

## **Strategies for Tough Times: Planning, Acquiring Resources, Reorganizing, and Maintaining Morale**

Boudreaux, Jane, Joan Exline, Michael Forster, and Patricia Sims. "Strategies for Tough Times: Planning, Acquiring Resources, Reorganizing, and Maintaining Morale." *The Department Chair* 14, no. 2 (fall 2003): 3-5. Reprinted with permission from [Anker Publishing, Inc.](#)

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### **PLANNING**

Planning in the midst of financial crisis seems downright silly. Uncertainty encourages caution and a tendency to tread water until "things clear up" and predictable patterns emerge. Yet failure to plan during tough times only contributes to a self-defeating, reactive mindset.

A planning process engages faculty and staff in a collective, vision-centered method of establishing priorities and marshaling resources to achieve objectives. No plan will ensure control, of course. But a plan can minimize the turbulence and reduce the risk of damage by forces outside our control. At the very least, planning will increase the probability that when opportunities arise they can be exploited. And when threats emerge, the capacity to respond will be greater—quicker, keener, more effective.

The rudiments of strategic planning are well known. Virtually any sound approach will include a recipe something like the following:

- Σ Envision the benefits or results desired from planning.
  - Σ Ensure leadership support for the process.
  - Σ Form a strategic planning group.
  - Σ Analyze the current situation (a popular approach is SWOT, examining the unit's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats).
  - Σ Craft a vision statement for the planning unit (program, department, college).
  - Σ Revise the mission statement of the unit to coincide with the vision.
  - Σ Identify critical issues facing the unit.
  - Σ Develop an action plan relevant to each critical issue, complete with goals in the three- to five-year range, implementation activities for the first year, and assigned responsibilities for specific actions.
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- Σ Monitor implementation of the plan on a sustained basis (at least quarterly).
- Σ Update the plan annually in light of learning and changed circumstances.

Of course, knowing the steps and doing the steps are two different things. Faithfully pursuing a planning process in tough times is tough indeed. Barriers and limitations seem to outnumber opportunities and resources. Yet usually some choice exists even in the most constrained circumstances. Planning can help to expand choice and self-direction. The pace of change in higher education shows no signs of abating, nor do the severe financial challenges.

## **ACQUIRING RESOURCES**

With or without budget cuts, there is never "enough." When funding allocations are fixed, a unit has no choice but to self-generate money from alternative sources.

The Center for Community Health at The University of Southern Mississippi focused first on increasing grant applications, building benchmarks into annual performance reviews, and tapping the departmental share of external grant "indirects" to create an incentive pool for principal investigators.

The center next plugged into its growing alumni base. A fund appeal distinct from the university's efforts was initiated, and an alumni listserv was developed to cultivate and sustain closer relationships with graduates. A new annual public health symposium focused on issues of interest and concern to alumni and spurred development of the alumni association.

The most innovative resource strategy, however, is the Center for Applied Research and Evaluation (CARE), which operates under a college umbrella outside many of the university's restrictions on departmental entrepreneurship. CARE's evolving line of fee-based projects and products include strategic and program planning; market research for health care providers, state agencies, and individuals; evaluation of programs and services; and training. In a real sense, CARE can reap what it sows, depending on the amount of effort invested by participating faculty.

What factors are likely to minimize risks and increase the probability of entrepreneurial success? It's smart to examine and consider adapting what others are already doing to generate funds. It certainly helps to embrace a business plan mentality, developing a crisp proposal for any venture. It's also important to identify significant stakeholders in a project—who stands to win or lose, both inside and outside the university. Leadership should keep a constant "scanning" eye on the internal and external

environments and stand ready to move quickly when opportunity knocks. Capping everything is the contribution of a genuine team approach to new revenue generation: New ideas emerge more rapidly when partnership and teamwork prevail.

## **REORGANIZING**

Tough times inspire reorganization schemes galore. However, some schemes generate more heat than light, too many have a downright adverse impact, and the vast majority are ephemeral. Only a rare few make lasting change and contribute simultaneously to the unit mission and the bottom line. How can we separate the reorganizational wheat from chaff here?

A critical first concept is that of "systems." The salient characteristics of any system are that a significant change in any one part of the system will reverberate throughout the system as a whole, that the whole is greater than the sum of its component parts and includes all the interactions within the system, and that successful change involves change in the interactive patterns of the system.

Other important concepts are "first order" and "second order" change. The former involves adjustments that leave the system structure fundamentally intact, however dramatic the change may appear on the surface. Second order change, by contrast, involves new learning and new patterns of interaction among system components; it is qualitatively different and fundamentally transforms the structure of the system so that it will, in the future, continue to behave differently.

Making second order, transformative change requires setting specific goals for change, framed in specific ways. It is usually tempting to frame goals in terms of "problems"—we must fix this, eliminate that, and so on. But positive and results-oriented "solution" frames—we want to realize this specific outcome—are usually more effective in stimulating the energy and commitment needed for successful change. A positive frame will create feelings of enthusiasm and empowerment.

Making transformative change also involves, inevitably, dealing with resistance to change. How can a unit leader minimize resistance and create receptivity to the change process? Several strategies may be useful. First, inclusion and maximum engagement of stakeholders in decision-making will help build support for change. Training of leaders in skills of personnel management—notably team building and conflict management—can also be valuable tools, along with articulating clear expectations of the various players in the change process, linking change efforts to the unit mission, and recognizing and rewarding faculty who embrace the change process.

## **MAINTAINING MORALE**

Sustaining morale and productive team dynamics within an academic unit is always important, but never more so than during tough times. What basic guidelines should chairs follow in this area?

Most important is to keep the unit mission in focus. Mission goes to the roots of motivation for most employees. For faculty members and staff alike, the mission can ensure the emotional bond between the individual and the work. Focusing on mission may be easier in some disciplines than others, to be sure. Professional programs with strong service missions, for example, may feel less constrained by the university system than more purely academic programs.

At the same time, it's smart to pare down the unit plan when times are tough—to focus, reduce, and concentrate. A plethora of grand goals in the face of inadequate resources is a recipe for institutional ennui. Morale will pick up to the extent that real progress can be made toward limited, realistic goals.

Resource decline is almost invariably damaging to morale. But a leader able to preserve the budgetary core—the minimum needed to carry out the mission, the basic work of the unit—can hope to contain the damage and ensure good spirits for the duration of the trial. The leader's ability to discern one from the other—knowing what is at stake with each budgetary reduction, and knowing where to draw the line in the sand with axe-wielding executive administrators—is vital to morale.

Attitude is important. The morale-focused leader is no Pollyanna, but will tune into the feelings of faculty and staff. Yet the good leader will not wallow in suffering. Morale-boosting leaders will be constantly on the alert for good news—a favorable administrative decision, a new grant won, a donation from an alumnus—and quick to report and celebrate it.

Morale-oriented leaders will also seize the opportunity to reassess strengths and weaknesses of the unit. Few times are better than hard times to make a brutally honest assessment of what is and what is not working well and to initiate desirable change. It is corrosive of morale in the extreme to ignore significant and long-standing problems, especially when resource costs are involved. But removing a thorn in the collective side will likely prove a substantial boon to morale.

Finally, it is important for the chair to promote teamwork and civil behavior. The ideal is open communication and fluid cooperation. Conflict resolution skills are a must. Equally valuable can be engagement of faculty and staff in collective problem solving, which promotes group cohesion and deepens the sense of shared responsibility. Basic behavioral methods, too, can be a powerful tool to reinforce desired norms. The chair can exploit opportunities to publicly praise cooperative behavior and challenge the uncivil, disruptive behavior of unit curmudgeons.

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