Strategic leadership

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This article explores the nature of strategic leadership and assesses whether a framework can be established to map the dimensions of strategic leadership. In particular it establishes a model which outlines both the organizational abilities and the individual characteristics of strategic leaders.

Characteristics of strategic leaders

Davies (2004) argues for the development of the strategically focused school in this special edition of the journal. Key to that strategic focus is the quality of the strategic leadership in the school. If we are to support and enhance the development of strategic leadership in schools, we need to be able build a framework of understanding of what strategic leadership might comprise. This article will consider what organizational abilities and individual characteristics can be associated with strategic leadership. The article does not purport to describe a new form of leadership, such as transformational or instructional leadership, but analyses the strategic element in the leadership repertoire. It identifies characteristics of individuals who are successfully undertaking a strategic leadership role. However, there is a difficulty of isolating the strategic element of good leadership, as Davies (2003, p. 303) has identified:

The difficulty in reviewing the literature, or interpreting the results of my current research, is that it is not always easy to distinguish the characteristics of ‘good leadership’ from those of ‘strategic leadership’.

The second difficulty is to consider whether we are just talking about strategic leadership being associated with the formal leader of an organization or a broader base of individuals who contribute leadership insights to the strategic process. In this paper we recognize there may be a number of individuals in an organization who demonstrate a strategic perspective or ability. Thus, we take the view of distributed leadership (see Bennett et al., 2003) which involves several individuals within the organization being involved with the strategy.

With these concerns in mind the paper attempts to draw out those distinctive
strategic elements of leadership. Strategy has been defined by Davies (2004), in this special edition, as encompassing direction-setting, broad aggregated agendas, a perspective to view the future and a template against which to evaluate current activities. Leadership is defined by Bush and Glover (2003, p. 8) as:

… a process of influence leading to the achievement of desired purposes. It involves inspiring and supporting others towards the achievement of a vision for the school which is based on clear personal and professional values.

What successful activities or behaviours do strategic leaders engage in? To facilitate discussion we put forward nine factors associated with strategic leadership. These are, first, those abilities to undertake organizational activity and, second, individual abilities:

Strategic leaders have the organizational ability to:

1. be strategically orientated;
2. translate strategy into action;
3. align people and organizations;
4. determine effective strategic intervention points;
5. develop strategic competencies.

Strategic leaders display:

6. a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present;
7. absorptive capacity;
8. adaptive capacity;
9. wisdom.

Each factor will be considered in turn.

Organizational abilities

Strategic leaders have the ability to be strategically oriented. This quality involves the ability to consider both the long-term future (Stacey, 1992; Boisot, 1995; Beare, 2001; Adair, 2002), seeing the bigger picture, as well understanding the current contextual setting of the organization. Strategic orientation is the ability to link long-range visions and concepts to daily work. Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1998, p. 9) suggest that ‘visionary leadership is transformational by nature, and as such, quite different from planning, which is a managerial or a transactional process’. Javidon (1991), quoted in Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1998, p. 10), suggests that ‘visioning depends on understanding existing realities (culture, history, formative context) and developing a clear sense of direction for the organisation’.

However, it is necessary to treat the concept of vision or visioning with caution. Seeking to analyse trends and their meaning for the future of the organization can be seen as a good thing if it engenders debate and if future scenarios become the basis for strategic conversations. Buley (1998) issues a timely warning when discussing the work of Schwenk (1997):

… he argues that a powerful vision can actually do damage to an organization. In his
view, by creating and communicating a clear vision, and by creating conditions which require his ‘followers’ to commit themselves to that vision, a leader is in danger of imposing uniformity of thinking and of stifling healthy debate which can have dire consequences … Imposed values, he argues, destroy dissent and discussion which are essential to creative decision making … (p. 216)

The importance of creating the strategy with others, and not just communicating it to others, may be the critical skill that strategic leaders deploy in determining the strategic direction of the organization (Kakabadse et al., 1998; Boal & Hooijberg, 2001). Strategic orientation can be considered to be the establishment of an outward-looking organization which builds an understanding of possible future directions, and involves engaging in strategic conversations and debate to focus on the most appropriate direction and approach.

