

Ryan Watkins

Determining If Distance Education Is the *Right* Choice: Applied Strategic Thinking in Education

SUMMARY. Making decisions about which technologies, if any, are appropriate for your classroom or educational institution has never been easy. These difficult decisions are, however, increasing in their complexity as new technologies continually enter the marketplace, expectations of parents and students rise for more technology in the classroom, budget constraints require institutions to do more with less, and the benefits of distance education place mounting pressures on educators to provide resources beyond the boundaries of the traditional classroom. So how do you as an educational leader make the challenging decisions related to distance education and other technologies in your school? This article provides a framework for results-focused decision making that can help you make complicated choices in even the most challenging of circumstances. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

RYAN WATKINS is Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Leadership, Educational Technology Leadership Program, The George Washington University, Washington, DC 20052 (E-mail: rwatkins@gwu.edu).

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In recent years the shifting and evolving responsibilities of leaders in education has created the requirement for dynamic models of decision making. For decades, educational institutions have benefited from the application of the conventional models for decision making that were derived from nearly a century of industrial growth. And while these models were quite useful in the rather stable educational environment that dominated most of the twentieth century, education has been rapidly changing with the development of information technologies and an expanding globalization (of all sectors, including both private and public). Leaders of today's institutions are increasingly being held accountable for supporting the growth of dynamic learners: learners that increasingly bring rapidly changing requirements to the *learning environment*.

Meeting these demands will require not only a new perspective on education, but also a new set of tools for institutional leaders. Building on the decision analysis techniques and visionary leadership tools, this article provides a pragmatic offering that can assist decision makers at all levels of an institution in making and justifying tough decisions related to education. Though the strategic thinking tools described are applicable to all of the difficult decisions educators are being asked to make, the primary context for the discussion will focus on the answer to one, not so simple question: *Is distance education "right" for me and/or my institution?*¹

Additionally, the framework I described for systemically determining if distance education is the *correct* solution for you and/or your institution will also provide essential information for determining which (if any) intervention or technology is likely to accomplish the necessary results for you and/or your institution to be successful now and in the future. You can further use the decision-making framework to align daily activity and resource decisions with other critical decisions for the long-term health of the institution.

DISTANCE EDUCATION IS ONLY ONE OPTION

When making challenging decisions, if you begin with a predetermined solution (e.g., distance education, outsourcing, computer technologies, standardized tests, etc.), you are likely risking the long-term health of your institution. And while we often enter decision-making processes aware of the many pressures from different interest groups and with our own ideas as to what solution(s) may be appropriate, we do not want to presume that this limited perspective is going to accomplish the necessary results for institutional success now and in the future. Without a formal identification of the need (i.e., a

gap in results), solutions are left to searching for problems for which they may be appropriate, and this is backward decision making.

Instead, we want to begin by examining what results are required for the long-term success of the institution, identify gaps between where we are and where we should be, and then (and only then) determine which solutions may be feasible for accomplishing the required results. And this is achieved through integrated strategic planning and needs assessment within a performance accomplishment system (Watkins & Leigh, 2001; Kaufman, Oakley-Brown, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003).

Since we are not starting with distance education as the pre-selected solution, this is likely not the path toward answering the question above (i.e., is distance education right for me and/or my institution) that you may have expected. Additionally, this article is not written to sell you on the benefits of *distance education* or any other tool that educational institutions may use to accomplish desired results. *Distance education*, as we will view it, is just one of many alternatives that may be *right* for ensuring individual and institutional success. Therefore, we will focus our attention on first ensuring that we *really know* the results that we want to (and must) achieve and how those are aligned with the requirements of the institution and the social system, before we examine the tools and techniques for selecting appropriate useful interventions (like distance education). This assessment-first approach is a hallmark of performance-based decision making (Watkins & Leigh, 2001).

