

Erie County Technical School Strategic Plan Mid-point Review

Refocusing Our Vision

In his book *Leading Change*, John Kotter discusses an eight-stage process for transforming organizations and implementing change successfully. Two stages of Kotter's process include "establishing a sense of urgency" and "communicating the change vision." In an effort to clarify the technical school's vision and to aid in the communication of the vision, the administrative staff developed a set of vision anchors (*see the graphic representation which accompanies this document*). The vision anchors are the mainstay components of the school's vision. And, they are the aspects of the school calling out for the most attention. The vision anchors simplify the vision into four categories that are easily recalled and communicated. Each of the anchors is surrounded by "urgencies." The urgencies, being both positive and negative in nature, are the external and internal reasons for refocusing the school's vision—for refining the way the school operates.

The four vision anchors adopted for the school are *Product*, *Customers*, *Promotion* and *Culture*. Other than Culture, the other anchors are discussed in the current strategic plan. Each of the anchors has underlying activities or conditions that define and describe the anchor. A brief discussion of each anchor follows.

Product

The Erie County Technical School is a provider of *technical training*. There are many facets to our product including qualified personnel, planned curricula, teaching resources, facilities and equipment, financial resources and student support services. One area we would like to focus on in this strategic vision is *instructional delivery methods*. The desired features and action steps for this initiative are detailed in our quality action plan, *Great Career & Technical Education*, Best Practice B, Teachers as Instructional Managers (*see the attached document*). Another area where we intend to concentrate our efforts is "up-to-date" curricula. Our curriculum documents are a weakness for the school. We have taken the first steps in upgrading our curricula. The desired state and action steps for this initiative can be found in the quality action plan under Best Practice A, Nationally Accredited

Programs. Part of this initiative is to make our technical training more relevant to business and industry standards.

Academic standards have become a major influence on our product. This external influence has swelled in the past three years. Our students and participating school districts are dealing with accountability issues brought about by state and federal legislation. Despite the relative newness of this factor, our quality action plan does include strategies to enhance the academic content within our technical training. Best Practice E, Integrated, Contextual Academics depicts an extensive plan to “support academic standards.”

Customers

The concept of customers has grown at the technical school in recent years. The growth is due in large part to the progress of our quality management system. Identifying and meeting the customer’s needs has become more prevalent. There are three particular groups of customers whose needs we expect to meet.

The first group is high school students with proficient or higher academic skills. Creating urgency for this initiative is an analysis of our current student population which reflects a dramatically different circumstance. More urgency can be found in the needs of business and industry. The business community values academic skills. When technical skills are coupled with higher level academic skills, the individual student and the business owner wins. The essence of this initiative is to attract and retain students with higher levels of academic proficiency.

A second customer group we plan to offer technical training to will be adults. While we meet some of the adult technical training needs with our Regional Career & Technical Center part-time, short-term programming, there is still a large group of adults in our region who need and are looking for more extensive technical training. This initiative is further highlighted by the urgency found in the lack of a community or technical college in northwest Pennsylvania. Despite recent disappointments with adult fulltime training, the technical school is capable of offering fulltime training to adults. And we can do so and still

overcome or avoid the hazards which led to our recent disappointments. One means to accomplish this is to co-enroll adults and high school students into the same programs.

The relevance and sophistication of the training offered in our high school programs is “good enough” to meet the needs of adults. This is especially true in the second and third years of training in our programs. Enrolling adults into the same classes with high school students will also modify the classroom environment. Other schools using a co-enrollment model have found that adults bring about a more serious and improved classroom environment. Another distinct advantage to the co-enrollment model is finances. Financial well-being was a major issue in our recent adult training failures. In the co-enrollment model, there is virtually no additional cost to enrolling adults into the high school programs. In fact, the tuition received by enrolling adults could have a significant, positive impact on the financial well-being of the technical school. The hope lies in results experienced by the Greater Altoona Career & Technology Center. The Greater Altoona CTC enrolls about 100 adults every year. Their average tuition for adult students is \$5,000. A quick calculation tells us a school could realize an additional \$500,000 annually in revenue.

The final group identified in the customer anchor is *special assistance clients*. The technical school and Regional Career & Technical Center have long histories of serving those in need. Be they delinquent middle school youth served by our career alternative education program, special population students served in our high school program or displaced homemakers served by our New Choices/New Options program, we have found a way to assist them in their special circumstances. The Erie County Technical School remains committed to this service.

