

Thrivecast Episode 52: How to Create a Strategic Plan

Trish Kritek: [00:00:00] Welcome to another episode of the University of Washington's Thrivecast, the podcast designed to help School of Medicine faculty thrive. I'm Trish Kritek, and today we're joined by Dr. David Morgenroth. Dr. Morgenroth is a professor and the vice chair for research in the Department of Rehabilitation Medicine.

He's also an outstanding teacher, and I've had the pleasure of learning from him about the structure and process of creating a strategic plan, which he did for his department. With that in mind, I thought it would be great to have him join us. Today to talk about exactly that, how to create a strategic plan.

So David, thank you so much for joining us today.

David Morgenroth: It's my pleasure, Trish. And always a pleasure to speak with you.

Trish Kritek: Thank you. I said I was going to talk to you about how to create a strategic plan, but I'm actually going to start a step before that and say, why should a unit, a division, a department, a research team, why should people [00:01:00] consider creating a strategic plan?

What's the reason to do this?

David Morgenroth: I think it's an important place to start since I think a lot of people hear the term strategic planning and they want to turn and run in the other direction. So it's it is important to think about why, why do this in the first place? We clearly are in a complex health care system.

Academic medicine has a lot of external forces that only seem to be gaining in complexity. And there's a lot of historic momentum and not all of it moving us always in the best directions. A lot of external forces we're dealing with. So I think the easiest way to answer your question is to think about what's the alternative to going through a strategic planning process.

It's really allowing that momentum to carry us and those external forces to use the metaphor of being in a sailboat, just sort of blow us wherever the wind is going. Maybe toss us into some [00:02:00] jagged rocks or that type of thing. And so I think a lot of it is about being intentional about where we're going.

I'd say that we're all incredibly busy, and it's really hard to find the time and it does require time. And I think this is maybe one of the most intimidating aspects is saying, well, how do you carve out the time? But I think if you think about the alternative that we're not going to end up where we want to go carving out that time is vital so that we can go through a process, which the process itself is actually beneficial.

And I worked with a consultant, a strategic planning consultant who use this terminology process is product, which I really liked, which is that even if we don't achieve every single tactic in a strategic plan, just developing this sense of shared purpose, enhancing collaborations in a collaborative environment, breaking down silos, these are all things that I think really benefit us by going through the process.

Trish Kritek: I really like a lot of that. [00:03:00] Like part of it is to be intentional and be kind of writing the plan for where you want to be going. And I don't want to sound too dramatic to control your own destiny, but don't just kind of continue doing what you've been doing or let outside forces direct where you're going, but actually have some intentionality about where you're going.

But I really liked the part about saying there's a huge amount of value in going through this exercise with the folks in whatever that space is, that community that you're doing. And that there's many benefits of just going through the process. That's different from the outcome. That's called the strategic plan.

And I, I think that's an important thing for people to hear because I think you have to understand what the values of this proposition are. As you highlighted, it takes time and engagement and investment in many different ways. So let's assume that people are like, yeah, I don't want to just go where the wind blows me.

I want to be thinking about where our division is going or our, our office is going and, and you've persuaded them that it's [00:04:00] worth the time to invest. Where do you start? What's the starting point for this?

David Morgenroth: I think the starting point is defining what is the scope of the plan, and that really helps you figure out what, what it's going to entail and how to get going with it.

So, for instance, is this going to be a strategic plan that is only for one unit? Is it going to be for an entire division or an entire department or even an entire institution? And, and that is often obvious at the outset, but what might be a little less obvious is, let's say it is within a department as our, our scope of, of unit, then is this going to be an overall plan?

So if this is a, uh, a department like mine that, uh, similar to a lot of departments that has both clinical care research and educational programs, are we going to try and take on all of those, or are we going to carve out just one aspect of, of the, the three legged stool of academia [00:05:00] and say, you know what, we're just gonna do a plan focused on the, the clinical mission or the research enterprise, uh, which, which, for example, that's what we did in my department, is I led a plan which was focused on advancing research.

Once you have developed or defined the scope of the plan, then you can say, okay, well. What's, what's the projected timeline that we might need? And do we have a budget that is also going to determine how we're going to go about moving forward here? So once you've figured all those nuts and bolts out, then you can do some really important baseline work.

And one of those things is to think about what are guiding principles. And I'm going to pause here, so I don't talk too long and give you a chance to jump in with any questions or comments. Thanks.

Trish Kritek: Well, I'm going to definitely ask you questions, but I want to, before you get into the guiding principles, I want to just pause and say, I think there's the scoping part.

