

## Thought Piece: Strategic v Operational – The Difference



## Strategic v Operational - how do you know the difference?

*“The role of governing boards in defining and implementing strategy whilst holding leaders of schools to account has to be the foundation upon which a world class education system is built.”*

..... Sir David Carter (former National Schools Commissioner for England)

Governing boards are often reminded that their role is strategic and that they shouldn't stray into the operational side. But how do you make sure you do not become involved in operational matters when one of the core functions of the board is to hold the executive of the school to account for the educational performance of the school?

Let's start by taking a definition of strategy; '*a plan or action designed to achieve a major or overall aim*'. The key here is '*a major or overall aim*'. As a governing board, you must have this in place.

The most effective schools, trusts and governing boards are ambitious. They want to set the bar high, and this is not just about growth or extra resources; it is about the attainment, the achievement and improving the life chances of the young people we serve. It is about having a vision that excites people, that will foster engagement and ownership among all stakeholders including pupils, staff, governors and families. There is no reason it should be limited.

As with any journey, you have to start from where you are. Therefore, as a school or a trust, you need to have a very good understanding of where you are. This involves some very serious self-assessment by the school, including input from governors. It also involves having that self-assessment validated by qualified, independent, professionals.

Having identified where you are and where you want to be, you will be only too aware of the gap.

The next step is to devise a plan to close that gap with a realistic judgement of how long it will take. It will not be achieved overnight, it will not be achieved in one, or even two, years, but over a period of three, or possibly, five years. What will be clear is that some of the actions required to achieve your vision can be completed in years 1 and 2. The high-level actions will be milestones that serve as your strategic objectives; the most specific, or developed, will be for years 1 and 2.

Developing the plan further will take time, effort and commitment and should involve all stakeholders. After all, who has a greater stake in the achievement and enhanced life chances of our young people than those young people themselves and their families?

At this point we have a clear focus, a goal, a vision of where we want to be. We have a journey broken down into a number of stages over 1-5 years, and we have milestones along that journey where we can check on progress.

The role of governors and trustees is to lead the development of the vision and strategic objectives and to put in place a robust system that measures progress and presses for mitigating actions if required.

That is what being strategic looks like.

Once a plan, with milestones, has been established, it has to be implemented. This involves breaking each milestone down into smaller, bite sized chunks, that have owners, deadlines and (where appropriate) associated costs.

Developing this – shall we call it the `implementation plan' – falls to the Heads and senior leaders of the school. They do the doing.

This is what operational looks like.

The role of governors and trustees is to hold the school to account for the delivery of the implementation plan.

As each bite sized chunk is delivered, as each milestone is reached, it is another step along the path to reaching the end of your journey and achieving your vision.

I would suggest that it is also within the scope of the chair's role to keep the `big picture' in focus, to remind everyone what you are striving for, and to put all her/his effort into ensuring that the momentum is not lost.

**Harry James**

\*\*\*