A framework for integrated strategic planning and needs assessment can assist institutional leaders in setting strategic direction and accomplishing useful results (see Kaufman, 1998, 2000). The framework provides for the development and communication of a clear direction for educational institutions. By focusing on results and consequences, the planning and assessment approach to strategic thinking leads institutions away from decision making based on fads, trends, or knee-jerk reaction and toward a holistic approach of balancing the emerging results requirements of learners, institutions, and society with an agile and strategic decision-making structure. And distance education is thereby offered as one valuable alternative for institutional leaders to consider when determining how useful results will be achieved by and for their institution.

PREPARING FOR CHANGE

In his book *Adaptive Enterprises* (1999, p. 16), Stephan Haeckel, of IBM's Advance Business Institute, suggests that in "environments of discontinuous change, thinking outside the box is not sufficient: It is also necessary to think about changing the box." *Changing the box* of education, however, requires more of institutional leaders than merely choosing the correct technology or implementing a unique delivery model. Changing the box, and subsequently meeting the demands of the changing environment, requires that leaders guide

institutions toward demonstrated added-value for learners and clients with varying perspectives and criteria for success (see Kaufman, Oakley-Brown, Watkins, & Leigh, 2003).

Achieving success in education, now and in the future, will not be the result of any singular software program, innovation, academic model, or policy change. Adding value for learners and clients will likely be achieved through a variety of interventions aligned with the unique requirements of the educational system. Throughout education, this may lead to a number of diverse yet successful institutional structures, dissimilar institutional objectives, assorted delivery models, and an array of other differences as educators identify distinct methods for adding value. And most of these changes required for success lie beyond the boundaries of our current approaches to education.

It has been evident in the evolution of information technologies that even the most capable leaders cannot systematically and accurately predict change, let alone predict changes at the rapid pace that would be demanded by today's institutions. So how can we as leaders of education and training find success in the future without making meaningless predictions? Peter Drucker (1993), in his book *Post-Capitalist Society*, urges that if we are unable to accurately predict the future, then we should be concerned with creating the future. This proactive mindset is a brand feature of institutions that find success in emerging paradigms.

Proactively changing our institutions requires that we move forward into the new realities without quite knowing all the facts. This is not to suggest that leaders blindly storm off with any fad that may be disguised as an emerging paradigm; rather, successful leaders should structure their institutions in such a way that as the boundaries and ground rules shift, so does the institution. Institutions are thus adaptive and agile structures that can respond to change. The systemic thinking and planning model presented in this article is a guide for how leaders in education can approach *distance education* as one possible means for assisting the institution in achieving the dynamic characteristics necessary for demonstrating added value and finding continued success amid changing realities.

ESSENTIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Proactive systemic decision making is built on three foundational relationships. The first is the connection of system and systems thinking, the second is the affiliation of ends and means, and the third is the confusion of needs and wants. Each of these relationships, as the basis for the performance-based decision-making process, is essential for success.

System and Systems Thinking

The first relationship that should be explored as an essential basis for decision making is that of *system* and *systems* thinking. Though often used synonymously,

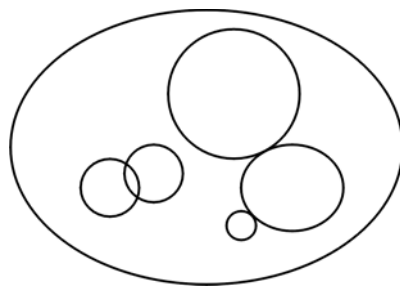
mously in the professional literature, the two approaches to thinking, planning, and assessing actually represent interrelated but distinct paradigms for institutional leaders who apply them. In practice, exemplary decision making regarding the appropriateness of *distance education*, or other initiatives, relies on both system and systems approaches that are applied in a systematic and systemic fashion.

Initially, any discussion of the essential relationships of *system* and *systems* approaches may seem like an unnecessary confusion of terms or semantic quibbling. But then when systemic and systematic processes to each approach are discussed, are we really going too far? I don't believe so. It is through the integration of both *system* and *systems* thinking that decision makers can plan for and assess *distance education* options with a complete understanding of both the entire array of success measures (system-wide perceptions) as well as the dynamic relationships among the interdependent systems (Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001; Kaufman & Watkins, 2000). In application, when planning becomes implementation, the essential characteristics of systemic and systematic are critical to success.

