

Strategic Conversation: Just the Facts

What is a Strategic Conversation?

A Strategic Conversation is an informal, but structured, discussion on a strategic policy issue that results in a clearer understanding of that issue or issues. A Strategic Conversation helps an organization or board thoughtfully examine why it is making the policy decisions it makes, while connecting and involving all internal stakeholders affected by those decisions in a positive and meaningful way. Topics reflect policy issues facing the Board of Trustees, rather than operational issues.

Who Attends?

Email invitations are sent on behalf of the board to all internal stakeholders: students, and classified, faculty and management employees. RSVP's are requested for planning purposes. While the process shares common components with a charette, a significant deviation is its exclusion of external stakeholders.

Is there an optimum size for a Strategic Conversation?

No. The process works with all sizes of groups.

Are formal decisions reached?

No. The meeting focuses on examining directions and assumptions that underlie strategic policy issues.

How is this different from a brainstorming session?

It is more focused than brainstorming as it is directed dialogue.

How does it work?

Everyone is considered "equal" in a Strategic Conversation, regardless of rank, expertise or experience – everyone's opinion is valued.

A topic/issue is selected by the board. The district then sends out an invitation to all internal stakeholders identifying the topic of the Strategic Conversation. Stakeholders self-select whether they wish to participate and RSVP for planning purposes.

Prior to attending the Strategic Conversation, participants are sent information explaining the process; it is called "Strategic Conversation: Just the Facts". Participants also receive a white paper which provides an in-depth analysis of the situation or issue under discussion. This background paper is used to frame the discussions at the actual Strategic Conversation session.

The event begins with a social hour which allows participants to mingle and enjoy refreshments. This is followed by a two-hour conversation on the identified topic. Participants sit at pre-designated tables to ensure a balance of board members, students, classified, faculty and management at each table. A facilitator and recorder is pre-designated for each table; a presenter is selected by the participants at each table.

The session is opened with a welcome from the Chancellor who is hosting this event because it is a new program for SCCCD. (Future Strategic Conversations will be hosted by the President of each campus as the event will rotate from campus to campus.) A member of the Board of Trustees will give opening remarks to provide a framework for the entire session and set out the protocols for the first session.

The first session begins with each table responding to the **same question focused on the situation or issue**. Participants are given 30 minutes to discuss the question at their tables. Each table then summarizes and shares the results of its discussion with all attendees.

During a 15 minute break, staff synthesizes the responses and notes the top 10-12 topics based on all of the reports. These topics, which further refine the discussion, are placed at each table.

A Board member opens the second half of the session by providing additional context to the framework. For instance, the Board member might indicate that once remedies are identified, it is up to the participants to carry the information back to their departments/constituent groups, etc. at the campus level to ensure the remedies are operationalized and feed into the college/center/district planning process.

The participants then self-select the table at which they wish to work based on their area of interest. For instance, if the initial topic is "barriers to student success", one of the areas it could be broken down into is "lack of partnerships with the area high schools". Anyone interested in further discussion of this barrier, and more importantly, how to fix it, would choose that table. The outcome is that experts and/or those with a passion for that topic will be at the same table. This should contribute to an increase in enthusiasm and synergy for the second portion of the event. This second portion of the event is 30-minutes long.

The Chancellor will then close the meeting by clarifying the district is moving beyond conversation. The expected outcome is that the synthesized information will now feed into the annual strategic planning process. The district will hold its traditional charette on March 1, 2012, it will be shaped from themes identified in the Strategic Conversation. The charette will gain internal and external stakeholders' perspectives on the development of the district's 2012-

2016 Strategic Plan, including the vision, mission, values, goals and objectives. Ideas generated and recorded during the Strategic Conversation are forwarded to all members of the organization and become part of the official minutes of the Board of Trustees.

The Chancellor will also explain the intent is to institutionalize this strategic conversation process. Therefore, it will be used annually to identify topics/themes which need to be addressed.

Who should use this process?

It is designed for use by policy-making governing boards of governmental and nonprofit organizations.

When is this process used?

Strategic Conversations do not replace regular board or staff meetings. They supplement those regular business sessions.

What is the end product of a Strategic Conversation?

- Helps the Board anticipate challenges and develop strategies on policy issues.
- Board decisions will be received with a greater degree of support.
- Strengthens the organization's ability to remain flexible and open to change.
- Identifies strategies which can be vetted through district and college governance processes, and integrated into districtwide and/or college planning processes.
- Facilitates the revision of goals and objectives of the districtwide Strategic Plan, during the annual review.

Who developed this process?

The concept of Strategic Conversation was developed by the Maricopa Community College District Governing Board and staff in 1994. It has been used successfully to explore subjects including diversity, finance, nontraditional education, marketing, quantum mechanics, employee issues, leadership and student issues.

Works Cited:

North Orange Community College District Strategic Conversation, October 25, 2011.

