Engaging Staff in the Strategic Planning Process by
Changing Approaches and Attitudes
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Abstract
This paper presents a case study of the approach being implemented within the Faculty of Science and Engineering to improve communication of, and engagement in, the annual strategic planning process.

The viability of this approach is assessed, in the context of the strategic planning framework in place at Flinders University, using a model for auditing change presented by Cacioppe (1998), which contends that seven critical factors need to be met if successful change is to be achieved.

Performance against each of these factors is explored sequentially, with reference to a review conducted into how the Faculty was formerly operating to meet its strategic planning obligations, and an examination of how it has now adjusted its processes and communication mechanisms in light of the shortcomings which this review highlighted.

This examination finds that, in the drive to achieve genuine engagement by staff throughout the Faculty, based on acceptance that strategic planning has real value and is not simply “administrivia”, critical elements have been to:

\begin{itemize}
  \item ensure that the content of the Faculty’s strategic plan is relevant, concise and effectively communicated;
  \item enable progress in achieving change to be monitored, evaluated and reinforced;
  \item clearly ascribe responsibility for implementation;
  \item stimulate buy-in by the Faculty’s senior management enabling them to lead change, in particular by demonstrating to staff that effective planning can lead to tangible outcomes which are of value to them.
\end{itemize}

Key words: strategic planning, Flinders University, change management

Background

A famous Cheshire Cat once said “If you don’t know where you are going, how will you know when you get there” Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Unfortunately, whilst senior managers may know where they want to go they do not always communicate this effectively to others in their organisation. Harris suggests that communication in an organisation may not be successful because senior managers come up with the ideas, commit them to paper and call the exercise strategic planning, even though no actions or measures of progress are put in place. Without specific assignments to individuals, due dates and measurable objectives, the plan may be little more than a wish list.

This paper presents a case study of the approach being implemented within the Faculty of Science and Engineering to improve communication of, and engagement, in the annual strategic planning process. The viability of the approach will be assessed using a model for auditing change presented by Cacioppe (1998).

Cacioppe suggests that to achieve successful change seven critical factors need to be in place. The factors are linked, weighted equally, and ordered in sequence beginning with pressure for change and running through to evaluate and improve as the last required step. See Figure 1 below.
Further, Cacioppe argues that if one of the critical factors is missing symptoms of unsuccessful change management will be evident. For example, if there is no pressure for change yet the six remaining factors are in place it is likely that change will not occur; with insufficient stimulus the new process or method will be likely to be ignored.

Context

Flinders University Strategic Planning model is an integrated framework for strategic planning and quality assurance which comprises the following major components:

- A Mission Statement;
- Flinders Strategic Priorities and Future Directions Mark III 2006 – 2010 which identifies strategic directions in the four key areas of Education, Research, International and Community Engagement;
- Key Accountability Measures (KAMs), which enable the University to monitor performance against goals in these four key areas;
- Annual performance reviews including the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors and the heads of the major cost centres, (there are six major cost centres:- four faculties, the library and central administration) in which performance against KAMs is monitored;
- Strategic Overview Action Plans (SOAPs) which are prepared annually to implement the goals and strategies of FSPFD.
- Annual Priority Actions which are the major priorities determined by the Vice-Chancellor, the Deputy Vice-Chancellors for the four key areas and the heads of the major cost centres.
- Annual reporting to Academic Senate and Council on SOAPs and the University’s performance.

An overview of the strategic planning and quality assurance framework is summarised at Appendix 1.

Pressure for Change

In April 2005, in preparation for the 2006 AUQA Audit, the University commissioned a Trial Audit. From the Report of this Trial Audit, the Faculty identified a number of areas that it could consider addressing to ensure it was well prepared for the AUQA Audit. A statement made in the Trial Audit Report that “There is less evidence that evaluation of performance systematically leads to actions for improvement...” was identified as an issue which the Faculty could usefully address through improving the process for development and implementation of annual strategic planning.

