

Eastern Center for Arts and Technology

Synthesis Report of Baldrige Team Reports Current Reality Issues 2007: A Self-Study

Background

This report serves as a synthesis of the individual reports from seven (7) teams that examined EASTERN's current reality through the lens of the Baldrige Award Categories including:

1. Leadership
2. Strategic Planning
3. Student, Stakeholder and Market Focus
4. Measurement, Analysis and Knowledge Management
5. Faculty and Staff Focus
6. Process Management
7. Results

These seven (7) teams were tasked with applying the criteria to EASTERN to establish, at this point in time, how the school is performing against those criteria. Each team was asked to prepare a narrative report with supporting data and to develop a summary statement using the S-W-O-T (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) approach. It is these S-W-O-T summaries that have been synthesized into this statement of EASTERN's current reality.

Statement of Strengths

Given that this is the third cycle of strategic planning and the second including a current reality assessment component; it should be no surprise to see the listing of the current strengths of EASTERN. This can be best stated by borrowing from the introduction prepared by Team 7.

By "strategic maturity" we mean that there is a specific relationship in the organizational life of Eastern between intentions or goals and results. An educational organization may be considered successful if an analysis of the seven categories identified in the Baldrige framework shows that satisfactory results are occurring. But for an organization to be strategically mature in our sense it must be true that when satisfactory results occur they can be seen to grow out of consciously developed intent. But strategic maturity also entails that when results are either unsatisfactory or at any rate not clearly satisfactory the organization is able to consciously understand these results in the light of its intentions and goals. On both counts not the least of the factors that makes such strategic maturity possible is access to data that can both

demonstrate success and shed light on anything less than success.

Eastern has developed and implemented two strategic plans in the past decade. The combined effects of those two plans, together with the ongoing effects of the such equally strategic aspects of the organization's life as the Articles of Jointure and the commitment to a robust advisory committee structure, has produced an organization which is strategically mature in the sense of that term as we have defined it.

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It will be left to you, the reader, to review the individual team reports to gain an appreciation for the vital nature of the current strengths EASTERN has crafted during this period of stable strategic maturity.

Changing Reality

EASTERN finds itself at the "intersection between a long period of growth and maturation with a basically stable environment and a period when changes in EASTERN's environment have become, and are likely to remain for some time, pervasive." (Team 7 Report) What we now see happening is a shifting from this stable situation toward change, unpredictability and challenge.

Again, Team 7 provides us with a concise and sobering statement of this uncertain period.

The various elements of EASTERN's leadership, in particular, have undergone specific changes and have seen a pattern of change emerge that suggests that any constancy that emerges from the current fluctuations will look and feel very different from what we saw in the 1980s and 1990s. The legal and policy context of all public educational institutions has been significantly altered by such national legislation as the NCLB assessment law and such state policies as the support for charter schools and, most significantly and most recently the enactment of Act 1 which has significantly impacted the ability of local school boards to determine the level of funding for their school systems. It is our view that if EASTERN's approach to its third major strategic planning effort will succeed only if these changes of EASTERN's environment are fully taken into account.

Given the nature of the changing external environment, the weaknesses and threats raised by the seven (7) teams take on an even greater significance for this strategic planning process and EASTERN's future.

Current Significant Issues

While the seven (7) teams raise a number of weaknesses and threats in their individual team reports, a review of these reports yields the identification of a small list of thematic issues that would challenge EASTERN over the next planning period even without the existing uncertainty and shifting environment. These themes are:

- A. Declining Student Population
- B. Changing Legislative Environment
- C. Image and perception of EASTERN by stakeholders
- D. Marketing to improve image and increase enrollments
- E. Measuring and demonstrating real outcomes
- F. Involve stakeholders in providing feedback to create a feedback loop
- G. Strengthening or Adapting the OAC Model
- H. Absence of Staff Development Strategies
- I. Continued emphasis on compiling complete, meaningful, and accurate data sets

Below is a brief coverage of each of these emerging strategic issues.