Sometimes that's given to you from [00:06:00] outside and sometimes you decide that. And so I appreciate that. And then there's the timeline part and the kind of what are the resources to support this and Before you talk about the guiding principles, my question for you is, how did you figure out the timeline?

Like, that seems a little bit abstract, and I'm curious, did your consultant help you with that? Did you come up with it on your own? What's in general a reasonable timeline? Are we talking weeks, months, years?

David Morgenroth: Definitely an important question. I will tell you that in the case of the strategic plan in our department, the timeline was given to me.

So when I started in the role as vice chair for research back, I think it was 2019. Our department chair, who was Peter Esselman at the time said to me. I want you to lead a five year strategic plan. And I said, okay, sounds great. And so that was the timeline. But that's not always the case. And often there's more latitude in figuring out what an appropriate timeline is.

I think it is [00:07:00] challenging to figure out, because I think the tendency is people want results, and they want them quickly. So people will often say, and I've had a number of folks I've spoken with in the School of Medicine, who've been interested in doing strategic planning, who've talked to me about it, and say, we want to do a six month strategic plan, and then they describe what they want to try and do.

And it's not realistic to get done or to get done well in that time frame. So I think if you are working with a consultant, I think they often can, uh, provide insights into what an appropriate timeline is. But I think We probably all tend to err on the side of saying we want results too quickly and that a timeline is going to take longer than we think.

So I know that's not a perfect answer.

Trish Kritek: I think it is a perfect answer because I think that's exactly what happens is that things take much longer than we think they are. And you might also find in your strategic plan, you're going to do some things that are going to be quick wins. And so it seems like you can get to the place where there's some early stuff that you're going to deliver on early [00:08:00] deliverables, but that, a lot of it is that you have to have a longer forecast, which is a different way about of thinking about things, which I think is important.

David Morgenroth: Absolutely.

Trish Kritek: Okay. You were going to tell me about guiding principles that are helpful. So I didn't want to stop you from sharing that.

David Morgenroth: Yes. So guiding principles are important to think about really early in the process. And these are the really deep, deeply held beliefs inherent beliefs that we have that are going to drive our thinking, our actions, our interactions.

As part of this process, and they're often things that if we stop to think about it, we know already, but we just have to figure out well, what are they exactly? And this is going to get into a little bit of talking about who are the who are the right players to be having these discussions, which is probably what we are going to talk about next.

So I'm not going to go too far into that yet. But just to mention that we'll have this as a placeholders guiding principles will be important. Part of that, that discussion and one more thing I want to mention. Is that there's a tendency for people to when they jump [00:09:00] into a strategic plan to want to move as quickly as possible towards a vision for the future and strategies, which is a completely natural tendency for people to have.

But the other thing that I think is really important from the start is assessing the current state, where things are now, strengths, weaknesses, areas for improvement and building, building based on what you know, you have what, you know, you might be missing and really understanding that.

Trish Kritek: Okay, so. I'm going to try to put what you just said into some sequence and you're going to tell me if I got it right, but start with the kind of scoping.

What's the timeframe that you're going to be thinking about for the strategic plan? Not the time it's going to take you to make the strategic plan, but like the strategic plan is for the next 3 years, 5 years, 10 years, something like that. And then I am going to ask you about who you need to engage to do this, but I think what I heard you say next is you need to assess the current state before you can envision the future state.

So. Are there key elements to assessing the current state that you would recommend people consider as [00:10:00] part of this? And I'll just say, you know, we just did a strategic plan for the School of Medicine. We're still working on it. It's taking time, like we just talked about. And we did a lot of different forms of assessment.

So I'm curious what you think are kind of core buckets of things one might consider.

David Morgenroth: Yes, absolutely. I mean, one thing I want to say right off the bat is I think it's helpful to have both quantitative and qualitative data, and probably the qualitative data may even be more important, which as a vice chair for research, you know, I tend towards the quantitative side of things.

And I think a lot of us do probably within our day jobs here. Um, so it's a little harder sometimes to remember the importance of the qualitative data. So I'll give an example, surveys: I think surveys are an important part and a challenging part of this. Developing the right survey questions is not just the right survey questions, but the right length of survey where you're not going to intimidate people so much that they won't fill them out, ensuring [00:11:00] that people feel confident that their results will be held anonymous so that they're actually going to answer honestly, because if you don't get honest answers, it's not going to be helpful.

And then having a nice mix of short answer and longer answer questions that to give people a chance to wax poetic about their concerns, their areas that they think are really important to consider in the current state. And I want to pause again because I have a couple other areas of assessment.