In *Useful Educational Results* (2001, p. 16), Kaufman et al. offer the following definitions:

A system approach begins with the sum total of parts working independently and together to achieve a useful set of results at the societal level, adding value for all internal and external partners such as our institution, employees, state, and the shared society. We best think of it as the large whole as represented as in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. A System Approach



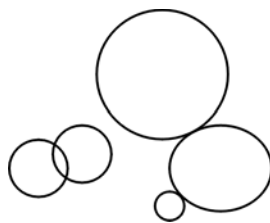
Note. From *Useful Educational Results* (p. 16), by R. Kaufman, R. Watkins, & D. Leigh, 2001, Lancaster, PA: Proactive Publishing. Copyright 2001 by Proactive Publishing. Reprinted with permission.

A systems approach begins with the *parts* of a system (i.e., subsystems) that make up the system, such as the training units, curriculum departments, as well as administrative and technology subsystems. The relationship among parts can be developed, analyzed, and/or evaluated, as represented as in Figure 2.

It should be noted here that a *system* is made up of contributing *systems* or subsystems. If we start at the subsystems level with a systems approach, we will start with only one part (or multiple individual parts) of the overall system (or supersystem) while ignoring the whole system. Thus, a systems approach really focuses solely on one or more subsystems. Though often well intentioned, it is usually a superficial focus on the parts rather than the whole. We commonly find examples of systems approaches in the practice of medicine, where a team of specialized physicians may each separately treat ailments related to the heart, lungs, digestion, and other subsystems, leaving the well-being of the whole system (i.e., your overall health) unattended. When making decisions with a *systems* approach, we can only *assume* that the payoffs and consequences will add up to something useful for the *system*, and that is usually a very big assumption.

In order to accomplish the many results that are essential for the varied perspectives on success of any educational institution, the system approach should serve as the basis for decision making since it alone ensures that all perspectives are included (e.g., parents, students, instructors, legislators, social service organizations, etc.). A systems approach, though effective in identifying and defining the success measures of a limited number of perspectives related to individual subsystems, does not provide decision makers with this

FIGURE 2. A Systems Approach



Note. From *Useful Educational Results* (p. 16), by R. Kaufman, R. Watkins, & D. Leigh, 2001, Lancaster, PA: Proactive Publishing. Copyright 2001 by Proactive Publishing. Reprinted with permission.

wide lens for viewing the array of criteria that must be met for an institution to be considered successful from diverse perspectives.

Having a system approach, in application, means that decision makers view success within the terms of their own institution (e.g., long-term profits, graduated students, and such) as well as their position (e.g., courses designed, CD-Roms developed, and such). But success from a system approach also includes the success criteria defined by external clients and partners (including, for example, learners, future employers, parents, community partners, resource suppliers, and other external partners). So, in applying a system approach to decision making, we start by removing the boundaries that have been the benchmarks for decision makers in the past.

Ends and Means

Beyond the relationship of system and systems approaches, another relationship that should be considered prior to making critical decisions regarding the application of *distance education* solutions is that of *ends* and *means*. Though the terms *ends* and *means* are common in our everyday language, we rarely take the time for close consideration of their relationship when making decisions. Ordinarily, we select our means with good faith that the desired ends will be the result of our labor. The more effort we put into an initiative, the more likely favored accomplishments are to be attained. But is this really true?

Our experiences have often reinforced the fact that decisions are commonly made in most of today's institutions without a clear and measurable end in mind (i.e., results or accomplishments). Rarely are institutional leaders able to define and communicate in measurable terms the ends, results, or accomplishments that they want to achieve through their institutions. Now this isn't to say that these leaders have not been quite successful in the past, because many of them have. In the past, when success could be defined by graduation rates and test scores alone, institutional leaders often did know the educational program, software upgrade, or process improvement tactic that would lead to success.