Strategic leaders have the ability to translate strategy into action. In addition to strategic leaders leading the creation of an appropriate strategy for the organization is the need to translate strategy into action by converting it into operational terms. Kaplan and Norton (2001) argue that this can be done by ‘strategy maps’ and ‘balanced scorecards’ and suggest that such approaches ‘provide a framework to describe and communicate strategy in a consistent and insightful way’ (p. 10). What strategic leaders are able to do is step back and articulate the main features of the current organization, the strategic architecture of the school, and lead others in defining what the future of the school and the new architecture will be. This is a process that Tichy and Sharman (1993) call the re-architecturing stage, which involves identifying a series of projects that need to be undertaken to move the organization from its current to its future state.

Tichy and Sharman (1993) put forward a three-stage process that strategic leaders are able to undertake, the components of which are:

• awakening;
• envisioning;
• re-architecturing.

The awakening stage involves building an agreement within the school that a continuation of the current way of working is inadequate if it wants to be effective in the future. This may involve the process, described by Davies (2004), of enhancing participation and motivation to understand the necessity for change, through strategic conversations. The envisioning stage is building a clear and understandable picture of what this new way of operating looks like. This may initially involve the creation of strategic intent (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994) and building the capacity to achieve it. Once this has been completed, then the new architecture of the school will emerge and be the organizational basis for action.

Many schools have strategies that are written in different sorts of formal plans. Changing those strategies into action is very difficult. The key assessment of a leader’s ability to operate in the strategic domain may be to ask staff in the school how this week’s or this term’s activities fit into the strategic plan or direction of the school. If the teacher can articulate, in broad terms, where the school is going and
its priorities, then strategy will have been translated into action. If not, the gap between strategy and action will remain. In our research with leaders in schools, those who are successful at leading strategy strongly emphasize strategic awareness and action.

Strategic leaders have the ability to align people and organizations. This ability involves aligning individuals, or the school as a whole, to a future organizational state or position (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gratton, 2000; Davies, 2003). A key element of this ability is to encourage commitment through shared values (Boal & Bryson, 1988). It would seem that the leader’s own personal values and ideas are paramount in this process and the leadership skill involves making it real for others. Leaders therefore need to understand themselves and the values they hold and be able to nurture quality communication. DePree (1993, p. 99) classifies this ‘lavish communication’ found in organizations with cultures ‘which promote truth and do not suppress or limit the distribution of information’. Stacey (1992) believes that strategy is as much about the creation of meaning for all those in the school as it is about the establishment of direction. Critical in this creation of meaning is the art of strategic conversation and dialogue. Making a vision real for others needs skills of conviction and passion. It involves emotion. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 516) state that ‘strategic leadership focuses on the creation of meaning and purpose for the organisation’. Strategic leadership therefore is concerned with the ‘development of the organisation as a whole which includes its changing aims and capabilities’ (Selznick, 1984, p. 5).

It is important to find a way to build a connection between thinking and action. The concept of a learning organization helps here: an organization of people who are attuned to changes and able to respond to them has valuable insights into how individuals and groups learn and how to convert this knowledge into organizational action. Pietersen (2002, p. 181) suggests that all learning organizations have developed a ‘culture of giving’ which ‘fosters teamwork, experimentation, learning and knowledge sharing’.

More recent leadership theories focus on transformational and visionary leadership, and they emphasize the interpersonal processes between leaders and followers. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 526) suggest that research into transformational leaders ‘stress such factors as intellectual stimulation’ and ‘inspiration’. Cheng (2002, p. 53) found two recurring elements of leadership in various definitions: ‘first, leadership is related to the process of influencing others’ behaviour; and second, it is related to goal development and achievement’. This view is reflected in the previous discussion on the process of strategy; leaders need the skills to be able to influence people and their actions and they need to direct those actions through setting goals and creating meanings. This has resonance with the perspective of transformational leadership, where a leader is proactive about the vision and mission, shaping members’ beliefs, values and attitudes while developing options for the future. Bass (1985) identified that transformational leaders, in educational settings, motivate people to do more than they are originally expected to do by raising their level of awareness and getting them to go beyond their own self-interest for the wider organizational benefit.
Alignment is about altering attitudes, values and beliefs, all of which influence the culture of an organization to unify its sense of purpose and direction.

