

BHS plans to leave 'Comfortopia'

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By Eric Czarnik
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BLOOMFIELD TOWNSHIP — Operating under a motto of “discovery that defies reason,” the consulting firm Project Innovations Inc. gave a status report on its oversight of Bloomfield Hills Schools’ upcoming strategic plan.

During a Dec. 6 meeting before district officials, company founder Charlie Fleetham expounded on the strategic process’s next steps. He implored his audience to prepare to disembark from a place he called “Comfortopia.”

“Comfortopia can be a place of profound misery,” he said. “What I hope to do in this effort is get the community of Bloomfield Hills to get on these ships and leave Comfortopia.”

In November, the BHS school board voted to spend \$110,000 to hire Project Innovations to help create the strategic plan. The company, based in Farmington Hills, was founded in 1992 and boasts of clients including the city of Kalamazoo and Ford Motor Co.

Making a strategic plan is the top item on a list of the school board’s goals for the 2007-2008 school year. The plan is supposed to guide BHS through challenges like dwindling enrollment, insecure state aid, aging facilities and soaring retiree costs.

Board Secretary Cynthia von Oeyen said the plan must be an adaptable, living document. “This is not something that you sit on a shelf, but it guides you in your decision-making and your priorities,” she said.

In descending order of importance, Fleetham said a strategic plan must uphold the district’s strengths, solve problems, instill a shared vision and explore new ideas.

He said his company has been interviewing school officials and poring over documents. From those interviews, he said he saw a broad desire for unity. “We didn’t have any argument that the district must change,” he said. “But how should it respond to those trends?”

In 2008, several groups will meet to discuss and form the plan. According to Fleetham, the district will find a group of “strategic champions” in the community who are committed to working together for the plan’s success. Organizers are seeking 80-100 of these champions.

The champions will have a retreat on Feb. 2 at West Hills Middle School. The school board will later have its own retreat, and organizers will hold several meetings with the public to gain input.

After these meetings, Project Innovations will wrap up the strategic plan and give a final copy to the school board in June.

'Unrational leadership'

After the meeting, Fleetham said much of his leadership theory is inspired by psychologist Carl Jung, who wrote about ideas like the collective unconscious.

Project Innovations promotes a philosophy of "unrational leadership," which Fleetham defines as using both rational and irrational techniques to achieve a desired outcome. While he said he uses the scientific method to solve problems, his so-called irrational tools target "the unconscious portion of the individual and personality in a seemingly random way."

One way he tries to tap into the unconscious is by drawing a mandala for his client. According to the Project Innovations Web site, a mandala is an Eastern art form that displays energy. The Web site explains that one makes a mandala by drawing a circle and filling it with visions or letting one's "inner hand" guide the drawing utensil.

"The shape of the mandala eases the frustrations of the conflict within and opens up doors to the solution," Fleetham said.

BHS expects to see a customized mandala at its Feb. 2 strategic champions' retreat. The design will be based on Project Innovations' interviews, Fleetham said.

Fleetham said his many years of consulting taught him that most organizations' problems are rooted in emotions.

"I see too many organizations drive over the cliff because they had a conflict that they didn't want to resolve ... and no amount of reason would convince those people to change their behavior," he said.

But he said his leadership theory works best in certain situations. "If I'm flying, I hope my mechanic isn't practicing unrational leadership," he said. "It's most effective in a large-scale system of conflict."

Trustee Michael Scadron praised Project Innovations for offering a unique approach to strategic planning. "They presented some serious research," he said. "They had done more than submit a boilerplate proposal."

That research included some interesting projections on Michigan's economy, Scadron said. He also lauded the firm's ability to bring together an array of different disciplines, ranging from asset management to financial planning.

Trustee Carol Stencel said the district must get feedback from a diverse cross-section of the community to build an effective plan. "We talk to the same people all the time, and that gives us only one little bit of what the community has to say until we go to the polls," she said.

Fleetham agreed. "We want everyone together," he said. "My philosophy, it comes from Lao Tzu — it's 'yield and overcome.'"

For more information on becoming a "strategic champion," visit www.bloomfield.org or call (248) 341-5424. For more information on Project Innovations, go to www.projectinnovations.com.

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