However, the options have grown, the competition for financial resources has increased, and the ability for leaders instinctively to know what solutions will be able to accomplish the necessary goals for the institution is challenged almost daily. As a result, successful decision makers today have learned to rely on performance data and clear operational definitions of success when making difficult decisions. This perspective is, however, most useful when the focus is on the results (i.e., ends) to be accomplished rather than on the implementation of the processes (i.e., means).

Needs and Wants

The final essential relationship we will discuss is that of *needs* and *wants*. Like the previously described relationships, this, too, is a relationship that is

often muddled by the daily use of the terms as if they were synonyms. And while their mixed uses may be grammatically correct, it is the confusion of the terms that leads institutional leaders away from a result-focused process for decision making. In actuality, overuse of the term *need* may even be a little more devious than the confusion surrounding the earlier relationships.

For decades marketing companies have insisted on changing the vernacular of consumers in order to define *needs* as all the products that they want us to purchase. Marketing companies have been so successful in these efforts that it is now common for most children and adults to truly believe that they “*need*” the latest products on the market. Politicians even use the word *need* to add an exclamation when they want voters to support the activities they have in mind. We even find examples of a misperception in needs throughout our institutions everyday. For example, how often have you heard colleagues describe a product they “*need*” in order to do their job? The newest software? A new computer? Training on the latest management technique? Courses on gun safety in our schools? The list of preselected solutions goes on and on. But how does this aid the decision maker when trying to determine which of these activities is really going to accomplish the required results.

Unfortunately, often perceived solutions (e.g., software, computers, training, distance education, school vouchers, etc.) are not the singular solutions to the complex challenges of today’s educational institutions. Yet, when reading the professional literature or attending a professional conference, you are commonly bombarded with people selling you on the notion that you “*need*” their solution to fix whatever challenges you may be facing in your institution.

While these products that we supposedly “*need*” may be appropriate tools or techniques for accomplishing some of our goals. Most often there are many alternatives that we no longer consider once the *need* has been defined by the marketing firm, the politician, sales person, or even the decision maker who is more concerned about the means than the ends. In order to keep all viable options open until the alternatives have been weighed, the relationship of *needs* and *wants* should be clarified.

In decision making, *needs* are best defined in relation to results. We can, therefore, define *needs* as gaps between the current results being achieved and those results that must be achieved for success (see Watkins, Leigh, Platt, & Kaufman, 1998). This discrepancy definition of needs, we suggest, is the basis for effective strategic planning, needs assessment, and decision making.

When *needs* are defined in terms of gaps in results, and not desired resources or activities, decision makers are better able to clearly define what results must be accomplished and select appropriate interventions (e.g., *distance education*) without the biases of a single-solution mind-set. Thus, the discrepancy definition of needs changes the language that decision makers use when identifying and addressing issues within their institutions. Effective decision makers no longer start a conversation with “we need to buy XYZ software” or “our staff needs more training on XYZ.” Rather than prematurely selecting a

solution in search of a problem, decision makers maintain a focus on the gap between current and required results with statements like, “our students are scoring 10 points below the set objective for our school on the state writing exam; what alternatives are available to help us improve?” or “employees are not able to process client orders using the software system; how can this be corrected?”

Necessity is not an established fact, but an interpretation.

–Friedrich Nietzsche
(as cited in BrainyMedia.com, 2002)

As a basis for the tools and techniques that will follow, we want to develop a framework for effective decision making. This framework will provide the foundational constructs for the processes that will hopefully quickly become intrinsic to your decision making. The framework, we suggest, is grounded in a system focus that takes into consideration the multiple perspectives of success, including that of the community (i.e., society). Further, it retains a results (i.e., performance) focus throughout, linking choices among alternative processes and resources to the accomplishment of useful results.