A. Declining Student Population

EASTERN's programs are designed to serve eleventh and twelfth grade students from our participating High Schools. During the 1999-2000 school year, there were 4,205 students in this cohort. Eleventh and twelfth grade enrollment has increased steadily since. In the 2007-2008 school year, there are expected to be almost 5,400 students eligible to select programs at EASTERN. During the first year of this plan, 2008-2009 enrollments in the eleventh and twelfth grades will begin to decrease. In fact, in three years the cohort is projected to decrease by more than 700 students or 13%.

B. Changing Legislative Environment

Much of the uncertainty in the current external environment is happening in the legislative arena. As we know, the priorities of education are defined by state and federal legislation.

- Nationally, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has clearly focused the primary goal of K-12 education as defined by students' performance on standardized tests. This has brought about significant change in the organization and delivery of public education.

- Career and technical education is defined by the priorities set forth in the Carl D. Perkins Act. In a radical departure from its historical goal of increasing access and enrollment in vocational schools, the new legislation is clearly aligned with the goals of NCLB and stresses academic performance and ability to enter college as its primary goal. In essence, they have reversed their position that has directed EASTERN and other schools like it.

The combined impact on these two controlling pieces of legislation will have significant impact on students' ability to take time from their crowded academic schedule to attend EASTERN and in EASTERN's ability to provide entry-level employability skills to students who have not demonstrated proficiency in English and math.

Additionally, Pennsylvania has recently implemented Act 1 of 2006, which is intended to limit the growth of funds available to support education within the Commonwealth. The impact of this legislation will require EASTERN to compete with local school districts' priorities for a shrinking pool of resources. On its own, this presents a significant challenge for EASTERN.

When viewed in combination with the other themes described below, it definitely heralds the need for continued strong leadership and a sound organizational strategy to appropriately position EASTERN to achieve its goals and future success in this changing and competitive environment.

The Department of Education adopted Chapter 4 of the Pennsylvania School Code in June 2006. This provides state standards for career education and work as part of each student's curriculum, which should be assessed at grades three, five, eight and eleven. As school districts begin planning for activities to implement these standards, EASTERN has the opportunity as a partner to identify and maximize opportunities for making all students aware of the opportunities at EASTERN.

C. Image and perception of EASTERN by stakeholders

This was by far the most pervasive weaknesses identified by the study teams. There were no less than 27 references to this issue in the collective reports. There is no doubt that this is a significant issue given the shifting environment and the fragile nature of some of the programs. Here are some examples of their statements.

- Team 2: Stereotype of parents, students, and sending school staff regarding the old "tech school" mentality
- Team 3: Some sending schools (faculty, counselors) have a misperception that EASTERN students are not college-bound

- Team 3: There is an inconsistent focus on career development among participating schools that limit student/parent knowledge of vocational/technical opportunities
- Team 3: Some post-secondary schools exhibit inconsistent interest in maintaining a mutually supportive market with EASTERN
- Team 3: Participating schools may not consistently utilize EASTERN's educational opportunities for all students who may benefit
- Team 6: Participating schools have considerable impact on the number and type of students attending EASTERN

D. Marketing to improve image and increase enrollments

Hand-in hand with image is EASTERN's marketing effort which should be planned and designed to affect these perceptions and result in increased enrollments. The team reports paint a less than favorable picture for the current marketing plan or strategies. They suggest ways to connect to stakeholders more effectively.

Team 6 actually wrote: "The marketing goals for the 2006-2007 school year were not met, resulting in a significant decrease in enrollment."

At another point in their report, Team 6 indicated that "the marketing plan does not contain specific objectives and strategies for increasing enrollment in programs with low enrollment."

A, B and C taken together highlight a major gap that could severely impact EASTERN's ability to achieve its enrollment and student success goals in the future.

E. Measuring and demonstrating real outcomes

Three of the teams identified the need to identify performance benchmarks, best practices or other measurement strategies to determine real success, progress on tactical action plans, or some clear measures to show which strategic objectives are being accomplished.

