

Strategic Flexibility: The Critical Aspect of School Planning

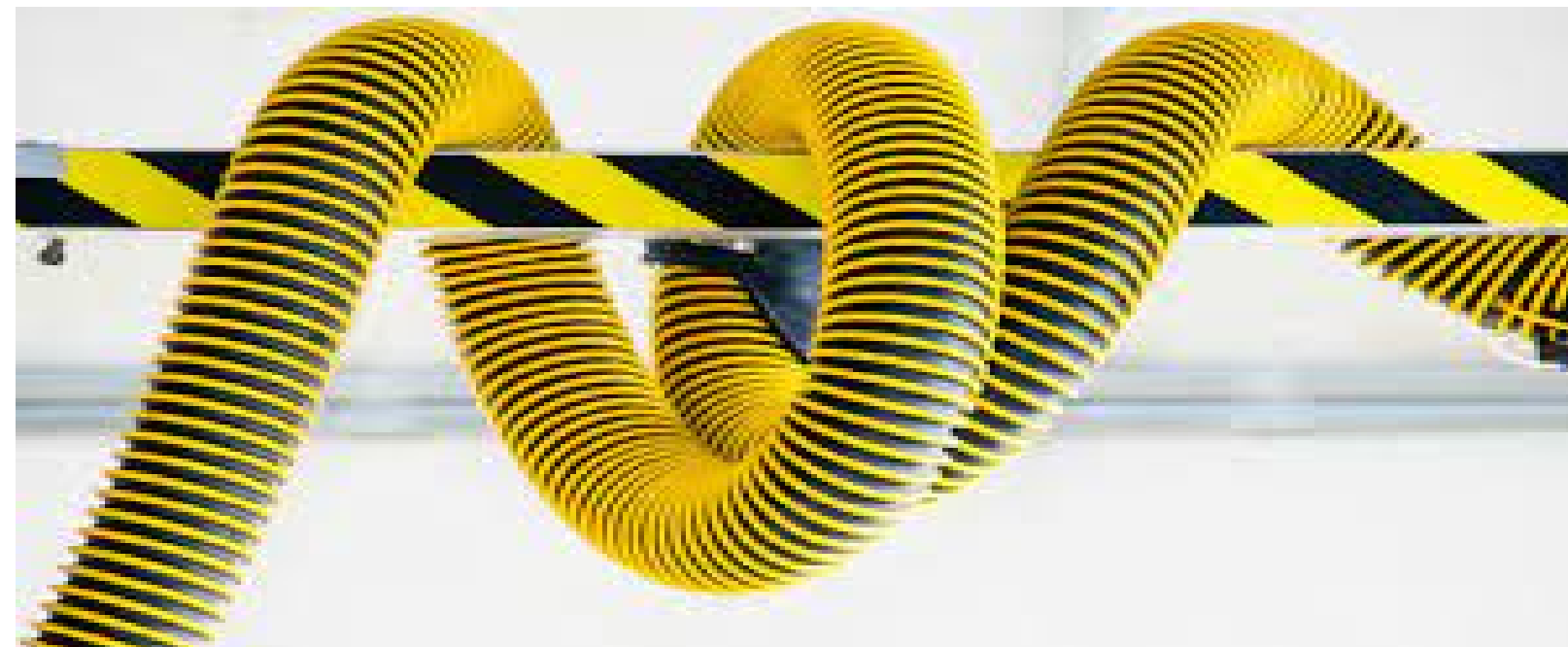
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Being Locked Into a Single Path = Likely Failure

What is Strategic Flexibility?

The strategic flexibility can be defined as a series of well orchestrated reactive and proactive strategic moves for change that leverage the positive aspects of the organization such as core values, culture, competence, brand, and its strategic positioning” (Sushil 2014). In the K-12 educational realm, strategic flexibility can be a challenging proposition. Strategic flexibility

requires striking a balance between not changing enough or changing too much. This is the classic inertia versus progress challenge. Strategic flexibility should not result in a flurry of new directions which can create initiative fatigue and risk losing focus or alienating the organization in the process, but rather, achieve calibrated changes and maneuvers that move the organization forward to achieve the stated goals. In education we often talk about continuous progress and monitoring and in this regard strategic flexibility is the



operationalization of continuous progress monitoring.

Difference Between Strategic Planning and Strategic Flexibility

Strategic planning and strategic flexibility are related concepts in the broader field of strategic management. They are complimentary and refer to different aspects of an organization's approach to achieving its goals.

Strategic planning in education is a structured process through which a district defines its direction and makes decisions on allocating its resources to pursue this direction. It involves setting goals, and allocating resources over a rather long-term time frame. Most school district plans are a somewhat rigid roadmap that outlines specific steps to follow over the course of years.

Strategic Flexibility, in contrast, refers to an organization's ability to adapt and respond to changes in its external environment or internal conditions in real-time.. When a district is flexible It emphasizes the need to be agile and responsive to unforeseen circumstances, allowing for adjustments in strategies as needed. Strategic flexibility recognizes that conditions can change rapidly, and organizations need the ability to modify their plans in the short or medium term.