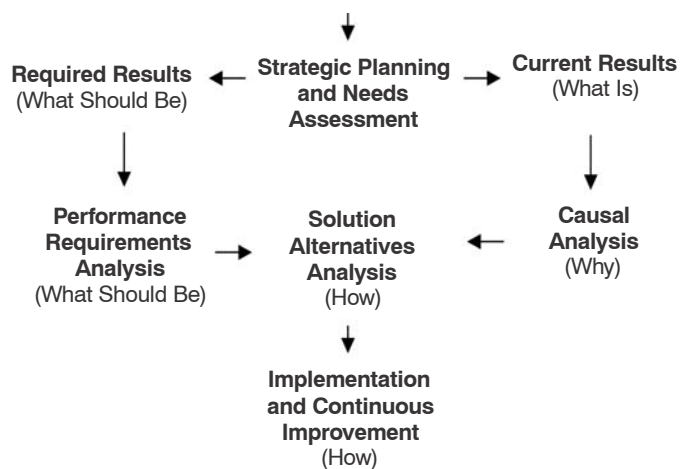
It is not, however, intended for this framework to provide a detailed and complex process for making decisions. System decision making is not an invariable set of procedures. It is a flexible and dynamic heuristic that is effective in selecting the appropriate course of action. Ideally, the framework will be illustrated in such a way that it becomes a basic construct that is not memorized, but rather one that you find to elaborate on the common-sense approaches to decision making that you have already developed.

A PERFORMANCE ACCOMPLISHMENT SYSTEM

A generalized performance accomplishment system offers a basic framework that is useful when considering decisions at the individual or institutional level. With a constant focus on accomplishing useful results, a performance accomplishment system can provide decision makers with a map for navigating through the necessary logic in making rational decisions that can be justified and are linked to performance.

While a variety of performance accomplishment systems share characteristics, the system illustrated in Figure 3 can serve as a basis for decisions related to *distance education* or most any alternative being considered at your institution. Initially developed as a tool for institutional performance improvement, the systematic approach profiled in the performance system delineates six essential steps in making decisions (and one step related to implementation and continuous improvement).² This framework provides the required comprehensive model for making effective choices, without the distraction of more complex systems designed for specific applications.

FIGURE 3. A Performance Accomplishment System



With a foundation in systematic planning and assessment, the performance accomplishment framework provides decision makers with the basic elements necessary for making (and justifying) difficult decisions. And while it could be viewed as a set of linear steps to be taken in selecting appropriate interventions (or solutions), it may be most useful when forgotten (or more accurately, developed as an intrinsic heuristic to guide decision making).

Decision making is not an invariable process. With each decision we make, whether personal or professional, we instinctively process information in varying sequences depending on the situation. Sometimes we first refer back to similar decisions in the past in order to determine the effectiveness of our previous decision-making processes. Other times we may react quickly to the new decision; only later do we examine how the situation was related to previous decisions. Most of us do, however, have a basic framework we commonly use to represent the effective decision-making processes we have identified from past experiences. But many times we are not conscious of the process, nor have we ever committed it to paper.

The general performance accomplishment system can provide a valuable decision-making heuristic for each of us. Even upon initial examination, the performance system likely seems logical and rather easy to apply. And it is. That is why my goal is not that readers will memorize the elements or the illustrations, but rather that the framework will become an intrinsic framework that you will refer to instinctively when presented with a challenging decision.

Strategic Planning and Needs Assessment

Strategic planning (and thinking) is the basis for long-term and short-term decision making. By identifying measurable objectives for the future, the stra-

tegic plan of an institution or individual should provide the guiding direction for all decisions made within the institution. Now this is probably more idealistic than what most of our experiences have been with strategic planning in the past, where strategic plans are written by institutional executives and then left on the shelf to gather dust until the next generation of leadership comes along to write a plan of their own.

So, how do strategic plans become *living documents* and thus guides for decision making? This is accomplished through integrated needs assessment. The needs assessment process is one that identifies and prioritizes gaps between current and required results in relation to the strategic plan. Using this definition, then, strategic planning and needs assessment are interrelated processes and they must coexist in order for either to add value. This companionship of these two processes provides the basis for either process leading to useful results, and together they will provide the foundation for effective decision making with regards to *distance education*.

