Conflict and Strategic Planning: A Higher Education Dilemma

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As is true in most organizations, conflict is not absent in the higher education environment and certainly is not absent in our associate degree granting institutions. On the contrary, "as in the case with all complex organizations, educational systems manufacture the ingredients of conflict and stress" (Hanson, 2003, p.251). Several years ago, I conducted research into this area of higher education, today, more than ever, it is imperative to understand the link between strategic planning and conflict. The purpose of this paper is to share how the presence of conflict affects the strategic planning processes performed by respective administrators in higher education and specifically how functional and dysfunctional conflict affect their key decision making processes.

Dominant to higher education, its functionality, and its accreditation, is the strategic planning process. This practice, loaded with controversy and often individual agenda, can and will generate conflict. However, foundational to higher education is the creation of an atmosphere in which diversity of opinion is prevalent and appropriate. Through this diversity is the overwhelming temptation for argumentation. Conflict of ideologies, theories, and perspectives are certainly a vital portion of higher education; however, when the line between academic incongruity is crossed and the participants enter into personal assault, conflict becomes increasingly dysfunctional and counterproductive (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Socci, 2002).

Complexity exists when the administrator is faced with a tactical decision to be made, and yet faces conflict without a clear, concise, and complete understanding of the functionality and/or dysfunctionality of that contradictory process.

There are several conclusions that were made based on this research in regards to the perceptions of administrators regarding conflict and strategic planning. First, **conflict is inevitable in strategic planning**. Secondly, **functional conflict aides in the strategic planning process**. Finally, **dysfunctional conflict has the potential of destroying effective strategic planning processes**.

This study focused on the *attitudes and beliefs* that current academic leaders had regarding the strategic planning process and their perceptions of how conflict affected the process. There existed one primary objective to this study and two guiding questions. Through the exploration of the perceptions of administrators regarding conflict the strategic planning process, perhaps higher education administrators can begin to glean understanding of the effects this conflict has on the planning, the communication of, and the implementation of a strategic plan.

1. **How does the individual educational administrator in charge of an institutional strategic plan perceive conflict affects their processes?**
2. **How do these same administrators address conflict when it arises at their institutions?**

This study utilized a naturalistic and qualitative design. Due to the nature of this investigation, it was determined that the best fit would be a naturalistic paradigm and specifically an exploratory case study (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, pp.229-231). Focused in-depth, phenomenological interviews took place between the researcher and those individuals actively involved in the strategic planning process.

Transferability is the ability for research findings derived from qualitative research to be generalized to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was established through "thick description" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.316). It is the responsibility of the researcher to provide a "data base" that enables future "appliers" the possibility of transferring judgments associated with the study. Therefore even though the research was conducted at four year institutions the findings relate effectively to all areas of higher education.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn based on the findings of this study related to conflict and its effects on strategic planning.

First, **conflict is inevitable** (Lulof & Cahn, 2000). In the attempt to "cease our efforts to find perfect people and learn how to manage conflict" one is quickly faced with the realization that conflict will occur:

> …whenever perceived or real interests collide. The collision can result from a divergence in organizational goals, personal ambitions, group loyalties, departmental budget demands on scarce resources, ethnic expectations and demands, and so forth. Conflict, therefore, comes from a multitude of sources and is found at personal and organizational levels (Hanson, 2003, p. 253).

Given this perception and the participants' confirmation of the inevitability of conflict, the conclusion becomes animated and one realizes quickly that conflict should occur during strategic planning. Each participant concluded that, due to the very nature of strategic planning, conflict will occur when institutional members are vested in the planning process and outcomes. They established that with the existence of limited resources, the need for innovative direction in institutions, and the changing dynamics of the university, strategic planning is taking on a greater importance and this context will lend itself to increased levels of conflict. Likewise, with the application of for-profit approaches to management of higher education, the strategic planning process has become an integral part of the skill set for leaders in higher education.

Second, the participant's responses to the interview questions about the conditions for a successful strategic planning process yielded **three themes**: 1) an organized process; 2) transparent and open communication; and 3) non-punitive responses to conflict. The participants viewed these conditions were viewed as the requisite for a successful strategic planning process.