For example, Team 2 wrote that there is ". . . little evidence of an organization-wide systematic approach to tracking, analyzing or evaluating improvements." They also suggested that "tracking systems should be developed to determine progress of tactical action plan."

Team 3 found that the "Lack of consistent and comprehensive satisfaction data weakens EASTERN's evidence of student success and responsiveness to stakeholders.

F. Involve stakeholders in providing feedback to create a feedback loop

Five (5) of the seven (7) teams included the lack of informal or formal feedback systems to be both a weakness and a threat for EASTERN. While each team focused on its specific category, the theme calling for better and more frequent feedback processes is easily identified. The surveys they recommended included:

- Student and parent satisfaction
- Students and staff (at participating schools) knowledge and interest in EASTERN programs/services
- Businesses needs
- Employee satisfaction
- Student satisfaction with program content, teaching styles, equipment, and facilities

G. Strengthening or Adapting the OAC Model

Team 7 writes very eloquently about the need to explore ways to strengthen and adapt the current business partnership in program development through the OACs. The OACs are seen as a strength and data suggest that they are instrumental in program strength, student enrollment, job placement and overall program success.

If this is true, the findings of two teams raise a serious concern. Team 3 suggests that OAC membership is inconsistent and that OAC self-evaluations are used inconsistently.

Team 6 found that weak OACs weaken Business Alliances. They further note that loss or weaknesses in Alliances threaten student employability, program authenticity for students and ultimately could contribute to a loss of Students that EASTERN could otherwise attract.

H. Absence of Staff Development Strategies

Teams 2 (Strategic Planning) and 6 (Process Management) see this as a significant issue and weakness as evidenced by their statements:

- Lack of process or policies to insure a smooth transition for new employees (Team 2)
- Lack of process to insure that key knowledge is not limited to a single person (Team 2)
- Employee skills inventory data are not used to their full potential to identify individual and group training needs (Team 6)

- Very little employee training outside of the new employee induction has been provided over the past year (Team 6)

I. Continued emphasis on compiling complete, meaningful, and accurate data sets

EASTERN's ability to navigate the future will rest with its capacity to collect, analyze and use meaningful data to make meaningful decisions. In uncertain times, good data take on increased importance to help an organization navigate the uncharted waters. Two of the teams (2 and 4) are concerned with potential data overload of not always meaningful data and the existence of a number of incomplete data sets in ones that are meaningful.

An additional concern centers around the notion that the data and its corresponding analysis need to meet the expectations of the end user who needs the data to make the decision.

For both teams, potential data overload is a real concern.

Concluding Comments

Going into the next phase in developing its new strategic plan, EASTERN will need to retain its focus and reinforce its commitment to the basic elements that have brought them success in the past. Student success, stakeholder perception, marketing, the OAC process, and the other themes identified above should stay in the forefront with a renewed commitment and vigor.

The conclusion to the team 7 report is appropriately included here to conclude this picture of the current reality.

We think it calls for continuing the organization's efforts in many of these areas, in particular the goals of continuous improvement and data-driven decisions.

We think it suggests the wisdom of deepening the school's engagement with the strategic initiatives already in place, such as the effort to have students consciously develop goals and the shared-purpose initiative

And we think it demands a recommitment of the school to basic and essential aspects of its structural foundation such as the advisory committee structure, which require not so much repair as adaptation on the one hand to the now less stable environment in which the organization finds itself, and confrontation on the other hand with the particular threats that are either ongoing and chronic, as we have noted about the student/parent stakeholder issues touching enrollment and course completion, or quite new and either potentially short-term like the internal administrative

succession or likely to be ongoing such as the more rapid change in administrative leadership in the participating districts and the still-uncertain impact of Act 1.

In short, we think that this will be a distinctly different kind of strategic planning cycle for EASTERN, with no less crucial implications for the organization's growth and long-term health than the previous two.