A review of the Faculty’s annual strategic planning process was conducted by the Faculty QA Coordinator. This took into account anecdotal information from a range of staff throughout the Faculty which suggested that knowledge of the process was limited. With this in mind, the QA Coordinator then spoke with senior academic and general staff, including Heads of Schools and the Faculty Registrar to gauge their understanding of the process and to seek views from them about the way in which information about the plan was conveyed. During the course of these discussions the following issues were identified;

- delegation of responsibility for implementing actions associated with the strategic priorities and SOAPs was not communicated well nor was it formalised.
- monitoring and review of progress against strategic priorities and actions was not well developed.
• the determination of strategic priorities and actions was top down
• the people closest to the issues were not encouraged to engage

In relation to point 1 above, the University template used to report the Faculty annual strategic priorities and actions, does not require the Faculty to report delegation of actions to individuals, due dates or measurable objectives. The review found that, because these details were not sought by the University, the Faculty had not generally considered these factors either. This also made it difficult for the Faculty to monitor and review progress.

The Faculty had tried to engage staff, but the approach used traditional hierarchical channels and the method of communication was written. Each year the Heads of Schools were sent a Memo seeking comment on the annual SOAP, a document of some 50 pages. This draft SOAP was prepared by senior management, without substantive input from other staff. Primarily, this was to spare other staff from having to commit time to what was viewed as an administrative activity driven by the University, with which the Faculty was obliged to comply.

The review was unable to establish if the memo and draft SOAP were relayed on by the Heads of School to staff in their Schools or if, in some other way, Heads sought the input of others in their School. The review thus had to conclude that, in all likelihood, communication onto staff in each of the Schools was likely to have been patchy at best.

Not surprisingly, little or no feedback was ever received. Whilst the review was unable to identify any one cause for this lack of engagement, it concluded that even Heads of Schools did not consider they needed to provide feedback as the link between developing the SOAP and their involvement in implementation was not clear. Further, the SOAP was seen as an administrative activity, adding no value to their roles, having no worthwhile connection with their “real” work, and thus not relevant to them.

Finally, the lack of engagement of people closest to the issues was clearly evident in the manner in which Education KAMs were responded to. The Course Coordinators, who had a vested interest in these data, generally did not even receive the data nor were they invited to comment. The Heads of Schools prepared responses for the Faculty; one of their major motivations being to spare their staff from what was seen as yet more “administrivia”. This issue will not be explored further, but it is further evidence of impediments in the communication style of senior managers.

Clear Shared Vision

The review recommended the following steps be followed to change the approach to strategic planning, and hence the attitude of staff, in order to improve engagement:

• define the implementation process and identify responsibility, timelines, means of verification and reporting
• develop a streamlined SOAP – the “less is more” principle
• develop a model to enhance engagement with the KAMs and improve the understanding of the link between KAMs and the strategic priorities and SOAP

The Executive Dean’s Advisory Group (EDAG) accepted the review recommendations. We cannot claim that this equated in practice to all of the members of EDAG equally and genuinely sharing the vision for change. However, acceptance by the senior management group in the Faculty was undoubtedly essential in ensuring the access to, and degree of receptiveness from, staff in the Schools that was necessary to begin to build improved levels of engagement.
Capacity for Change

It was proposed to EDAG, and they accepted, that an initial trial of a new approach for delegation and monitoring of actions was needed to gauge its effectiveness before attempting to roll it out to all areas of the Faculty. Two of the Faculty Committees were identified to pilot the new approach: the Research Committee and Teaching and Learning Committee. Each of these two committees covers a key area under the University Strategic Plan: Research and Education.

These committees were also selected because their executive officers, respectively the Faculty Registrar and the Faculty QA Coordinator, had been involved in the review, understood the issues and were committed to changing the approach to strategic planning. They were given responsibility for implementing the trial, tracking and reporting the outcomes.

The trial concluded at the end of 2005. The committees struggled initially to take responsibility for actions related to the strategic plan when, in some instances, these were actions they had neither endorsed nor regarded as relevant. Further, it was a distraction from their normal business and required additional effort.