In practice, organizations often seek a balance between strategic planning and strategic flexibility. Striking the right balance helps ensure that the organization has a clear direction while remaining adaptable to changes in the business environment.

Benefits of Strategic Flexibility

Strategic flexibility is a strong predictor of vitality and sustainability of a school district. This flexibility helps in synergizing the the engagement of all the stakeholder to drive enhanced performance of students and faculty and fosters the long-term growth and vitality of the district.

Only those school districts that are strategically flexible will be able to survive the impacts of environmental uncertainty such as economic upheavals, technological change, and competition for students. The school districts with strategic flexibility are able to adjust their learning and innovation processes and can quickly adapt to the changing environment, which also gives them longevity and and the best student outcomes.



Five Components of Strategic Flexibility

Research by Peeters and Arnst (2020) have identified the five core competencies that any organization must have to be strategically flexible:

Awareness: The ability to identify relevant changes that are happening not only in your educational realm, but in other industries. Emerging technologies such as AI or important trends in other countries may give you an indication of key trends that can affect your district going forward. Adaptive organizations are constantly on the look-out for new relevant information. This concept of awareness also means being able to interpret this new data relative to the need for change and the timing of such changes. Flexible organizations share these key trends within the organization the insights gained about the factors impacting their district.

Experimentation: Flexible school district leverage their awareness to identify new potential opportunities for your organization. Innovation may come from anywhere in the school district, even students, but it is essential to know innovations have the best potential. In education you can refer to the empirical research for guidance but, more often than not, you simply do not know which ideas are best and most effective. This is where experimentation comes in. You don't begin

with massive long-term initiatives that are expensive but with small, time-limited incremental advances. Adaptive and flexible districts engage in this type of experimentation. Each innovation may not be right, but they will seek outcome data as early as possible. The notion here is to “fail fast”, and most importantly, learn from their experiments, so they can improve based on data and feedback.

Partnering: You can increase the odds of success by making sure you have the right skills and expertise on board to explore new innovations. The notion of partnering can be viewed both Internally and externally. Partnering means recognizing that the best skills and expertise you need to explore new opportunities may be limited by the way your district currently organized. Organizational charts, departments and teams have their reasons for existing, but they may not be the best for facilitating the exploration of new innovations. Flexible district do not let their current leadership team structures limit the generation of ideas and access to expertise. The idea is that a strategic team is only as good as the smartest and most creative team member. Great leaders are uncompromising in breaking down the silos and bringing together relevant expertise wherever it may be located inside or outside of the district.

Ambidexterity: From the perspective of strategic flexibility, this refers to the ability to not only explore new opportunities and innovate, but also exploit and leverage the

districts' existing core areas of high performance. Exploration and exploitation can be described as “out-of-the-box” thinking versus maintaining current methods. Ambidexterity can surface many tensions, between traditional and nontraditional management styles and create what is referred to as the “innovators dilemma”. For example, starting a new magnet school can create disruptive innovation and may unsettle one’s own work in education as well as others.

Decisiveness: Finally, being a responsive and flexible school district is reflected in the ability to act decisively. School district leaders are historically afraid of change and risk-averse, often due to stakeholder resistance and lack of political will. Being decisive does not necessarily mean being the first or the fastest to market, but rather, being able to implement decisions when the time is right. For many decisions, getting the timing right for strategic moves can be the difference between success or failure. Adaptive districts aim to match the rhythm of their strategic decision processes with that of the educational market in which they operate. This transforms strategic planning from an periodic or episodic event to an ongoing iterative process. Great leaders seek ways to avoid lengthy decision-making cycles that would slow down innovative initiatives.

Leveraging Technology:

We have found in our work with school districts that most do not have a software platform that

can help drive effective strategic flexibility, but rather, use antiquated methods that makes innovation and timely decision-making difficult. Software systems that are designed to help districts implement the 5 core components of strategic flexibility can greatly enhance the probabilities of success for students and faculty. Through the use of these types of systems districts can improve:

- Accountability for all stakeholders to achieving goals and objectives
- Tracking of completion of tasks and activities
- Creation, tracking and analysis all experimentations
- Consistency of activities across the entire organization
- Visibility of progress for all initiative and objective
- Rapid decision-making
- Efficiency and accuracy
- Meeting effectiveness

Conclusion:

Research by Peeters and Arnst (2020) found that organizations struggle most with the timing of their strategic decisions and actions to match the speed of change in their educational market. In an educational world in constant flux, school districts must be able to deal with emerging threats as well as shape and seize new opportunities. Building such strategic flexibility requires that they strive to develop a system of the 5 flexible capabilities

with the support of specially designed software systems.

References

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Contact: Dr. Balow at Voyager Education to learn more about the “**Beacon**” software platform which is design expressly for K-12 education strategic planning.

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