

Strategic Planning That Drives Real Change:

*What Great Boards
Do Differently*

ISCA Annual Governance Conference
February 2026



70% of all change initiatives fail..

- HBR, Oct. 2023



*Three board presentations in one week.
Different schools, different contexts, same pattern.*

The trustees understood the strategic plan. They nodded at the priorities. They asked smart questions about implementation.

And then, when it came time to choose, they wanted to add initiatives, not subtract them.

**Can you name three
significant things you
stopped doing because
of your strategic plan?**

Not streamlined. Not paused. But stopped.

If you can't name at least a couple...

You have a PLAN

A to-do list with strategic language

47 initiatives across 8 priority areas

Everyone feels included

Nobody is disappointed

Nothing changes

You have a STRATEGY

Integrated choices with real trade-offs

A few priorities with named consequences

Programs stopped, not just started

Some people are disappointed

Something actually changes

What is **Strategy**?

Adapted from Roger L. Martin, "Don't Let Strategy Become Planning," Harvard Business Review, February 2013.

STRATEGY IS DEFINED AS:

An integrated set of choices that collectively positions an organization to deliver on its mission and to create a sustainable advantage relative to the competition in its market.

CRITICAL NOTION:

Strategy is not about trying to predict the future; it's about trying to shape the future to your advantage.

The Real Distinction:

Planning organizes activity. Strategy makes choices. Most "strategic plans" are planning with strategic language.

Strategy vs. Planning

Planning asks:

What should we do?

How do we predict the future?

How do we include everyone?

What are our goals?

How do we organize?

Strategy asks:

What will we choose?

How do we shape the future?

What are we willing to give up?

What are our trade-offs?

How do we differentiate?

The Distinction That Matters

*“Strategy is not the same as organizational effectiveness. Differentiation arises from both the **choice** of activities and **how** they are performed.*

- Michael Porter

Strategic Planning



The board's strategic job: ensure these three are aligned.

Most schools get two out of three. The missing one determines whether anything changes.



What is Culture?

“Culture is the temperature, **not** the forecast.”

- Jason Fried

“Culture is not a set of beliefs, **it's a set of actions.**”

- Ben Horowitz, quoting *The Way of the Samurai*

You Can't Strategize Your Way Out of Culture

The 90-Minute Block Illusion:

A school wants project-based learning. They switch from 45-minute periods to 90-minute blocks.

What actually happens?

Teachers who lectured for 45 minutes plan two 45-minute lectures. Or lecture for 60 and assign "work time" for the last 30.

You used a structural solution for a cultural problem.

Strategy that doesn't align with culture simply doesn't happen.

When Strategic Planning Is the Wrong Tool

Culture Work

You need to shift underlying beliefs, norms, and habits. A plan won't do that.

Operational Capacity

You need systems, training, and management discipline. A plan can't create it.

Leadership Alignment

Board and head aren't on the same page about roles and priorities. A plan can't manufacture trust.

Communications

People don't understand what you're doing or why. That's a messaging problem, not a strategy problem.

The Four-Lever Test

If nothing changes in these four areas, you did planning, not strategy:



TIME

You stop doing activities that no longer serve the strategy



PEOPLE

You hire differently, promote differently, or shift roles



MONEY

Your budget reflects your stated priorities



DECISION-RIGHTS

Clarity increases about who has voice, vote, and veto

What question is your strategic plan actually trying to answer?

If your board and leadership team can't articulate the same question, you're not ready to answer it strategically.

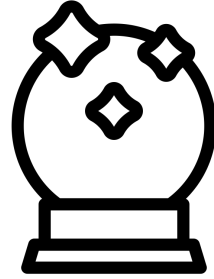
What Great Boards Do Differently

Modes of Leadership



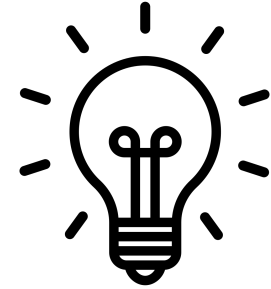
FIDUCIARY

- Protects assets
- Ensures smooth functioning
- Ensures efficient use of assets
- Acts in the best interest of school



STRATEGIC

- Discovers strategic needs
- Establishes priorities of needs and resources
- Generates and implements the plan



GENERATIVE

- Ideates outside the box
- Challenges norms
- Suspends what we *think* we know
- Anticipates the future

Governance vs. Operations

THE BOARD'S JOB

Governance Decisions:

- What to pursue
- What to stop
- Where to invest
- What trade-offs to accept
- How to measure success

THE HEAD'S JOB

Operational Decisions:

- How to execute
- Who does the work
- When and in what sequence
- How to build capacity
- How to communicate progress

The Courage Cascade: How Plans Stall

Each roadblock enables the next. Together, they guarantee nothing changes.

Skip culture diagnosis	<i>Jump to aspiration without understanding current reality</i>
Avoid hard choices	<i>"We'll do both" when forced to choose</i>
Optimize for consensus	<i>Every stakeholder gets their initiative</i>
Hire validators	<i>Consultants who make everyone comfortable</i>
Measure what's easy	<i>Track activity, not outcomes</i>
Blame timing	<i>"The strategy was sound, the timeline was too aggressive"</i>

What Courage Actually Looks Like

Less bold vision. More persistent clarity.

The Board Chair who interrupts:

"We've added six initiatives in the last 20 minutes. Which three existing ones are we removing to make space?"

The Head who says clearly:

"This program is well-loved, but it doesn't align with our strategic priorities. We're ending it."

The Board that votes on trade-offs:

"We're prioritizing financial aid over facility upgrades this year. That means some classrooms won't get renovated. That's the cost of this choice."

Success vs. Failure of Initiatives

NO VISION + Ownership + Skills + Incentive + Resources + Action Plan = **CONFUSION**

Vision + **NO OWNERSHIP** + Skills + Incentive + Resources + Action Plan = **SABOTAGE**

Vision + Ownership + **NO SKILLS** + Incentive + Resources + Action Plan = **ANXIETY**

Vision + Ownership + Skills + **NO INCENTIVE** + Resources + Action Plan = **RESISTANCE**

Vision + Ownership + Skills + Incentive + **NO RESOURCES** + Action Plan = **FRUSTRATION**

Vision + Ownership + Skills + Incentive + Resources + **NO ACTION PLAN** = **TREADMILL**

Vision + Ownership + Skills + Incentive + Resources + Action Plan = CHANGE

If your strategic plan makes everyone happy, you've built consensus, not strategy.

Strategy creates focus by disappointing people who want something else.

Table Discussion

10 minutes | Groups of 4

Think about your school's most recent strategic plan.

Can you name 2-3 things your school explicitly decided **NOT** to do — programs you won't add, families you won't serve, investments you won't make?

Share one with your group.

If you can't name any, that's worth discussing too.

Because...

The future will punish
certainty
and reward **clarity**

The Closing Question:

What initiative exists at your school not because it serves your strategy, but because ending it would require a conversation you don't want to have?

Until you can answer that honestly, you don't have a strategy problem. You have a courage problem.



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