Strategic planning and needs assessment processes are interdependent by their very nature (though commonly separated within most institutions). Useful strategic planning is dependent upon data related to current results being achieved by the institution, as well as data regarding the gaps between those current results and the current objectives required for success. And these data are best supplied through a results-focused needs assessment. The needs assessment, however, relies on the strategic plan as well. Since the needs assessment identifies gaps between current and desired (i.e., required) results, the process is dependent upon the strategic plan for definition of the latter. Without the strategic plan, there would be no gap, and without the needs assessment, the strategic planning process would be without data for setting useful objectives. So the integration of the two processes is critical to the success of either.

Required Results

Required results define for an institution, and the individuals that make up the institution, the objectives to be accomplished in achieving success for internal as well as external partners and clients. And while conventional strategic planning initiatives may have set out to define in measurable terms the long-term and short-term ambitions of the institution, missing from conventional approaches is the system perspective. The system perspective, as discussed previously, includes the views on success held by representative participants in the system, and not solely the institution itself nor individual groups within the system. In application, the incorporation of multiple perspectives on success requires more robust and inclusive visions, missions, and objectives than most institutions today currently have as their guide for decision making (Kaufman, Stith, Triner, & Watkins, 1998).

The defining of required results to be accomplished by, and for, educational institutions is an essential process in making decisions related to the appropri-

ateness of distance education for an institution. Without clear linkage and alignment with the institution's goals and objectives, decisions regarding the implementation of distance education solutions may lead the institution away from identified goals and objectives. To ensure the necessary linkage and alignment, the application of a system-focused strategic planning model is suggested.

There are three levels of goals and objectives that are foundation to a system perspective. The first level defines results that are required for the long-term success of the society; Kaufman et al. (2001, 2003) refer to planning at this level as *mega planning*, where the primary client and beneficiary of the goals and objectives is the society in which the institution exists. When planning at the *mega* level, the institution has the opportunity to define its contribution (and thereby worth) within the context of the community.³ This is the essential starting place for decision making that is going to lead to long-term success of the institution.

The second level of goals and objectives includes a focus on the institution. Kaufman et al. (2001, 2003) describes this level of planning as *macro planning*, with the primary client and beneficiary being the institution itself. Here the institution aligns its mission with the required results of the external community.⁴ Based on this mission, the institution can then identify the goals and objectives for the individuals and departments within the institution. Planning at this level is *micro planning*, with the primary client and beneficiary being the individuals and small groups within the institution.⁵ And this is commonly where most conventional strategic planning initiatives spend most of their time.

It is truly enough said, that a corporation [or institution] has no conscience, but a corporation of conscious men is a corporation with a conscience. (Thoreau, 1849, as cited in Thoreau, 1993, p. 2)

Through these three levels of planning, required results can be defined and a useful direction can be set for the institution. And institutional planning for success at each of these levels is the foundation of a system approach to decision making.

Current Results

For effective decision making, institutional leaders must be informed as to the current accomplishments and contributions of the institution, as well as those of the individuals and teams that constitute the institution. And the same is true when anyone in the institution is going to make a decision; only the scale and scope of the information required differ. This requirement of information regarding the current accomplishments (i.e., results) is a fundamental element of effective quality management. As a statistician, the "father" of quality management, Edwards Deming, realized the critical importance of data in making decisions of all kinds within an institution. From the factory workers

making decisions related to the output of production lines, to the chief financial officer selecting tactics to improve the annual profits per share, data are an essential element in effectively making decisions in today's institutions. And while many aspects of the quality management approach have become historical relics in today's institutions as management trends sweep through institutions, the fundamental concept of collecting data to inform decision makers is one aspect that will be a continuing legacy of quality management.⁶

When applying the performance accomplishment system, the collection of data regarding the current accomplishments of the institution (as well as the individuals and teams that constitute the institution) is crucial for success. In an ends-focused approach to decision making we want to define *needs* as gaps in results—discrepancies between required results (what should be accomplished) and current results (what is being accomplished). Subsequently, we define *required results* as the products of practical strategic planning. And now to complete the *needs equation* we define current results by collecting extensive data regarding the accomplishments and contributions of individuals, teams, and the institution.

