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*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics. This month we invited HSD Institute Associate Jim Roussin to reflect on a radical approach to strategic planning.*

Disturbing the Organization Artfully
A Generative Approach to Strategic Planning

*When you create your life as art, you, as artist, can take a look “deeper in,” and this act can profoundly change you. --Robert Fritz, **Your Life as Art***

I recently participated in a strategic planning process with the board of a national organization. I have served on many committees engaged in strategic planning, and I notice that participants in these processes report a common experience. I would liken the experience to that of a big balloon – initially full of air with potential to soar high and expand to new horizons – however, the balloon has an ever so tiny leak. And from this leak, air is slowly escaping the balloon. Despite all the good intentions, it doesn't take long before the initial energy in the room has dissipated and voices drift into a monotone drone. Where did all the exciting energy and potential go? What has turned the promise of imaging a new future into a mechanistic and lifeless consumption of data, statistics, and routine initiatives? What robs the human spirit from a process that should inspire and excite us?

I believe organizations need a new approach to envisioning and living out their future. If we can see our work in organizations in broader and deeper ways, we may be able to bring new life and energy to our planning processes. When I think of professions that by their very nature are engaged in this expansion and contraction effort, I turn to the world of the artist. And for a moment I imagine: Is it reasonable to bring the creativity, passion and imagination of art to our strategic planning processes? Is it possible to stand before the blank canvas of tomorrow and imagine a world rich with possibility, meaning and color? For a moment, consider yourself an artist and open your eyes to a different way of experiencing strategic planning in the future.

THE ARTIST ENGAGES PERCEPTUAL ENERGY FROM A CLOSE UP VIEW

The artist has many tools but none is as powerful as perspective. There are three basic points of view: close up, middle, and landscape. Each view is a narrative that holds a story line and communicates deeply a way of seeing and knowing in life.

The artist chooses a **close up** view to zoom in on a subject and announce all the minute details in an amplified and dramatic way. The purpose of the close up is to contract our vision toward a narrow band of awareness. While the close up provides stunning details, it also erases a lot of information that is present and hard to access when there is a fixed perspective.

This perspective may be one of the reasons why so many planning processes can deflate human energy. Typically, strategic planning focuses on narrow outcomes and measurements that converge rather than expand human potential. While a mission statement can be lofty, it is the strategies, goals and objectives that engage our human experience. It should not be surprising that human energy drifts into boredom and fatigue when outcomes limit our capacities to act in complex and self-organizing ways. This is like keeping your eye constantly fixed on a compass needle while navigating across a mountainous terrain. It won't take long before you bonk your head. A compass is helpful but you also need your full human awareness to scan the horizon and notice what is around you to deftly make your way to your desired destination.

When strategic planning settles only on narrow measurements, human attention suffers and the organization becomes blind to the emerging and changing environment around it. The close in perspective serves a purpose in strategic planning, especially in nurturing the identity of the organization.

THE ARTIST ENGAGES PERCEPTUAL ENERGY FROM A MIDDLE VIEW

Our mind and physiology expands and contracts with each view that engages the perceptual field. That is why the artist is intentional when selecting a perspective that best communicates the meaning of the art.

Another choice for the artist is the **middle perspective**. In photography, the 50mm lens most closely captures what our eyes typically see; it is a middle perspective. I believe that this view embraces the human energy that resides in the present moment. It uses language that pulls our minds back into the "here and now." My experience has been that when attention is drawn away from the present moment, participants can get lost in linguistic loops that spiral around ideas "out there" and which are not fully grounded in day-by-day experiences. The middle perspective reminds us of the ways we are adapting and changing as individuals and as an evolving and growing organization. This perspective stretches out for new ways we should be learning and expanding.

The middle perspective also invites each person to live out of his/her unique fullness in a way that embraces the 'spirit' of work through community. It reminds us that work in community is more dynamic when the individual agents are honored as distinct and "distinctly" a part of the whole. Strategic priorities must include what Arthur Koestler termed as the science or study of wholeness. He coined the term "holon" to represent the idea of being both a part and a whole at the same time. So, strategic initiatives should embrace priorities that nurture and sustain holonomous cultures. A strategic direction from the middle view might look like:

We will develop, empower and sustain human potential for every employee in our organization

Measurement: *Personal growth plans will be supported by a minimum of three coaching sessions per year and tied to yearly appraisals.*

THE ARTIST ENGAGES PERCEPTUAL ENERGY FROM THE LANDSCAPE VIEW

The artist also uses a **landscape perspective**. I call this the cosmological view. I prefer to start with this perspective when working with a group on strategic planning. I invite participants to watch the IMAX video, *The Blue Planet*. At the end of the video I have the group chart pictures, symbols and metaphors to capture a visual representation of how their work in the organization might be tied to a global connection. This process allows participants to access a deeper wisdom and intuition that goes beyond the language of words. It also offers a vision that stretches out beyond the boundaries of the organization. It reminds everyone that we are interconnected in deep and profound ways, and we are responsible to each other and the planet by the ways we engage in our work. It is from this perspective that organizations will find sustainable approaches to their work.

From this perspective, we also develop strategic priorities that deepen our capacity to scan the environment and forecast trends and patterns that are currently emerging. I believe this view deepens the mission and the purpose for the organization and embraces the many diverse callings of each individual. A strategic priority from this perspective might resemble the following:

We will explore and discover new ways to advance the field of professional learning.

Measurement: *In the next two years we will identify powerful new learning designs that are sustainable and that directly impact student learning.*

This strategic priority amplifies how we pay attention while focusing on a meaningful contribution to the work in the field. It also includes what I call generative language. This is language that engages the human spirit in discovery and adventure.

Strategic planning is a “creative act” and it can be more powerfully engaged when we consider how to utilize perspectives like an artist. Each perspective engages human energy and potential to serve the organization in dynamic and compelling ways.