*Third, **functional conflict***, also called cognitive conflict (Amason & Schweiger, 1994), is well defined as conflict centered on a precise task or tasks. Its principal emphasis incorporates the way in which the task is to be achieved rather than the task itself (Brehman, 1976; Cosier & Rose, 1977; Jehn, 1992; Priem & Price, 1991; Reicken, 1952; Torrance, 1957). For reemphasis, three themes pertaining to functional conflict arose in this investigation: 1) supportive vocabulary; 2) clear, concise direction, and 3) collaboration. All participants understood the

importance of conflict in the strategic planning process. They all agreed that functional conflict contributes to a more productive strategic planning process and outcome. The participants shared the important role that creativity played in the planning process, and their experience that creativity could be generated from conflict. They also understood that functional conflict causes individuals to question each other in a productive manner to enhance the quality of the plan, sharpening the perspectives of individuals as well as the planning community to move forward to a genuinely *strategic* plan.

Fourth, **dysfunctional conflict can harm the strategic planning process** and outcome. *Dysfunctional conflict* follows an emotional course in that the conflict focuses on party differences rather than the task (Brehman, 1976; Cosier & Rose, 1977; Jehn, 1992; Priem & Price, 1991; Riecken, 1952; Torrance, 1957). Amason and Schweigner (1994) label this form of conflict as *affective* (emotional or sentimental).

The three themes that contributed to dysfunctional conflict were: 1) **punitive vocabulary** or communication; 2) the **fear of the unknown**; and 3) **aggressive personalities**. Each participant acknowledged from the beginning of the planning process the prospect of and complexity associated with dysfunctional conflict. They led processes and communicated in ways that were intended to diffuse the three attributes of dysfunctional conflict cited above.
This conscious awareness of the role and characteristics of dysfunctional conflict positioned the participants to avoid or transform it to functional conflict. Lulof and Cahn (2000) depict this as an important leadership role since the administrator with tendencies to avoid conflict will often find themselves in the middle of dysfunctional conflict. The narratives provided by the participants in this study demonstrated rich approaches to fostering collaborative and communicative leadership as a way to move through dysfunctional conflict and produce functional conflict which enhanced the planning process.

The findings of this study have several implications for research in higher education and the effects of conflict on strategic planning. Socci (2001) attempted to make connections between strategic planning and conflict affects utilizing quantitative research methods. Similar to Socci (2001), this study found that the participants were **cognizant of the existence of functional and dysfunctional forms of conflict**. Socci (2001) suggested that leaders be aware of conflict in general; however, I recommend that awareness be intentionally developed to a higher level of skill. It is necessary for higher education leaders to be aware of both functional and dysfunctional conflict, the effects of both kinds of conflicts, and how to manage and control the impact and costs associated with each (Slaikeu & Hasson, 1998). Furthermore, this study suggests that institutions should invest in their leaders do develop skills in recognizing as well as and managing functional and dysfunctional conflict.

Socci (2001) suggested that administrators investigate conflict in general and foster training in negotiation and mediation skills. These skills would require leaders to learn to examine various perspectives on an issue and methods to build collaboration around solving conflicts. The findings of the study also suggest that leaders acquire and practice skills that transform dysfunctional conflict to functional conflict. For strategic planning to be mosteffective, it is imperative that the higher education leaders recognize and support functional conflict, and minimize dysfunctional conflict. To accomplish this end of recognizing and minimizing the harmful impact of dysfunctional conflict, leaders must make the strategic planning process a high

priority. They must stay actively and directly involved in the process (Carr, Hard, and Trahant, 1996).

The second implication is that higher education leaders in charge of strategic planning must **create an environment conducive to, open and free communication**. Communication is a process that is mutual and reciprocal, it does not occur until feedback takes place. So, the academic leader should balance open, free communication with focus and direction. Each communication that occurs should move frontward in a focused direction. Leadership, like strategic planning, is about setting vision, mission, and goals (Hackmann & Johnson, 2000). The leader should model communication that focuses on constructive issues and encourages positive vocabulary. The participants in this study acknowledge that by promoting open communication, planning conversations may develop in unexpected directions and identify important but previously unstated values. The strategic planning leader has the opportunity to orchestrate these many voices and views around the common good of a large community - students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, and others. Smith (2006) suggests that the key to academic administrative leadership is to be able to see beyond the present, to reach beyond the current, and see the overarching subject matters - to view the process from a global perspective. Thus, strategic planning leaders should create an environment of open communication, which will foster conflict, but keep the view of the institutional community on the larger goal of strategic improvement. From this perspective, fostering open and free communication results in a more thoroughly considered and higher quality strategic plan.