Trish Kritek: I was just going to say I couldn't agree more that I think the comments from people, well obviously there can be outliers who are going to express comments and I think you have to be a little cautious about one comment driving too much, but the words of people, the qualitative data that you're talking about, I think is essential to really get a flavor for what people think is the current state and where there are great things and where there are challenges and where there are opportunities.

So yeah, keep going with assessment.

David Morgenroth: Okay, so next step, which is entirely qualitative, and then I'll finish with quantitative for all you researchers, [00:12:00] quantitative data is interviews, and this is where maybe it'll delve back in a little bit to, uh, who, who the players are here. When you think about stakeholders to interview, clearly, there's important internal stakeholders to your unit, your division, your department, et cetera.

But it is absolutely vital to include some key external stakeholders as well. And I'll give you a couple examples of this. So, in our case, again, we did a strategic plan in my department, and we reached out to you. Some chairs of PM and our departments from around the country from leading departments because we wanted their insights both about what they saw looking from the outside into our department, but also thinking about different ways they might do things that we don't really consider, in our day-to-day practices within our department.

The second one is folks who have left our department, and it's where you have to be willing to hear the good, the bad and the ugly and reaching [00:13:00] out to folks who maybe left because they were unhappy and being very upfront with yourself that there's some things that might need fixing, and getting that information and again, being sensitive to making sure that they don't feel that this will negatively impact them, keeping what they say as confidential.

But those aspects, I think, and then putting all that together with some sort of thematic analysis, which doesn't have to be an experienced, qualitative researcher necessarily. So

that, as you said, Trish, you're not just taking one comment and outsizing it over everything else, but you're looking for themes.

Trish Kritek: So, before you talk about the quantitative because I know you're going to talk about the quantitative, I want to highlight a couple things you said which I think are really important and that is you want to make sure you engage all your different stakeholders internally and it's great to get some external voices that might have different perspectives.

And then the last one that I heard is and you want some dissenting voices or some voices that might not be entirely [00:14:00] happy with the way things were or are because that might shed some light on. The places where there's opportunity for change. And I think that intentionality of embracing all those perspectives is really valuable.

So I want to highlight that. But yes, tell us what numbers we should gather to.

David Morgenroth: Okay, this, this all depends on what the scope of your plan is. If you're focused on research, clearly, you're going to look at your grant submissions, you're going to look at your total direct dollars, you're going to look at your indirect flow, you're going to look at, you know, number of manuscripts published and journal impact factors, things of that nature. If you're focused on the clinical side, you're maybe going to look at your RVUs. You're going to look at length of stay. You're going to look at things such as those clinical indicators of different outcomes.

And you can imagine similarly on the education side. But what I want to caution is that this should not feel like a top-down process where the leadership [00:15:00] who has to really keep in mind a lot of these quantitative metrics is going to let that override the qualitative side. The importance of really understanding that this had to be successful.

This has to feel like a group effort where you have to involve those internal stakeholders from across your organization. Department, division, unit, et cetera, so that they feel part of the process and that they feel that their interests and what's going to allow them to thrive as individuals and as a team is going to be kept in mind.

And that's often where a lot of the qualitative side comes in with the data.

Trish Kritek: I think it's interesting you use the kind of distinction between qualitative and quantitative data to give another really important point, which is you need to hear all your stakeholders voices, and that means everyone from the, you know, round level up, and there are some ways that you can make sure you hear those voices and maybe through some of this qualitative assessment, you're going to hear those voices.

I've alluded, or you alluded that I would ask you, and it's true, I'm going to ask you, who needs to be at the table? Who are the folks that you need to [00:16:00] be engaging in this process? And is it everyone in all steps or is it different folks at different times? Can you give just some broad strokes on that?

David Morgenroth: Yeah, absolutely. The first step is figuring out who's the leader or the champion of this process. And in my case, and maybe in other cases, someone is tasked with it. And so that becomes quite obvious, but it's vital that you have someone who is championing the process who really wants to be championing the process and is invested in that.

Otherwise, it's not going to go anywhere. And often that person is not the, for instance, chair of a department, and it's really important that, you know, that you have the support of the leadership in the department or the unit or division, et cetera, even if they're not going to be leading the process.

Then the first thing I did was I put together a steering committee because I felt like this can't just be me sitting there thinking this through on my own. It's not going to be accepted by the department that way. So I needed to think about [00:17:00] who can I put together as a steering committee from across the department that represents different divisions in our department, different geographic sites in our department, so that people feel represented across the department and that we can have regular meetings and that this is going to be a team that is not necessarily all going to agree on everything. I wouldn't actually want that, but they're going to be able to constructively disagree and going to be able to represent the department.

