadership includes an excellent discussion of strategic vision. Quoting management expert Burt Nanus, the article notes that a vision is "a realistic, credible, attractive future" for an organization or community.

Again, from Nanus, a strategic vision can:

- Attract commitment and energize people.
- Create meaning in workers' [or community members'] lives.
- Establish a standard of excellence.
- Bridge the present and the future.

The article also points out that vision precedes strategic planning. Once a vision is created and shared, that is where strategic planning comes in. The authors state "visioning can be considered as establishing where you want the organization to be in the future; strategic planning determines how to get there from where you are now."

There was a great sense of accomplishment at our school when the strategic vision and goals document was completed. We feel like we've been able to articulate school values and craft a picture (in words) of the kind of school we want to be. It is a shared destination we can work toward. We still have some strategic planning to do now. And there will certainly be unanticipated opportunities and challenges. But with a shared vision, the board, and the broader community, are better equipped to navigate those uncertainties.

So when you think about your community, your organization, or even your team, ask yourself: do we have a strategic vision? A shared vision that gives us all a sense of not only being in the same boat, but a sense that we are all working together toward the same destination? That is a key question to ask. And if the answer is no, then it is time to start having conversations about vision.

This post also appears on the Community and Economic Development blog at <http://ced.sog.unc.edu/what-is-your-strategic-vision/>