However, the committees came to recognise, albeit somewhat reluctantly, that if they were to be responsible for actions in future Faculty strategic plans, they might as well become involved in the process by identifying and working to achieve actions they believed to be relevant and worthwhile. The chairs of both committees, with encouragement from the executive officers, helped stimulate this growing acceptance in the way they led and managed committee discussion.

The trial did not change hearts and minds in a single year. However, by the end of this first year there was evidence of a growing recognition within both committees that an improved model for strategic planning at a Faculty level might improve the use of resources and see key priorities being achieved. This was considered to be a sufficient basis for rolling out the new approach more widely.

Actionable First Steps

The first step in rolling out a new approach throughout the Faculty was to determine what the Faculty annual priority actions would be in 2006. The Faculty held a retreat in late 2005, attended by key decision makers in the Faculty and including representation from Faculty academic and general staff. The retreat identified a number of issues and possible actions to address them. From these, four priorities and a small number of key actions were agreed upon.

In terms of where the Faculty needed to head, the priorities were well chosen, in that they were clearly necessary if we were going to succeed in the future, pressing, framed succinctly and, as a result, readily able to be understood by most staff in the Faculty. For example, it is widely known that science faculties in Australia and elsewhere in the developed world are experiencing considerable difficulties in recruiting and retaining students. Selecting a priority and associated actions which aimed to address these problems made sense and related directly to the interests of staff.

The number of actions was much smaller than in previous years and all were contained on a single A4 page of text. There was therefore a significant reduction in the size and scope of the Faculty’s strategic plan. Previously the annual SOAP had exceeded 50 pages. For 2006, the key priorities and associated actions were contained within a single page. The Executive Dean was responsible for leading this substantial reduction, recognising that the Faculty’s ability to communicate its goals was significantly reduced the greater the length of the strategic plan; it followed, too, that it would be easier for individual staff members to understand their roles if the number of actions were refined in this way.

While the Faculty was still required by the University to submit a more detailed SOAP with actions addressing all elements of the University’s FSPFD – about 130 in total – this document was not issued.
widely throughout the Faculty. Instead, the single page document was used to communicate to staff what our key priorities and actions for the year were, and to seek to enlist their engagement in helping the Faculty to achieve those outcomes. And, rather than use just the traditional hierarchical channel of written memo sent to Heads of School and hopefully relayed onto School staff, the single page document was placed prominently on the staff section of the Faculty’s website.

As a second step, responsibility for implementation of actions was clearly assigned to key individuals with decision-making responsibility, principally the Executive Dean, Heads of Schools and Associate Heads of Faculty, some of whom also chaired Faculty or School Committees, and a timeframe for implementation of each action was determined.

The third step saw another change of approach. Whereas in previous years, there had been no systematic monitoring of progress in achieving actions, the Executive Dean now assigned responsibility for tracking of priority actions to the Faculty Board; giving the Board a central strategic planning role commensurate with its responsibilities as the senior decision-making body in the Faculty.

Despite being given this responsibility, it became evident during the first year of implementation that the Faculty Board was not really engaged in the tracking process. Whilst reports on progress were submitted for consideration, the Board provided little or no comment and appeared to see the exercise primarily as one for noting not for active engagement. To a large extent this seems to have been because written reports were provided. A culture had developed within the Board of getting through meetings quickly by minimizing the numbers of items discussed and disposing of written report items as unstarred (ie, not for discussion) matters. For 2007, reports will be provided in person by the person responsible for leading the implementation of a particular priority/action. Consequently, these items will be starred and will afford opportunities for Board members to ask questions and offer suggestions.

**Model the Way**

Cacioppe proposes that senior management should model the way so staff will adopt new approaches. We have seen from the steps outlined above that senior management had been given responsibility for key actions. These senior managers were not necessarily the ones who would implement actions but they did have a significant role in directing working groups, committees or individual staff members to take action. Focusing on only a limited number of highly relevant key priorities and actions, and clearly assigning responsibility, did assist the senior managers to view the exercise as significant and valuable. As a result, they were able and prepared to model the way by genuinely leading staff at all levels to engage more fully in working towards achieving the Faculty strategic priorities.