**Strategic leaders have the ability to determine effective intervention points.** Strategic leaders are able to define the key moment for strategic change in organizations. This is a concept that Burgleman and Grove (1996) call strategic inflection points. These are critical points in an organization’s development when it is possible to develop new visions, create new strategies and move in new directions. We would call these strategic intervention, or strategic opportunity points. The key here is knowing not only what to do strategically but also precisely when to intervene and change direction. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 518) pose the question ‘does strategic leadership matter?’ Their answer is:

Strategic leadership does indeed matter … it seems to us the real question is not whether it matters but rather under what conditions, when, how and on what criteria.

They believe that when a leader makes a decision is just as important as what decision or action is taken, a concept considered by Davies (2003) through the discussion about the double s-curve. Bartunek and Necocoea (2000) define ‘Kairos’ time as the ability to take the right action at a critical time. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 528) suggest that strategic inflection points create a ‘kairiotic moment’ and it is during these moments that ‘learning and change are possible if only the leader possesses the discernment to take notice and the wisdom to act’. The analysis by Davies (2004) of the double s-curve and the appropriate point to make the ‘strategic leap’ to a new way of operating is a useful model here. It may be that both insight and intuition play a significant role in making the appropriate judgement. Strategic leaders, therefore, have the ability to define not only what strategically to change but also strategically when to change.

**Strategic leaders have the ability to develop strategic capabilities.** Prahalad and Hamel (1990) use the term ‘core competencies’ while Stalk et al. (1992) use the term ‘strategic capabilities’. The focus of much of central government activities in most Western economies is to raise educational standards by measuring student performance in annual tests. The danger of this approach is that it focuses activity on short-term targets. Thus, learning how to teach with the latest ‘literacy pack’ from the Government may improve teachers’ specific skills but for sustainability the organization will need to develop deeper strategic capabilities or core competencies. These can be illustrated with the analogy of a tree, where the branches represent the short-term abilities and the roots are the underpinning fundamental capabilities of the school.

If the school is to develop and be sustainable in the longer term then it needs to develop strategic capabilities. Examples of these would be the fundamental understanding of teaching and learning rather than the ability to deliver the latest curriculum innovation; a problem-solving culture rather than a blame culture for the staff; assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Creativity in problem-solving and team-working could also be considered resources that give the school deep-seated strategic capabilities or abilities.
These abilities enable the school to successfully meet new challenges by re-configuring existing abilities and resources rather than having to seek new ones. The questions that strategic leaders ask is: ‘What strategic capabilities do I need to sustain and develop for the future?’ as well as ‘How do I meet current challenges?’ By focusing on strategic capabilities, leaders position themselves and their organizations to be sustainable and successful in the longer term.

**Personal characteristics**

*Strategic leaders have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present.* This restlessness involves what Senge (1990) describes as ‘creative tension’ which emerges from seeing clearly where one wishes to be, one’s vision, and facing the truth about one’s current reality. Strategic leaders are able to envision the ‘strategic leap’ that an organization wants to make, while acting as passionate advocates for change. Strategic leaders have the ability to live with the reality that the organizational culture may not be as forward-thinking as they. It is the ability to live with the ambiguity of not being able to change the organization fast enough, with the ability to maintain the restlessness for change and improvement. Individuals who are able to do this, challenge ideas and processes to seek better ideas and processes.

*Strategic leaders have absorptive capacity.* Cohen and Levinthal (1990) define absorptive capacity as the ability to absorb new information and assimilate it and learn from it and importantly to apply it to new ends. Hambrick (1989) argues that strategic leadership occurs in an environment embedded in ambiguity, complexity and informational overload. It is important therefore for strategic leaders to recognize new information, analyse it and apply it to new outcomes; leaders need the ability to learn. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 517) also call this ‘absorptive capacity’ and argue that leaders ‘have a unique ability to change or reinforce existing action patterns’ within the organization. Therefore, strategic leaders should create an organizational context where learning can take place. This may make use of Argyris and Schön’s (1978) double-loop learning. What is important is that strategic leaders filter out the unimportant and make sense of the important for themselves and their organization. The critical nature of their position often means their interpretation of reality determines patterns of action within the organization.

