We Can Get There From Here: Strategic Plans and Family Medicine

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A visit to an airport bookstore reveals a huge array of business books with clever stories about mission clarity and strategic planning. From this, an alien entering our universe might infer that organizations are lost and searching for their purpose or mission. That is not the case with STFM! We are clear about our mission. We serve family medicine educators and help them most effectively train future physicians to provide excellent care for patients, families, and populations.

But how exactly do we do that? What are the projects that we should invest in? How do we most effectively use our resources—the time and talents of staff and members, as well as our finances—to best serve educators and promote family medicine?

Family medicine educators are proud generalists. We appreciate our breadth of educational, medical, psychosocial, research, or pharmacologic expertise. We also celebrate our multiple non-academic interests and fervently believe that our interests in music, art, sports, nature, home improvement, or history help us retain balance and therefore make us better clinicians, researchers, and educators. It is fun to learn new skills, be open to possibilities, and be flexible if exciting opportunities show themselves.

STFM intentionally reflects our discipline’s enthusiasm for diversity, for opportunity and variety of experiences. We value our multiple groups and encourage groups and members to propose new initiatives in training, programming, and leadership. The vitality of our organization is reflected in these new initiatives and sense of possibility.

Our successful growth, however, could also become a detriment. Whether one follows Malcolm Gladwell, Jim Collins, or another organizational consultant, all agree that successful organizations are able to identify what it is that they do particularly well. Even with unlimited financial and personnel resources, an organization cannot be all things to all people. A well developed strategic plan can help an organization be clear about what we do well, where we want to go, and still create room for innovation.

Some of us, however, are wary about the usefulness of strategic plans. We may have experiences with unproductive planning sessions, plans that are too general, or plans in which there is inadequate follow-up. Some have concerns that a plan can become too fixed and not allow an organization to respond nimbly to new opportunities. Or we may have seen expensive consultants hired by our health centers and hospitals who have swooped in and created strategic plans, mission statements, suggestions for new organizational structures or processes, and then left. Their reports are filed away, in expensive binders, and the system reverts or remains essentially unchanged, save for some changes in middle leadership positions. Ineffective strategic planning processes can be wasteful and even demoralizing.

In contrast to these bleak scenarios, we have a bold 3-year STFM strategic plan, approved by the Board in July. With assistance from a skilled consultant, Dave Fellers, CAE, our Strategic Planning Committee and the Board engaged in an efficient and inclusive process. We integrated perspectives from Board planning sessions and from interviews and focus groups.
of members, staff, and non-members. We focused on what we want STFM to accomplish, but perhaps more important, we clarified some initiatives that cannot best be addressed by STFM at this time. We committed to use the strategic plan: to inform members about the plan, to make decisions consistent with the plan, and to identify and measure our progress.

These are volatile times, as well as times of opportunity. We must be able to speak with one voice and be able to focus our attention where it is most needed. With the leadership of Board member Cathy Pipas, MD, a Board committee is identifying specific metrics and measures so we can monitor our progress toward our goals. Board member-at-large, Melly Goodell, MD, is leading another subcommittee to determine a process so we can regularly assess effectiveness of existing STFM programs and services. This means that some STFM programs may end, to make sure that new initiatives can grow. We have begun to make decisions about liaisons with other organizations or whether to sign on to a legislative issue, for example, based on how the organization or issues fit with our strategic plan. We want to have our people, our time, and other resources engaged in activities that we think are most important.

We are most effective when we all are pulling in the same directions, so the STFM Board hopes that members will know and embrace our strategic plan. Please view the plan, available on our Web site, and feel free to communicate with me or any Board member with questions or comments. In brief, the STFM strategic plan identifies five core priorities, each with a clear general outcome, as well as goals and strategies to achieve the goals:

• **Professional and Leadership Development**
  STFM will be the leader in training, leadership development, and creation of information that improves family medicine education and teaching.

• **Scholarship and Innovation**
  STFM will be the authority for innovation and research in family medicine education.

• **Workforce Development**
  STFM will promote family medicine workforce development through innovation, curriculum development, and practice redesign in teaching sites.

• **Professional Relationships**
  Relationships developed through STFM will enhance the professional well-being, vitality, and growth of members and the discipline.

• **Policy Advocacy**
  STFM will develop and utilize its members’ expertise to positively influence legislation and regulations that have an impact on family medicine education and workforce development.

Consultant Dave Fellers, CAE, reported that the top concern from member surveys and interviews was that STFM was “juggling too many priorities.” My bet is that this also describes our departments and our individual lives. As we begin a new year, it can be valuable for each of us to take stock of our priorities and consider how we are living our lives—in our departments, in our own professional careers, and in our personal lives. We are fortunate people, who make valuable contributions to others. We have opportunities to be more intentional about how we make those contributions and how we prioritize our diverse interests and joys.

A good strategic plan is like an advanced GPS device: a map with great directions and signposts that identify mileage and important activities that occur along the route. We have choice in how we wish to create our journey, and the process of making intentional decisions about our journeys means that we won’t run out of time or gas before we do the things we most value. With an effective strategic plan, “We can get there from here,” and we will recognize there when we arrive. Happy New Year!

**References**

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