Empowering Innovation

By Daniel J. Bradley

A common complaint heard about strategic plans is that after expending effort and resources to develop them, they often sit on a shelf gathering dust. The aversion to cultural change is not unique to higher education.

However, a strategic plan can serve as a dynamic blueprint for change. Below are ideas I have used successfully at my previous presidency at Fairmont State (W. Va.) and in my current role at Indiana State.

1. **Involve everyone in the creation of the plan.** The plan should develop from the grassroots level. This needs to be reinforced every step of the way. Remember to always reference the documents as the “university’s plan” or “our plan,” rather than “my plan” or the “president’s plan.”

2. **Establish data benchmarks against which progress will be measured.** Having measurable goals is critical to maintaining forward momentum. Goals should be aggressive enough to be challenging without crossing into the realm where they are readily dismissed as unrealistic.

3. **Encourage risk-taking.** Innovation requires new approaches and thorough reconsideration of why we do things the way we do. Recognize that some ideas won’t work and know when to pull the plug. Embrace these “failures” as part of the learning process to help define new strategies. Remember that a part of the goal is getting people working together so there are no failures, only initiatives that are not helping achieve overarching goals.

4. **Allow enough time for success to occur.** It is difficult to move the needle on areas such as graduation rates. Understand the complexity of the issues and what it will take to meet the goals.

5. **Hold everyone accountable.** Incorporate the goals of the strategic plan into everyone’s daily routine. How does their job impact recruitment, retention or graduation? Do performance evaluations place value on advancing the university’s goals?

6. **Measure work and report progress.** Have university personnel “audit” the work being done. Plan open meetings for stakeholders at least once a year where goal chairs report on progress. This activity is probably the most important for keeping the energy level high.

7. **Be the cheerleader.** Live and breathe the strategic plan every day. Reflect its goals in your speeches, your media interviews and, most importantly, in your decisions. Connect the dots every chance you get so that everyone understands the goals and how the institution is going to achieve them.

8. **Encourage collaboration and competition.** Our Unbounded Possibilities (UP) program offered an opportunity to compete for funding for collaborative programs that would increase the distinctiveness of the university. External and internal reviewers helped select programs that received this designation. External validation helps avoid claims that the money goes to insiders rather than good ideas. In many cases, the energy and collaboration are ultimately more valuable than the focus of the work.

9. **Put your money where your mouth is.** Implementing new ideas requires resources. Our planning process includes an annual opportunity to request funds for the next year. They must show how the funds are helping the institution achieve its goals. It is also made clear that implementing programs is not the end goal; the actions must demonstrate a positive impact on meeting the established benchmarks.

10. **Recognize and reward those making things happen.** Find ways to call attention to the work being done. Our plan has literally hundreds of university and community members engaged in its implementation. Showing appreciation for their role in advancing the institution is critically important to sustaining their involvement.

Maintaining a dynamic strategic plan requires constant attention. Its importance is directly related to the time and attention the CEO places on it.