*Strategic leaders have adaptive capacity.* Black and Boal (1996) and Hambrick (1989) define the ability to change as ‘adaptive capacity’. Sanders (1998, p. 5) supports this view that strategic leaders need the ability to change and learn through asserting that ‘mastering chaos, complexity and change’ requires new ways of ‘seeing and thinking’. Whittington (2001, p. 43) suggests that ‘leaders need an enduring sense of purpose and a continuous sense of motivation’. This can be seen in Hitt et al.’s (1998) term of ‘strategic flexibility’. In an era of innovation and continuous learning where success may depend on a flexible strategic response, this is particularly
important and may favour the emergent strategy or the strategic intent approach. Linking to Davies’ (2004) concept of ‘strategic opportunism’, leaders position themselves to take significant opportunities as they adapt to new information in a responsive and proactive way. Leaders can adapt and lead new strategic directions for the organization if they have cognitive flexibility linked to a mindset that welcomes and accepts change.

*Strategic leaders have leadership wisdom.* Wisdom may simply be defined as the capacity to take the right action at the right time. In a perceptive presentation to the 2002 International Thinking Skills Conference, Robert Sternberg articulated that leaders need *wisdom because:*

- You need creative abilities to come up with ideas.
- You need analytical abilities to decide whether ideas are good ideas.
- You need practical abilities to make your ideas functional and to convince others of the value of your ideas.
- You need wisdom to balance the effects of ideas on yourself, others and institutions in both the short and long run.

In addressing the nature of wisdom in more depth he established that *wisdom is:*

- successful intelligence;
- balancing of interests;
- balancing of timeframes;
- mindful infusion of values;
- balancing of responses to the environment;
- application of knowledge for the common good.

He further established that for successful intelligence there is a need to combine practical intelligence, analytical intelligence and emotional intelligence. This provides an insightful and challenging set of criteria for leaders to develop in their personal set of skills and abilities to deploy strategic choices with wisdom and effectiveness. Throughout this discussion about wisdom, personal qualities of leaders have been mentioned, to which we could add for example the values they hold, the ability to inspire and stimulate, social intelligence, the ability to be passionate. All of these qualities affect the way a leader learns and is able to change. Boal and Hooijberg (2001, p. 532) suggest that ‘most leadership researchers agree that leaders need to have important interpersonal skills as empathy, motivation, and communication’. Bennett (2000, p. 3) expands the importance of personal values:

If moral leadership is to be exercised and pedagogy re-engineered with any degree of success, then future leaders will need a firm set of personal values. No doubt many will have their own lists, but integrity, social justice, humanity, respect, loyalty and a sharp distinction between right and wrong, will all need to be included. Strategic relationships will soon flounder unless such a value system is held with conviction and exercised on a regular consistent basis.
Although not specifically included in Bennett’s comprehensive list, social intelligence is important for strategic leadership because the process of decision-making, solution implementation and organizational improvement are rarely free of emotion. Social intelligence includes having a thorough understanding of the social context, and is defined by Gardner (1985, p. 239) as the ability ‘to notice and make distinctions among other individuals ... in particular among their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions’. So a key component of social intelligence is the ability to discern emotion both in self and in others. Gardner identifies this as both intra- and inter-personal intelligence. The ability to connect the involvement of others and to resolve conflicts will be increasingly vital in a context of developing strategic relationships and finding creative solutions. Bennett (2000, p. 4) also identifies the importance of strength and courage: ‘visionary projects, delivered with passion, will fail unless the leader has the ability to counter adversaries and remain confident until the conclusion has been reached’.

Conclusion

Much of the debate about leadership has been focused on transformational leadership with an increasing emphasis on instructional leadership which has been rebranded as ‘learning-centred leadership’. While these are very significant perspectives there is a danger that learning-centred leadership will be concerned with current approaches and outcomes. While we would support this as it is the...
core rationale for a school’s existence and purpose, we would, however, argue that effective learning-centred leadership needs to be set in a broader organizational and strategic context to be both sustainable and effective in the longer term. To this end the development of strategic leadership abilities and characteristics play a significant part. A model of strategic leadership therefore can take the form shown in Figure 1.

If schools are to sustain student performance and move onto deep learning rather than just addressing test-based, short-term agendas, we need to develop leadership capability that has a strategic dimension. This paper suggests a framework for identifying the components of that strategic dimension for leadership development.

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