

Strategic Planning as Partnership Building: Engaging the Voice of the Community

A new perspective on strategic planning,

by

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Strategic planning is the process by which an organization establishes specific goals and priorities for pursuing its mission in the context of its current and anticipated environment. Typically strategic planning is an activity of senior managers.

An alternative view of strategic planning is as much about the process of creating the plan as in the ultimate content.

While formal analyses of market dynamics, financial performance and operations continue to be essential, they are not sufficient. AI brings in the perspective of human stories, qualitative data about the lived experience of working with or in the organization, and aligns the motivation and aspirations of individuals with the trajectory and needs of the organization.

A case study

This case study is about a newly-formed integrated health system. This process successfully combined Appreciative Inquiry, scenario-based planning (1) and the other more traditional elements of strategic planning.

The setting

For the past four years, Northern Berkshire Health Systems in northwestern Massachusetts has been reshaping itself to move beyond the provision of "sick-care" to adopt a population-based approach to improving the health of the entire community in its geographic area.

This initiative included the vertical integration of existing healthcare institutions including an acute care hospital, a home-care agency and its hospices, and a local skilled nursing facility and retirement community to form NBHS.

An additional outcome is the formation of a community health foundation to access philanthropy to support communi-

ty health initiatives not financed by the health care payment system.

Strengthening relationships

As NBHS prepared for its first cycle of strategic planning as an integrated system, it brought the community directly into the planning process as a full partner. NBHS also wanted to strengthen relationships between the various stakeholder groups.

The strategic planning process

Five components make up the process. Community interviews, an analysis of market and utilization trends, an analysis of key clinical programs, a facilities plan and a scenario-based assessment of NBHS's future environment.

We made extensive use of individual interviews, small group dialogue and personal reflection to bring forth the voice of each participant and to foster the creative synthesis of diverse viewpoints.

Community interviews

Their purpose was to gather and learn from stories of successful experiences within the organization to identify its core life-giving factors; to create a dream for the future and to design the organization in a way that would be congruent with that dream.

Stakeholder groups and volunteers

Hospital patients, senior living center residents, public service agencies, religious groups, local businesses, insurers, NBHS employees, members of the NBHS governance structure, consumer advocates, physicians, nurses, and other health care providers) were invited to participate on the Stakeholder Interviewing Team.

Nineteen volunteers came to the first

meeting; 18 stayed with the project to its conclusion, collectively donating over 1200 hours of their time.

Three workshops for the Stakeholder Interview Team

Meeting 1: Introduction to the purpose and plan for the project, gain familiarity with AI and determine which themes to include in the community interviews.

Meeting 2: Learning how to conduct appreciative interviews.

At first they were sceptical about AI and its focus on instances of success. However, that changed through their own experience with the interviews. In a month, team members interviewed 5-10 community members each, a total of 136 interviews. The interviews lasted an hour or more, plus another 1-2 hours per interview for documentation.

Meeting 3: Analysis of the data. Using a qualitative research strategy called narrative analysis, the team members abstracted themes from all 136 interviews. (2)

The team found several overarching themes representing the core of what is most life giving when NBHS is at its best. From these themes the interviewers created three "Compelling Images" of the future of local healthcare. They are:

1) Caring relationships based on compassion, deep listening and mutual understanding.

2) Partnering to achieve the greatest good for patients, their families, and the entire local community.

3) Full spectrum excellence, providing access to and individualized coordination of services across the spectrum - from self-care programs to locally provided

professional services to specialized services at regional medical centers.

Traditional planning activities

At the same time, several other groups were undertaking studies of the type more traditionally associated with strategic planning. These activities included assembling data on market share, utilization rates and financial performance at NBHS; reviewing the state of the existing facility and perceptions of its strengths and limitations; studying several core clinical services that had not been meeting performance expectations and, finally, conducting a half-day exercise in scenario building.

Putting the pieces together

Five months later, members of the workgroups and the Board of Directors met for 2 days to review and integrate the information from each of the various components.

The retreat was designed to allow Board Members to develop a deep understanding of the work that was being passed on to them and give workgroup members confidence that their work was understood and would have a meaningful influence on the strategic plan. It was also important to give all participants a sense of the "big picture."

