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Future-ready directors: Owning a new educational development leadership role

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Abstract

This article focuses on educational developers who direct centers for teaching and learning (CTL) in new-to-them institutions. Professional guidance exists for entering educational development (Gillespie, et al, 2010; McDonald, 2010) and starting centers (Dickens et al., 2019), but not for transitioning into directing roles. Experienced educational developers in new director roles must develop self-awareness and a thorough understanding of their new environments. This article starts with an appreciative inquiry approach for identifying directors' strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results (SOAR, Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019), and then outlines questions for analyzing institutional strategic positioning.

1   Introduction

This article focuses on educational developers who direct centers for teaching and learning (CTL) in new-to-them institutions. Professional guidance exists for entering educational development (Gillespie, et al, 2010; McDonald, 2010) and starting centers (Dickens et al., 2019), but not for transitioning into directing roles.

Experienced educational developers in new director roles must develop self-awareness and a thorough understanding of their new environments. This article starts with an appreciative inquiry approach for identifying directors' strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results (SOAR, Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019), and then outlines questions for analyzing institutional strategic positioning.

2   Applying the SOAR framework

The SOAR framework for strategic thinking focuses on curiosity, possibility, innovation, energy, action and results (p. 16). Through learning conversations, this "whole system approach helps stakeholders see and understand how the system works and where their unique contributions make a difference" (p. 10). Table 1 adapts SOAR to self-examination for CTL leaders in new roles (p. 53). Throughout the transition, new directors can engage trusted colleagues in conversations to explore these questions. Colleagues' primary role is to listen and support personal discovery through SOAR. Beginning these conversations prior to applying for positions increases self-awareness, informs applications and interviews, and can lead to a strong fit, where the new director is interviewing the new position as much as being interviewed for it.

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SOAR	Individual
Strengths	What strengths do you bring to your new role? How do your strengths fit the demands of the new role? Think specifically of your most significant accomplishments. How do these accomplishments demonstrate your strengths? What strengths did you develop in the process? What new strengths are emerging in this transition?
Opportunities	What opportunities appear for you in the new context? What opportunities will be your focus in the first few months? How can you reframe challenges you face as leader so you see the potential in them?
Aspirations	What most excites you? What generates energy for you? What do you care deeply about? Who are you, and who/what do you want to become? How do you want to be known in your new context?
Results	What early actions or goals will you commit to? What will it take to accomplish them? What are meaningful measures of progress toward them?

Table 1: The SOAR framework applied to individual CTL directors

Table 2 outlines questions to prompt explorative conversations with various CTL stakeholders to create shared meaning. If the CTL doesn't yet exist, apply the questions to the organizational leadership above your center. For more ideas, see "Soaring at multiple levels" (pp. 45-55) and *Conversations worth having* (Stavros & Torres, 2018).

SOAR	Center for Teaching and Learning
Strengths	In what ways does the existing CTL best support the institution's goals and strategies? What are key CTL accomplishments, and how was the center strengthened through these?
Opportunities	What is the CTL's part in promoting institutional goals? How is it positioned to grow in its stakeholder support? What potential partnerships exist to increase impact?
Aspirations	Looking at strengths and potential, what meaningful difference can the CTL make for stakeholders? What necessary actions will make this difference? What resources are required?
Results	What indicators will you use to ascertain your progress? How often will you review your progress? How will you communicate it?

Table 2: The SOAR framework applied to CTLs

The SOAR framework focuses attention on what's compelling and possible. It creates a context for quickly implementing and evaluating new plans, and then iteratively asking the SOAR questions. This approach is especially important while the COVID-19 pandemic demands that CTLs respond quickly to new teaching and learning challenges, and when faculty may experience overload, isolation and anxiety. CTLs are compelled to guide faculty in imagining new ways of teaching and learning, and drawing them into a life-giving upward spiral of openness and wholeness.

While considering personal goals and their fit with the CTL, investigate the position of the CTL within the institution, and become aware of how that position might be changing.