And also, be able to improve the quality of what we come up with more than just what any individual can. So a couple more, but I'm going to pause there in case you have any questions.

Trish Kritek: No, I think that makes sense. I think what I heard you say is a leader, a steering committee that has representation across multiple domains.

So that people feel, you know, represented in that steering committee and then who else?

David Morgenroth: Two others: a consultant and this is a plus minus. So this depends going back to the scope of the plan. What's the budget? So, do you have money set aside where you can pay a consultant? Because consultants don't [00:18:00] come cheap and that's a decision that has to be made early on.

Where a consultant is really helpful is if you don't feel like you have the process expertise to be able to do this within the department, because you clearly have the content expertise as someone who's in the department, but the consultant is really the process expert. They don't have to know your area. They are just the expert in how to go about doing this. So it's helpful if you have a really good consultant, which we did. And I learned a ton from our consultant.

The other person I'm going to mention is, if you have the money in the budget to have administrative support for this, and this could be everything from just the basics of scheduling meetings, et cetera.

But what we ended up having is we had an assistant director of research administration who I worked very closely with. And his name is Kevin Gertz. And he was fabulous. And that really enabled the plan to continue to move forward, especially when you have busy folks who are championing the process who are on [00:19:00] faculty.

Who have a research portfolio to deal with and clinical care and teaching and all these other things pulling at their time. If you have someone on the administrative side that can really work closely with you and help with a lot of the details, it helps things move forward successfully.

Trish Kritek: Both of those make a lot of sense to me and I agree with you.

They cost money. So they're probably not always available to everybody. But I do think the best strategic plans have several levels of support. And now I'm going to say, let's say you don't have a consultant and you had to walk through the process that happens after you've gathered the data, after you have the assessment, what are the subsequent steps to kind of creating that plan?

And I know there's going to be many, many layers here, so I might keep you up at a high level to kind of walk people through what can they expect to do as they follow along.

David Morgenroth: Okay, this is where it I think it gets fun for people. You've got all that data. You've analyzed that data. Now you get to envision your ideal future with that data in [00:20:00] mind, and this is another place where it's incredibly important to engage your stakeholders.

So what we did in my department, and I would highly recommend is we had a retreat. We had a full day retreat where we pulled in about actually 40 different faculty, staff and actually a few trainees to ensure. That we're getting even wider stakeholder engagement and representation from across our community within our department.

Trish Kritek: So that's another way of hearing voices and also creating some enthusiasm about this process.

David Morgenroth: Yes, and if you don't have that enthusiasm, and if you don't have people feeling like they have a, have a voice, then they're not going to accept it and change is not going to happen. So once you do that process, then it gets back to some relatively more challenging work, which is saying, okay, we've got, we've got this North Star, this, this future that we're envisioning, this ideal future.

But how do we get there? What are the strategies and tactics that take us there? And that's where you can put together small groups again with representation [00:21:00] from across the department. And going back to process as a product, you can mix those groups up with people from different divisions, maybe some faculty and staff pepper in, you know, a trainee or 2, depending on what you're trying to get at.

Give them a working plan of how to go about doing that. But in each focus area that you've developed early on. So, in our case, we had 6 focus areas. Once you know what those focus areas on give each small group the definitions of what is a strategy? What is a tactic? And their job is to come up with those and then bring them back to the steering committee.

And the champion and if you have the consultant to refine those, make sure they're not redundant, et cetera. And then you can build the strategic plan document from that.

Trish Kritek: I'm going to ask one question in the weeds, which I may regret asking you, but I'm going to ask it anyway. Can you help people understand the difference between a strategy and a tactic?

David Morgenroth: Yeah, strategies are higher level than tactics. There are more of these [00:22:00] approaches that aim to achieve this overarching goal of, for instance, one of your focus areas. The tactics are where it gets into the actionable items. So these deliberate actions that where you're trying to enact them to accomplish those, those strategies.

So, you know, I'll give you the example from our plan. We had six focus areas. Each one had an overarching goal with two to three strategies, and each strategy had about four or five, six tactics to them. And then you want to develop metrics too, so that you can ensure that you know how you're defining success within each of those.

Trish Kritek: I think that's super helpful. So there's the goal. Then there's the strategies, a few of them, and then under each of those strategies are the kind of more granular things you're going to do, the tactics, and then for each of those you're going to have metrics, things that you can measure to say, are we affecting the change that we were, we were hoping for.