The retreat program steps

1. A presentation of the Compelling Images in the form of a skit - a mock living room conversation between community members.
2. This was followed by more traditional presentations of the other types of data.
3. Small group dialogue followed to explore the relationship between the data and the Compelling Images. Each small group had Board members and workgroup participants. They discovered that the stories and the quantitative data

informed one another powerfully - for example, the themes of caring, partnership and excellence shed light on the likely causes of certain market share trends and suggested potential responses.

4. Future scenarios encouraged discussion on how the three Compelling Images might guide organizational strategy.

5. A brainstorming exercise produced 15 specific action steps, based on the Compelling Images, for the board to consider.

6. The senior managers of NBHS subsequently consolidated these 15 steps into five initiatives; three of these were presented and approved at the very next Board meeting.

New relationships and appreciations

As a result of the retreat, a variety of unanticipated new relationships were established and continued after the retreat was over.

- Many people said their perspective had been broadened by the chance to discuss such a diverse mix of information.
- Qualitatively-oriented people expressed new appreciation for the power and importance of numbers; surmounting their initial skepticism
- Quantitatively - oriented people discovered a sense of direction, purpose and moral urgency in the community's stories.

The comments also reveal that not everyone was comfortable with the format or found the retreat worthwhile, although most did.

Enthusiasm for the plan

The strategic plan, the Compelling Images and several of the stories from which they arose were presented throughout the community and received a very enthusiastic response, including favorable newspaper coverage.

It was particularly symbolic and meaningful to community members that

the plan was based on their own stories, and that the interviews had been conducted by their own peers rather than by outside professionals.

In implementing a strategic plan based explicitly on themes voiced by the community, the Board of NBHS communicated powerfully its intention to listen deeply to its community and to work in partnership.

Benefits of a multi-method approach

The multi-method approach to strategic planning used by NBHS engaged and integrated many voices. Diverse elements were successfully woven together: stories and values with numbers and trend analyses. We can identify three important benefits from this process.

1. Understanding more deeply

For those familiar with the "heart" of the community stories it provided the rigor of numbers to underscore the importance of these themes.

For those familiar with the numbers, it enlarged understanding of the story behind the numbers; knowing what mattered to the community prompted new insights about how to address problematic trends that the numbers portrayed.

Board members understood more deeply the information presented to them than if they had received written reports.

Members of the working group felt more confident that they had been heard and understood, and that their efforts mattered.

2. Wiser and more creative

The organization's capacity to be creative and wise was enhanced by the greater diversity of both participants and kinds of information that were included in the strategic planning process. The strategic plan that emerged from the participatory process at NBHS was unlike anything the board would have created on its own.



A happy conclusion: members of the NBHS Board, the Stakeholder Interview team and the other strategic planning workgroups shortly after their successful and enlightening integration of qualitative and quantitative data.

3. Changed Dynamics

The dynamics of the relationship between the health system and its community was changed. NBHS enhanced the community's sense of its own capacity, by basing its strategic plan on the themes that emerged from the community, and by having the community members themselves conduct the interviews and perform the analysis, rather than using outside professionals.

Two challenges

There were two main challenges in implementing this new participatory approach to strategic planning.

Firstly, to encourage the board to engage the community in a process that had previously been the board's province exclusively.

It was the board members' own experience of the retreat that won them over - the power of the stories, the illuminating insights that resulted from the juxtaposition of stories and quantitative data, and the sense of shared commitment and passion that emerged as members of the community, staff, and board joined together to hear and understand one another.

Secondly, to help both the Stakeholder Interviewing Team and the board make the shift from a problem-solving orientation to an appreciative stance.

Again, it was their own experience of the connection, creativity and commitment unleashed by the community's stories of success that convinced them.

Summary

In summary, the strategic planning

process at NBHS demonstrated how health systems and other service organizations can engage their communities in meaningful dialogue about their own vision for care.

It showed the potential of a multi-method approach to strategic planning to create a robust plan; mobilize creativity, enthusiasm, and commitment; and create alignment across diverse stakeholder groups.

Taken as a whole, it is an inspiring example of both risk taking and a commitment to radical partnership on the part of a health system, its administrators and its board. We believe that partnership of this scope and intensity can help health-care organizations find their way out of these troubled times, and that nothing less will do.

References

- (1) Schwartz P. *The art of the long view*. New York: Currency; 1996.
- (2) Reissman CK. *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park: Sage; 1993.