Performance Requirements Analysis

While the products of strategic planning should provide decision makers with a guide to the *required results* for institutional success, visioning efforts rarely provide the details necessary for making, justifying, and evaluating complex decisions at all levels of the institution. Performance indicators detail the measurable evidence necessary to demonstrate that a planned effort has achieved the desired results. The *performance requirements analysis* identifies and clarifies these criteria for success in a brief and systematic process.

Causal Analysis

As the performance requirements analysis further delineates and clarifies the objectives derived in the strategic plan, the *causal analysis* reveals and interprets the likely causes of or reasons for the gap between the current and the required accomplishments. This identification of likely causes provides the essential link between the interventions selected to close a gap in results (i.e., address a specified need) and the probability of the solution actually accomplishing the desired results. The causal analysis is, therefore, an essential process in making effective decisions. Sometimes referred to as *needs analysis* or *training needs assessment*, the causal analysis provides the supporting data for making selections among solution alternatives (e.g., distance education).

Solution Alternatives Analysis

Each of the previous steps in applying the performance accomplishment system has focused exclusively on the results and consequences of the institu-

tional (and individual) processes and activities. During the *solution alternatives analysis*, for the first time, decision makers weigh the many options (e.g., distance education, computer technologies, year-long schooling). Each option (or set of options) can thus be considered based on its ability to achieve the required results (defined by the performance requirements analysis) as well as its capability to address the likely causes (defined by the causal analysis). Further, since solution selection is connected to strategic planning and needs assessment steps, decision makers can rest assured that selected interventions are adequately linked to and aligned with the institution's vision and mission.

Weighing the positive and negatives of alternative solutions is not, however, always that easy a task. Often, little valid and reliable data are available for decision makers, and return-on-investment (ROI) analyses depend on implemented solutions for their calculations. So how do decision makers move forward in an informed manner? We suggest that a costs-consequences analysis can provide decision makers with a coarse-grain estimate of the cost related to closing a gap in results (i.e., meeting a need) versus the costs of not closing a gap in results (i.e., not meeting a need), the latter being a traditionally forgotten element of the decision-making process. Based on this analysis, decision makers can utilize at least approximation data when making difficult choices.

By applying this system approach to decision making, selecting the *right* solution for an institution—for example, a distance education initiative—can be accomplished in a rational and justifiable manner. But the role of decision maker doesn't necessarily end when the decision is made.

Implementation and Continuous Improvement

Even after the decision to implement a distance education solution has been made, the role of the decision maker is not complete. Throughout the implementation process, the decision maker should remain involved with the application of any distance education initiative. Continued involvement offers three benefits for the decision maker and his/her institution. The first is that the decision maker can evaluate the achievements of the solution against the performance requirements identified throughout the application of the performance accomplishment system. Second, the decision maker should be involved in future decisions regarding the continuous improvement of the selected solution.

As alterations and improvements to the selected solution are made, the initial decision maker should remain involved to preserve the linkages to required results and valuable contributions. Lastly, by remaining involved with the implementation of a distance education initiative, the decision maker can remain informed and reduce the amount of new data that will be required for effectively making future decisions.

ASKING AND ANSWERING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

The performance accomplishment system may be used in determining the answers to a variety of difficult decisions and in making value-added contributions to your institution, clients, and clients' clients. The performance accomplishment framework will assist you in aligning the information you know about current performance with what is necessary for performance to lead to long-term success. Yet, to be successful, we must not only have an appropriate framework for answering difficult questions, but, additionally, we must ensure that we are asking the *right* questions in the first place. Doing otherwise would be similar to buying a prize-winning horse, only to find out that the game is water polo.

As decision makers in institutions, we often only know a very little about the many activities that are going on around us every day: What is Jane's department doing with this semester registrations? How is John's team handling the newest software innovations of our competitors? Has Mary's division shipped their products to the clients in Asia yet? And in many cases, we know even less about the contributions and results being accomplished by the many individuals, teams, and units of our institution: What were the results of Jane's department switching to online registration last year? Did the software released by John's team meet the requirements of our clients in their efforts to boost their profits? What is the safety record of clients using the products shipped by Mary's division?