Um, we could talk for hours about this. I know I could talk for hours. I've been spending my, a lot of my time thinking about this for the School of Medicine recently, and so I could [00:23:00] wax philosophical, but I'm going to move us forward. So you did all that, you end up with all this, this stuff and then how do you launch it?

Like what's the rollout of the strategic plan look like or what did it look like for you?

David Morgenroth: This is the implementation and this is where the rubber meets the road or I suppose going back to the sailboat analogy that I don't know the rudder meets the sea or something. So once you have all of these tactics in mind, then what you what you really need to do is you need to define priorities because you can't do everything at once. I mean, in our case, we had 70 something tactics. So you have to say, okay, we're going to define which we're going to try and do first, which maybe we try and do a little later and which we maybe are not even going to get to.

If we've said our scope is three years, let's say it's not realistic. Or maybe if, if we finish these other ones early enough, we can get to them. What we did in our cases, we allowed our

steering committee to [00:24:00] essentially give priority scores to each of those 70 something tactics and then we average them out.

So we use a quantitative approach and we put together this giant Gantt chart with all of our tactics and we prioritized each of them. Once we had that in mind, then you have to have a champion for individual tactics, or else they won't get done. And that champion is not necessarily the champion of the whole strategic plan.

In some cases it may be, but you know your department, your division, your unit, and you know who would be a good individual to lead any given tactic. You want to spread those out. You don't want to give any individual too much work to do. You have to understand that people are busy. And so if there's no money to pay or time to give to individuals who are going to lead these implementation of individual tactics, you have to ensure that they're excited about doing this and figure out a way to generate that enthusiasm.

The other thing I will say is it helps if you have a really nice looking plan. We use the graphic designer, and that generates that [00:25:00] enthusiasm. Sometimes that helps when you send that email saying, Hey, I'm We have this one tactic. Here's our beautiful plan, which, by the way, thanks so much for your help with now.

We'd love if you are going to lead this individual tactic with the implementation of this tactic. And then we have our metrics in mind. So you have to maintain flexibility. to know when you need to change gears because you're not headed in the right direction with an individual tactic.

Trish Kritek: I think there's so much there.

So one is like, you did all this work, make it look good. So you are developing a shiny product, which is nice. And then I heard distribute the leadership, distribute the championing of different tactics after you prioritize which ones you're going to start with, and then continue to engage people and continue Keep that spirit that you did when you engaged everyone to kind of tell you what the current state was.

Continue to engage people now as you move forward with change. And I think those are all great things just in general for change management. Makes a lot of sense. And I think there must be an iterative return to your strategic plan over time.

David Morgenroth: [00:26:00] Absolutely.

Trish Kritek: So we could keep going, but I'm going to actually focus you now and say, if you had to give the listeners one pearl or one kind of big take home about what you learn from doing your strategic plan or what you wish you had known before you started doing your strategic plan, anything like that.

If you have one pearl for folks about this, what would it be?

David Morgenroth: I think that it's all about relationships when it comes down to it. And so much of whether we are successful and whether we feel like we're thriving and satisfied comes down to relationships to developing relationships, caring for those relationships.

And so how does that, how is that operationalized within a strategic planning process? Well, it means that you maintain transparency through the process. You regularly show gratitude through the process. You're getting different people to the table together to enable these relationships to form and break down silos.

And you're sharing stories of success from the [00:27:00] plan regularly back to those stakeholders. So you're maintaining these relationships, which you grew through this process. And if you do that successfully, I think you do change culture in a positive way. People feel good about it and they feel a sense of shared mission.

And I think everyone thrives more to go back to the thrive cast of the podcast title here. And you end up not only with successes and wins from the plan, but with a department or division or unit that feels stronger.

Trish Kritek: I appreciate any guest who connects to Thrivecast. That was very impressive. And I really like, you know, I think sometimes when we make a strategic plan, we get really focused on key performance indicators and numbers and metrics and things like that, which are essential.

But I love that where you came back to is relationships and that building of trust, that building of community of shared vision, shared purpose and gratitude for all the contributions that went into it. I really love that something that feels kind of structured and organized. [00:28:00] Also helps build relationships and that those relationships are essential for the success.

So thank you for that pearl. It really resonates with me. And I think actually people have probably learned a ton from this conversation. So thank you so much for joining today and sharing all that you learned through the process of leading the strategic plan in your department.

David Morgenroth: It was my pleasure, Trish.

Trish Kritek: Again, I'm going to say thank you, and I'm going to say to everyone who's listening, if you want to listen to more episodes of Thrivecast, you can find them at Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. You can also find them on the UW School of Medicine faculty website at faculty.uwmedicine.org. Thanks for listening, and have a great day.