Promotion

The third anchor of our refocused vision is promotion. This is not a new focus for the technical school. However, there is a combination of urgencies and initiatives we think will help us dramatically improve our marketing and public relations efforts, and hopefully, improve our enrollments. It should be noted that the technical school does not necessarily

see itself facing a low enrollment issue. During our most recent enrollment period, we received over 500 applications. Of those 500 applications, we turned away over 130 students due to over enrollments in some of our programs. The issue is not one of enrollment, but rather one of *admission* and *retention*.

The promotional effort has more to do with attracting more academically proficient students. In order to accomplish this, our promotional efforts have to take on a new and different approach. For one, high school students and their parents need to understand “workforce realities.” The realities are only a limited number of jobs require a four-year college degree and the majority of individuals that seek a four-year college degree fall short of acquiring one. The most reasonable career pathway for most individuals is a combination of technical training either at the secondary or post-secondary level. This typically equates to two years or less of post-secondary education.

Another new and different approach entails the efforts of our faculty and staff. Historically promotion and recruiting have been the responsibility of one individual. A new approach has to involve faculty and staff in all aspects of promotion from meeting the individual needs of our customers, to enhancing the perception of quality in our education and training, to playing a more active role in the actual recruitment of students to “our school and programs.”

Culture

The final anchor in our vision is culture. There has been some debate as to how we should label this anchor. Should we call it organizational culture, or school climate, or school environment? People tend to grow nervous when there is talk about changing their culture. The reality is the philosophy and principles of any organization are its culture. Both our philosophy and principles need to adapt to the urgencies challenging the school.

Part of the need to concentrate on our school or organizational culture has been pushed upon us by public and legislative pressure. The No Child Left Behind mandates and our Commonwealth’s tax referendum and academic standards are forcing schools to be more

accountable. Public education is condemned in the editorial columns everyday. There are ways to confront the public scrutiny.

By incorporating three elements and making them prominent parts of our culture, the Erie County Technical School will stand above the scrutiny. The first element to heighten in our culture is *quality*. The efforts invested in our quality management system over the past couple of years have headed us in the right direction. It has also “paid dividends” and promises to pay “bigger dividends” in the future. The results experienced so far include more awareness of and responsiveness to customer’s needs, an operational mode where systems and processes are integrated, a leadership model with shared responsibility and a decision-making model based on data collection and analysis. The end result--quality is unquestionable.

The cultural element alongside quality is accountability. Despite the accountability challenges forced upon schools, what is more challenging is accountability placed upon one’s self. Due in part to our quality management system, the technical school has embraced a set of accountability measures which surpass any mandates. In our *Key Indicators of Performance Success*, every major aspect of our operation is measured and evaluated. The standards we set far exceed those set for us. Remaining accountable to our standards and the standards of others is vital to our future success.

The final cultural element, rigor and relevance, focuses on our primary purpose—instruction. Amongst all of the time, energy and resources expended at the technical school we must remain focused on instruction. Of all the initiatives we have undertaken recently, none of them truly focused on instruction. Albeit a surprising realization, it is true. Customer satisfaction, curriculum development, energy conservation, technology improvements—none of them truly focused on instruction. Our rigor and relevance assessment is just the first of many steps the technical school has to take to improve the quality of instruction that occurs in our classrooms everyday. The assessment will help us identify our “current state” of instruction. This piece of information is vital to the design and implementation “action steps” we will take to reach our “desired state.” Once we are able to

truly improve the daily instruction that occurs in our classroom, then it is likely we will also realize the potential identified in our other vision anchors.

Summary

The strategic plan we developed in 2001 is a good plan. It helped us identify our strengths, weaknesses and potential. While the action steps in the original plan addressed the issues contained in the plan, they under-propelled the technical school to its full potential. Fortunately, the technical school addressed this weakness in 2002 with the development of our quality action plan, *Great Career and Technical Education*. A review of this document clearly illustrates to the reader where the Erie County Technical School is headed and how it intends to get there. The creation of the “vision anchors” through this mid-point strategic review will further propel us to our potential. The vision anchors have helped us account for trends and realities that have occurred since the original strategic plan was developed.

This strategic mid-point review has also helped us realize circumstances do change and plans must change with them. It is certain with each passing year our circumstances will continue to change—either by our own actions or the actions of others. It is therefore certain our strategic plan, our quality action plan, and perhaps even our vision anchors will have to change as well. With these plans and anchors already in place, and the elements and initiatives they contain, it is certain the Erie County Technical School will respond for the better.