



Strategic Thinking: Why Campus Altitude is More Important than Attitude

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This past year, I was involved in a research project with three other faculty members studying the views of nonprofit CEOs regarding what is needed in the workplace. We surveyed 100 nonprofit CEOs on the skills and traits needed for success. They were first asked about the skills and traits that have led to their professional success as senior leaders. They reported that strategic thinking, communication skills, positivity, relationships, and leadership were most important regarding their leadership.

We followed up with additional questions about the skills and traits they were looking for in their employees. Again, strategic thinking was near the top of the list.

In talking with college and university leaders, we hear the same things. Building the capacity of campus stakeholders to think strategically is consistently a top concern particularly in these disruptive days of higher education.

In working with all types of organizations, we consistently see organizations filled with prac-

tical and tactical employees. These are people who work hard on the everyday practical things that are on their desks. Many of these people come early and leave late.

Kate Beatty, author of *Becoming a Strategic Leader: Your Role in Your Organization's Enduring Success*, also bears this out as she writes in

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a Forbes (Feb 27, 2010) article, “Statistics show that fewer than 10% of leaders exhibit strategic skills, a woefully inadequate number considering the demands on organizations today. . . . The job of strategy is not limited to a few top executives. Strategic leaders are needed throughout our organizations if they are to adapt, innovate and succeed well into the future.”

Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking is at the core of strategic leadership and in today's world, including higher education, it is in high demand. One of the core concepts of strategic thinking is understanding strategic altitude.

Strategy expert, David Collis, writes in *Thinking Strategically*, “When you think strategically, you lift your head above your day-to-day work and consider the larger environment in which you're operating.” Having the ability and focus to lift our heads from our tactical work and look at the broader horizon is key to understanding and engaging both strategic thinking and strategic altitude.

Traits of CEO Success

- Strategic Thinking
- Communication Skills
- Positivity
- Relationships
- Leadership

Traits of New Employees

- Expertise
- Strategic Thinking
- Communication Skills
- Relationships
- Hard Work

“Can Do” Attitude

I realized the confusion between attitude and altitude some years ago when I was serving as provost. It was at a summer cabinet meeting and our president had just unveiled t-shirts that had “Can Do” printed on them. We were behind in our preparations for our fall school opening, and this was an attempt to get everyone engaged in the effort.

In our cabinet discussions, we realized that our lack of preparedness had to do with some strategic issues. Getting everyone to work longer and harder was at best a short-term solution. Time and time again I see leaders seeking to address strategic gaps with more tactical work. It is at this point, we need to clarify the concept of strategic altitude. A “Can Do” attitude is typically engaging work at the tactical level. Tactical engagement is important, but it must be framed out in reference to both visionary and strategic engagement.

Visionary, Strategic, and Tactical Levels of Engagement

All of us have sat in meetings and asked ourselves if we are addressing the things that matter most. These reflections get at the heart of strategic altitude. Many times we come to realize that the tactical, practical issues that are pressing in on us are not the most important issues which actually need our attention.



I was working with one academic administrator and we began to call this the “tactical tsunami.” A “tactical tsunami” is that overwhelming wave of work that seemingly presses in all around us all the time.

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While working with a senior team of Ivy League-educated leaders on the East Coast, I asked one of them how much time they spent each month discussing strategic issues. She said “none.” I pushed back in surprise and she said, “No, really! We spend every day focused on nothing other than the tactical issues piling up around us.”

When we step back from these conversations and reflect, we realize that there are higher altitude issues that are fundamentally different than the on-the-ground tactical issues that fill our desks and days. We can look at the topic of altitude and consider a framework that includes three different and distinct levels. These levels include visionary, strategic, and tactical levels of engagement. Let’s unpack each of these to gain more clarity on how they are different as well as how they related to one another.

Visionary Engagement: This is the highest level of engagement and refers to core concepts of who we are as a college or university including **mission**, why do we exist, **vision**, where we are headed, and **values**, who are we. Visionary engagement focuses on our aspirational future, that picture of our preferred future. It is inspirational and motivational. This level of engagement is the starting point of all that we do because mission, vision, and values are at the very core of our institutions.

Strategic Engagement: If vision is about where we are headed, strategy is about deciding how we are going to advance that vision. President Kennedy had a vision to reach the moon. NASA had to develop a strategy to achieve that vision. Strategic choices include which road will we take to reach our preferred destination? What are our mid-range strategic priorities? We have to choose which metrics we will use as short-term and long-term measures of progress. With limited resources, which initiatives will provide the most strategic return on investment? Great strategies give us greater confidence that our vision can be realized.