Strategic positioning	Ask these questions about the *current state* of the • **Center for Teaching and Learning** • **Division** • **Institution**
Information and communication	What systems exist for sharing information? What backchannels exist? How might you access these? Who will share what you need to learn? Where does "official" information live? How do you access it? How do stakeholders shape that information? What happens when official policies or communications do not already exist? What is CTL communication like? Is CTL information up to date (e.g., web, job descriptions, calendar, contact)?
Culture and behaviors	What perceptions exist? Why? How have these changed over time? For what does the institution reward faculty most? How? What do faculty value? How is faculty morale? What teaching and learning practices are valued? How does the institution solve problems? What was the last major disruption? How did the institution react? Is the CTL seen largely as a reaction to problems or a strategic move towards the future? In what ways are academic leaders such as CTL staff evaluated and valued? What professional development is supported and expected for them?
Management systems	Is there a CTL strategic plan? How is progress toward goals reviewed and communicated? How do these goals relate to other strategic positions? What are the budgetary systems? Where do you find policies? What unofficial budget practices and assumptions exist? Who shares trustworthy information? How are centers evaluated? How do they show their worth? How are staff evaluated? Do staff receive ongoing feedback? Are accommodations appropriately made? What facilities and equipment does the CTL have? Are there satellite locations?
Organizational structure	Does the CTL have a team? How does it function? What are the roles? What CTL services exist? Is there an advisory committee? What is its role (e.g., oversight, advocacy, etc.)? Who are the members? What standing committees include CTL representatives? At what tables does the CTL have a seat? What major initiatives have CTL staff helped lead? To what effect? What is the top-level investment in the CTL? Grassroots? What partnerships does the CTL have? How healthy are they? Are they formally documented? How helpful are they to advancing vision, mission, and goals?

Table 3: Investigating the current state of strategic positioning

3 Discovering institutional strategic positioning

The SOAR framework also offers a tool for analyzing strategic positioning (Porter, 65-68) in four areas: Information and Communication, Culture and Behaviors, Management Systems, and Organizational Structure (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019, pp. 33-34). In stakeholder conversations, learn the current state of these four foci, then imagine the desired, future state.

Table 3 outlines four areas pertinent to institutional, division, and center levels, and to their interconnectedness.

Information and communication are key. Interpersonal connections are built and strengthened by the way that information flows among people. Most institutions have both official information channels and backchannels. Even institutional leaders seeking transparency have some protected information and processes by which important new information is shared. Determining how the most accurate information flows, and what is perception and what is fact, is essential to determining how the CTL fits into operationalized strategic plans.

Communication and information flow reveal many aspects of institutional culture and behaviors. Knowing the culture in which faculty and CTLs operate and the behaviors that the institution values and rewards is crucial, so you can maximize your use of management systems and strategically position the CTL – both in systems defined by the organizational chart and those defined by relationships. Step back to examine how the CTL is currently positioned in the larger organizational structure and how it is structured internally.

Look over the current state of all four areas. At the heart of SOAR are conversations in which stakeholders inquire into strengths and opportunities, and imagine and implement potential, desirable futures. These conversations generate power and inspiration for future successes (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2019, p. 35; Stavros & Torres, 2018). In stakeholder conversations, outline the ways in which the CTL already has potential to reach its strategic goals. Consider together how you can leverage leadership strengths and opportunities to guide incremental growth from current to future states necessary for achieving CTL goals.

4 Future-ready: Plan to SOAR

You, too, can SOAR in your new role. Transition often brings a large cognitive load, and you may find yourself fully engrossed in planning for CTL successes. Avoid a lopsided relationship to the CTL in which you ignore your own professional progress and goals. Remember your back story of experience and expertise, and keep the conversation going with trusted colleagues about how your leadership in this context helps you attain personal aspirations and results.

With so much to discover and accomplish, choosing how to move ahead is challenging. The SOAR approach encourages you – through systematic conversations – to implement new ideas and achieve and communicate early results. Just as we tell faculty and students, a fail is simply a First Attempt In Learning. Using a growth mindset of learning from missteps, you can make changes in the next iteration (Dweck, 2006). Together, you and the CTL can SOAR. It's a question of imagining what this soaring will look like.

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