At first glance, you may say, "Yes, but that is the responsibility of the president, principal, or CEO—not me." Or your initial reaction may be, "But that is why we have those annual retreats, to make sure everyone is on the same page." And yet, when applying a system approach to decision making, we cannot afford to ignore any subsystem. To ignore other subsystems for the sole success of our subsystem would constitute sub-optimization, and put the success of the entire system in jeopardy.

So, how can we ensure the success of the system without having to involve everyone in the institution in every decision that has to be made? We start by ensuring that we are asking the right questions.

The questions we ask, and the answers we find, provide the necessary strategic alignment to effectively apply the performance accomplishment system in our decision making. In *Strategic Thinking* (1998, p. 203), Kaufman offers the following questions as guidelines for achieving strategic alignment:

Do you commit to deliver institutional contributions that add value for your external clients AND society, now and in the future?

Do you commit to deliver contributions that have the quality required by your institution and its external partners?

Do you commit to produce internal results that have the quality required by your internal partners, individually and in teams?

Do you commit to have efficient internal products, programs, projects, and activities?

Do you commit to create and ensure the quality and appropriateness of the human, capital, and physical resources available?

Do you commit to deliver:

a: products, activities, methods, and procedures that have positive value and worth?

b: the results and accomplishments defined by our objectives?

An honest answer of “yes” to all of these questions requires that each of us consider our current motivations and reasons for commitment. Too often, today’s motivations are focused on getting more computers, increasing standardized test scores, increasing training enrollments, and other means and resource variables alone. Yet, if we are committed to the achievement of success with regard to each question, then the achievement of useful results is our vision and our institution’s vision.⁷ On the other hand, if we don’t or can’t answer “yes” to these questions, who will?

Strategic alignment is only attained in institutional decision making when the answer to each of these questions is “yes.” When you, and your institution, have committed to the delivery of results that add value for external clients and society, you have committed to taking a system approach to decision making. And this commitment to making useful contributions sets the guiding direction for all decision making within the institution.

Having a useful (and utilized) *north star* for guiding decisions within an institution can prevent sub-optimization by ensuring that all divisions, departments, teams, and individuals have the same overarching objective in mind. And this is how we can attain strategic alignment without having to know the specifics of what is being accomplished in all areas of our institution.

So what are your answers to the questions posed? What are your institution’s answers?

By establishing clear answers to these essential questions, you can calibrate the likely success of most institutional efforts and develop strategic alliances with others to work toward useful results. Additionally, you can adjust your decision making to account for departments or individuals that may be making decisions that are not aligned with the committed objectives of the institution (while working to bring them onboard with the objectives of the institution).

CONCLUSION

In today's educational environment, making the "right" decisions regarding distance education can be critical for the long-term success of an institution. But making the "right" decisions begins with determining what long-term success indicators will be used later to judge those decisions. This article offers a framework for making difficult decisions that is based on a system approach that aligns planning at the mega, macro, and micro levels. The goals and objectives at each of these levels can assist institutions in establishing the long-term indicators of success that can provide direction in decision making. By utilizing this framework, decision makers can answer difficult questions and maintain the necessary alignments with the direction and vision of the institution.

NOTES

1. If your institution has already determined that distance education is the right solution, you may want to review Watkins and Kaufman (2002).
2. Initially proposed by Doug Leigh and later included in Kaufman, Watkins, and Leigh, 2001.
3. An example of a mega level objective would be "a world where everyone is self-sufficient and self-reliant" (see Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001).
4. An example of a macro level objective would be "a community where no individual is debilitated by substance or person abuse" (see Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001).
5. An example of a micro level objective would be that "all students will have the mathematics skills required to obtain employment" (see Kaufman, Watkins, & Leigh, 2001).
6. We suggest that it was likely the misapplication of Deming's quality principles that led to its lackluster success in many U.S. institutions.
7. Linked to and aligned with an ideal vision stating the kind of world we are committed to creating for future generations.

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