Tactical Engagement: As mentioned earlier, tactical engagement is about our everyday work. That said, it takes on new importance as we align our tactical work with our vision and strategy. Tactical work becomes about executing and implementing our strategy by doing the right work well. High performing institutions have a habit of doing the right things well.

Visionary Level

As mentioned above, we start with the visionary level which represents a perspective from the summit, has the longest horizon, and addresses the primary questions of:

- **Why do we exist?** This addresses the issues of purpose and **mission**.
- **Where are we headed?** Here we focus on the direction of the institution as well as the aspirational **vision** or picture of a preferred future.
- **Who are we?** This refers to the core **values** of the institution and its key stakeholder groups.

From a governance perspective, the board is ultimately responsible for affirming the mission of the institution. At a broader level of shared governance, the stakeholders of the college and university speak into the vision and values of the institution. Then the president and senior



leaders also have important role in reminding everyone why we are here and why what we are doing is so important. Senior leaders in collaboration with other campus stakeholders also help point the way toward an aspirational direction and a picture of a preferred future. Leading at the visionary level with clarity, commitment, and collaboration is important for leaders across the institution. It inspires hope and vitality.

All three levels of engagement play a role in the life of the institution. However, having not enough or too much of one level can lead to certain deficiencies. Here are the most common ways in which the visionary level gets out of balance.

- When there is **not enough visionary engagement** by leaders, people can become disheartened or distracted.
- When there is **too much visionary engage-**

ment, people can feel stuck in over-drive.

In addressing the elements of mission, vision, and values of visionary engagement, here are some principles to keep in mind:

- **Clarity** should not be assumed. Mission, vision, and values should be revisited every 5-10 years to affirm the language and role in the institution or to refresh and update the language for the next chapter.
- **Communicating** regularly the mission, vision, and values is key in keeping the institution focused on the highest levels of purpose, direction, and identity.
- Appropriate **alignment** is needed to keep all aspects of the college or university generally aligned with the high-level attributes of the institution.

Strategic Level

This mid-level altitude focuses on choosing the best possible mix of strategic features to best advance the mission, vision, and values of the institution. Strategy is most often about choices, focus, and discipline and can be described as deciding “which.” The following list of choices begins at a high strategic level and works down to lower strategic levels.



- **Which stakeholders** will we serve and which value proposition(s) will we promise and deliver for each stakeholder group?
- **Which strategic priorities** (usually 1-4) will we choose for the next 3-5 years?
- **Which strategies** will we choose to advance our chosen priorities?
- **Which metrics** will we choose to measure progress on what matters most?
- **Which initiatives** will advance our strategy with the highest Return on Investment (ROI)?

Institutions struggle when they lack focus and discipline at the strategic level and tend to fall into one of two different traps:

- **No focus:** No one knows what choices have been made.
- **Focus is too wide:** When we choose 20 priorities, everything blends together.

At this level, we can also miss the right balance.

- When there is **not enough strategic engagement**, vision does not translate into results or our tactical work does not align with our strategy and vision.
- When there is **too much strategic engage-**

ment, people lose sight of visionary aspiration or become preoccupied with just doing work even if it is not aligned with the vision and strategy.

Our research shows that of the three levels of engagement, the strategic level is often the least developed and least engaged by leaders and teams. With attention, focus, and development, the strategic level can be developed and leveraged.

Tactical

This is the lowest level of engagement and focuses on getting on-the-ground, practical work done. Sometimes it means doing the same things we have always done. This can mean answering email, holding meetings, teaching classes, managing budgets, etc. Of course, tactical work is what we do most hours of most days. The problem with an exclusively tactical focus is that we can lose the vision of what we are trying to accomplish. Also, we run into problems when most of our regular tactical work is not well-aligned with our strategic choices. Lastly, a tactical focus can also limit change. Change can refer to both process improvement or deciding what good things need to be discontinued in the pursuit of new inno-



vation and/or new advances.

At this tactical, practical, work level, the focus is often on what, when, and whom:

- **What** needs to be done and at what level of quality?
- **When** does it need be done?
- **Who** will do it?

We never want to give the impression that tactical work is not important. As mentioned above, we spend most of our hours doing tactical work. Instead, our goal is to find the relationship of the tactical level of engagement to visionary and strategic levels.

Here are some ways in which our tactical engagement can be out of balance.