An example of this was the introduction of a transition program for commencing BSc students. This action was one which would contribute to Priority 1, “Implement activities that will increase enrolment from local and international students and improve attrition rates across the Faculty”. In 2006, the Chair of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) worked closely with teaching staff of the BSc to develop and deliver a transition program for new students. All staff attended the transition activities and were able to see first hand how their input was valued by the students. The 2006 program highlighted some areas for improvement and, with the continued support of the Chair of TLC and input from the Executive Dean and Faculty Registrar, the BSc teaching staff redesigned the program for 2007. We can report that the 2007 program was much more successful and the Faculty is now considering introducing transition programs for all commencing students. By engaging the staff in development and delivery, it became possible for them to see, first hand, the benefits and to have tangible proof that a specific activity in which they were involved could directly contribute to achieving a major priority of the Faculty.

Perhaps, also for the first time, they knew where they were going and could tell when they had got there. Previously a lot of action was promised but, with little sense of clear direction, no-one really knew how it fitted with the priorities of the Faculty.
An approach whereby those responsible for actions would report directly to Faculty Board was not adopted in 2006. Instead the QA Coordinator was charged with seeking advice on progress and collating the information into a reporting template which was submitted to each meeting of Faculty Board. Some information was obtained through regular meetings held with the Executive Dean and Faculty Registrar, other information was sought directly from those responsible. The approach was not ideal and did not lead to a change of staff attitude, as the approach was administrative not engaging.

The changes to strategic planning made by the Faculty in 2006 focused on changing the approach. However, they were not completely successful in changing staff attitudes.

**Reinforce and Solidify Change**

The tracking process, whilst not ideal, did add some value. For the first time it made a concise record of progress against actions readily available to members of the Faculty, in particular senior management.

By the end of 2006, the Faculty was able to clearly identify what had and had not been achieved. It was then evident that, although some progress had been made towards achieving the priorities, there was still some way to go. Further, the external and internal factors which had led to the determination of priorities for 2006 had changed little. Consequently, the Faculty decided it would maintain the same priorities in 2007. A small number of actions were identified, some new and some carried over from 2006. Actions which had been successfully implemented in 2006 were mainstreamed as ongoing operational activities.

Faculty Board’s role in tracking progress will continue in 2007. However, there will be greater emphasis on fostering the Board’s engagement in the process, with Board members being encouraged to comment on progress and provide feedback directly to those responsible for taking action. Consequently, it is proposed that those delegated with responsibility for actions will report directly to Faculty Board. This approach will be trialled and evaluated to see if direct communication rather than written reports generates greater immediacy and interest and, as a result, improves the extent and quality of engagement by the Board.

**Evaluate and Improve**

The final factor which Cacioppe says is critical to any successful change is evaluation and review. In this case it has been an integral part of the approach, with the Faculty undertaking an initial review of current practices back in 2005, which then led to a trial of a new approach and its wider adoption across the Faculty in 2006. As has been noted above there is still some way to go before we could claim success. However, the Faculty now has in place an approach which enables continual evaluation and improvement and which is showing signs that it is achieving changes in attitude of staff at a variety of levels.

There continues to be pressure for change, there is growing evidence that commitment to a shared vision is growing, our capacity for change is stronger, the first steps have been taken and we are modeling the way. A continued commitment to reinforcing and solidifying the change and evaluation and improvement will, we believe, enable us to successfully change the approach, encouraging staff to understand that strategic planning can be a useful tool to map the way and helping them to see where and how they are travelling.

**Bibliography**


Harris, H., Eight Problems with Your Firms Strategic Plan, retrieved from http://www.planning.org/consultant/eightpr.html
Appendix 1

Flinders model for integration of planning and quality assurance