Finally, the administrator must recognize **dysfunctional conflict and take steps to change it to a constructive, functional conflict.** The study participants understood the inevitability of conflict; in fact, all participants accepted and planned for conflict to be a necessary part of the process. However, they were unanimous in their belief that the functional conflict produced a better planning process and outcome. So the goal of the higher education leader is to encourage all involved in planning to take the road toward functional conflict and away from dysfunctional. This can be accomplished by an organized process that establishes ground rules for healthy communication practices. The higher education leader should establish expectations for the nature of communication, moving those involved from communications that involve personal attacks and focusing on productive conversations that move the planning process forward. Open and transparent communications is one method to diminish dysfunctional conflict while keeping all members of the community involved in the process. In contrast to the top-down planning process in for-profit environments, higher education communities expect involvement in all stages of the planning process. The change process is supported by open communications and broad participation (Carr, Hard, Trahant, 1996). Therefore, leaders should plan to make strategic planning a high priority, involve the entire institutional community, and expect, recognize and manage conflict.

Two recommendations are offered as a result of this study. The first recommendation is for **further research in the area of functional conflict** and its positive effects on the strategic planning process. Greater understanding of the dynamics and complexities of functional conflict in the strategic planning process would be beneficial to the higher education community. Although most leaders realize that conflict is abundant in planning, it is the researcher's perspective that many leaders do not understand the benefits of functional conflict. Further research might yield findings that assist higher education leaders to be prepared to implement

strategies intended to effectively manage conflict in a functional direction. This recommendation leads to the second recommendation: training in the academy for conflict resolution.

The participants in the study discussed how they handle conflict by using words like *collaboration*, *communication, compromise.* However, in higher education the reality is that often strategic planning participants may also be highly intellectual individuals who are *competitive, argumentative and aggressive.* Therefore, the second recommendation is simple: higher education institutions should offer training for leaders and administrators on how to manage dysfunctional conflict with the goal of moving it to functional conflict. This training should include methods that support active listening, problem solving, mediation and negotiation.

For the individual seeking a quality, functional strategic planning process, understanding that conflict will occur is the first step. However, there are some concrete steps that are applicable for these leaders and that will assist the leader in creating an environment where conflict is functional.

- **Listen**: It is important for the educational administrator to understand that through listening we attempt to understand what Deutsch, Coleman and Marcus (2006) refer to as "intended meaning" of those around us. Listening is a skill that is important for understanding, and therefore administrators must practice and improve this skill in order to move dysfunctional conflict to functional.

- **Communicate**: Perhaps an oversimplified term, communication must be clear, continuous, and dynamic (O'Rourke, 2010). Successful strategic communication, according to O'Rourke is comprised of several steps. First the administrator must link their message to the strategy and goals of the organization. They must understand the audience they are communicating with and explain their position in terms that their constituency will understand. Administrators must also motivate their audience to accept a strategic plan and move toward that plan. Finally, it is important to manage the expectations of the university community, and communicate in ways that make clearer the message and strategies being taken.

- **Be accessible**: One of the most important aspects of leadership, must less the strategic planning process, is to be available for questions, comments and constructive discourse from those in the university community. A true open door policy is one in which the academic leader sets certain times for constructive feedback from those that the strategic plan affects. This arena assists in diffusing dysfunctional conflict and gives opportunity to transform dysfunctional to functional.

This study explored the perspectives of four higher education leaders regarding conflict and its effects on strategic planning. The narratives of these participants provide the researcher with a framework to identify the themes or elements which contribute to effective strategic planning, and an increased understanding of functional and dysfunctional conflict. The study explored the presence of conflict in the strategic planning process. This exploration provides a rich context for understanding how leaders can recognize and manage conflict to produce valuable and strategic planning processes that contribute to institutional improvement.

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