- When there is **not enough tactical engagement**, our visionary and strategic levels of engagement lose traction because of inadequate implementation and execution.
- When there is **too much tactical engagement**, 1) people can become weary because of the lack of vision, 2) people can become overworked, and 3) there can be a lack of strategic results.

Practical Applications of Strategic Altitude

The applications of the concept of strategic altitude are many, both positively and negatively. When this framework can be leveraged effectively, the impact can be transformational. When things are not going well, these principles can also be helpful in describing what is working and what is not.

Raising the Altitude of the Discussion

It is common to be in a meeting or discussion and realize that the meeting's focus is almost exclusively on tactical issues. At this point, it can be invaluable to **raise the altitude of the conversation** from tactical issues to strategic issues. For example, I once had a senior leader ask me how much a certain position should be paid. I answered by asking if we could begin by discussing some higher level issues related to his questions. He agreed. We then moved to a strategic discussion about their philosophy of compensation and whether it was based on longevity, credentials, performance, etc. Often tactical issues are better addressed by starting at a higher strategic level. After framing out the issues at the strategic level, you can then see how your tactical issues can be better aligned.

Processing Issues

In many cases we can use strategic altitude to help us in framing out processes. For example, if you and your team were processing the development of a new academic major, it can be helpful to begin with the mission, vision, and values of both the institution and the proposed new program. I will sometimes say, "Let's begin by framing out this idea at a higher altitude and then work down through the strategic and tactical elements." This sequence can be invaluable in hitting the key issues at the right time.

The Altitude of Meetings

The applications of strategic altitude to meetings are endless. Here I want to commend the work of Patrick Lencioni in his two books: [*Death by Meeting*](#) and [*The Advantage*](#). *Death by Meeting* is written in story form as is the case with most of Lencioni's books. *The Advantage* is a latter compilation of his many insights and he includes a chapter on meetings. In this space, I will just highlight a few of the key points on how meetings and altitude intersect.

First, my higher education work and leadership was transformed by re-framing our meetings into separate visionary, strategic, and tactical meetings. Like many teams, as provost and president, I had sat through hundreds of hours of meetings that had often intertwined all three altitudes of engagement in the same meeting. Lencioni helped our cabinet to use the following framework for our college meetings.

Weekly Tactical Meetings — These are your typical operational meetings dealing with all the ongoing issues of running an institution. Whenever a significant strategic issue came up in the middle of a tactical meeting, we tabled that for our next monthly strategy meeting.

Monthly Strategic Meetings — A once-a-month strategy meeting gives you an opportunity to deal with the larger, higher, more significant, long-range issues. You can pick a time slot like the 3rd Thursday of the month or just pick a date for the months ahead. If you can't get a whole day, just take a half day or two hours. Here you can deal with your monthly strategy review as well as big issues like retention, compensation, facilities, or personnel planning. After some years, we held a monthly strategy day for a full day. We soon called it the most important day of the month.

Visionary Meetings Each Year — These are meetings that are held quarterly, each semester or at fixed times during the year. These meetings may include just the senior team, the

board, and/or the whole campus. Visionary meetings are inspirational, aspirational, and often relational. Here you remind one another why you do what you do and why it matters. You can also look at long-range issues 5, 10, or even 25 years out including facilities, capital campaigns, and other large-scale issues.

Re-framing Tactical meetings — Second, once you have your meeting pattern in place for each of the three levels, you can also look at how you can re-frame tactical meetings. These are the regular meetings that we have all the time. Instead of going for 60 minutes with a full agenda of tactical issues, consider starting off the meeting with even a minute or two at the visionary level reminding people of why we do what we do, where we are headed at a high level, and/or talking about why we exist. Next, take 2-3 minutes and connect the tactical issues of the agenda to the higher strategic priorities and strategies of the institution. Then you are at a great place to go 45-50 minutes on the practical issues of the agenda. Just before you close, you might want to circle back and connect what you just discussed or decided with your strategic and visionary levels.

More Thoughts on Strategic Thinking

Let's close by circling back to strategic thinking. Strategic altitude is just one of many concepts related to strategic thinking. Other topics include **strategic capacity** and **strategic clarity**. We want to leave you with the idea that strategic thinking is the new core competency needed by all leaders in higher education today.

Plan A Free Strategy Day on Your Campus

These days can provide an affordable way to build the strategic thinking of your cabinet, board, and/or campus teams. If you are interested in scheduling a strategy day on your campus with **ClarionHigherEd**, the first day is free including no travel cost for the Clarion consultant to come to your campus. For more information, feel free to visit www.clarionhighed.com or click here for [Free Strategy Day](#).