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Strategic Leadership

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Chapter 1

Strategic leadership

Brent Davies and Barbara J. Davies

This chapter considers:

1. What is strategic leadership.
2. What strategic leaders do.
3. Characteristics strategic leaders display.
4. A model for strategic leadership.

Introduction

Strategic leadership is a critical component in the effective development of schools. The key foci for those who led schools in the last two decades, in many countries, have been school effectiveness and school improvement. These foci are set against an agenda of centralized curriculum and assessment frameworks with a primacy given to test results. While these developments may be welcomed or criticized, they probably have an inherent conceptual flaw in that they are attempting to improve current patterns of schooling within the existing paradigm of education. Even if such attempts at improvement are successful, the question that should be asked is, are they sustainable? This chapter puts forward the view that renewed attention needs to be paid to the strategic dimension of leadership to ensure this sustainability. Much of the orthodox perspective of leadership development suggests that new leaders tend first to address current administrative and managerial issues to build confidence and organizational ability before moving to a more strategic and futures activity. We argue that what is needed is a concurrent or parallel view of leadership development in which leaders not only improve on the

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'now' of school improvement but concurrently build strategic capability within the school.

This chapter draws on insights gained from the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) research project, 'Success and Sustainability: developing the strategically focused school', which was based on detailed case studies of leaders in primary (elementary), secondary (high) and special schools to analyse their strategic processes, approaches and leadership. Our analysis of strategic leadership will be supported by the 'leadership voices' of the participants in the research project. The project identified, through initial survey data, inspection and evaluation reports, schools that were strategically led and sustainable for a detailed case study analysis. The focus was on the features of strategic leaders, in terms of what they did and what characteristics they displayed.

What do we understand by strategic leadership? Strategic leadership is not a new categorization or type of leadership such as transformational leadership or learning-centred leadership. Rather it is best considered as the strategic element within the broader leadership paradigm. Initially, a definition of strategy can make use of five concepts. First, it is concerned with the idea of *direction-setting*. To decide on the direction for the institution, it is necessary to understand its history and its current situation. This is articulated by Garratt (2003: 2) who gives an excellent definition of strategic thinking:

'Strategic Thinking' is the process by which an organisation's direction-givers can rise above the daily managerial processes and crises to gain different perspectives of the internal and external dynamics causing change in their environment and thereby giving more effective direction to their organisation. Such perspectives should be both future-oriented and historically understood. Strategic thinkers must have the skills of looking both forwards and backwards while knowing where their organisation is now, so that wise risks can be taken by the direction-givers to achieve their organisation's purpose, or political will, while avoiding having to repeat the mistakes of the past.

Second, strategy, while very often associated with planning in traditional definitions (Fidler, 1996) might better be thought of as a *perspective*, as a holistic way of looking at things. Third, strategy does not get involved in the detailed day-to-day activities but is concerned with the *broad major dimensions* of the organization. Fourth, a *medium-to longer-term* time framework is useful when considering strategy. A final useful concept is that strategy can be used as a *template* against which to set shorter-term planning and activities.

Defining leadership presents a challenge owing to the expanding amount of literature in the field from which to draw. The forms of leadership are extensive and other chapters in this book consider symbolic leadership, transformational leadership, learning-centred leadership, constructionalist leadership, emotional leadership, ethical leadership, distributed leadership, invitational leadership, entrepreneurial leadership and sustainable leadership. So where to start? Bush and Glover (2003: 10), in their review of the leadership literature for the NCSL, define leadership 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'. Building on this generic definition of leadership, Davies and Davies (2004) use a nine-point model of strategic leadership which combines five organizational abilities and four individual characteristics of strategic leaders. Using this model as a reference point this chapter is split into three parts:

1. What strategic leaders do.
2. Characteristics that strategic leaders display.
3. A model for strategic leadership.

What strategic leaders do

We put forward the view that strategic leaders involve themselves in five key activities:

- direction setting
- translating strategy into action
- aligning the people and the organization to the strategy
- determining effective intervention points
- developing strategic capabilities.

Direction-setting

Strategic leaders are concerned with not just managing the now but setting up a framework of where the organization needs to be in the future, setting a direction for the organization. The function of strategy is to translate the moral purpose and vision into reality. A useful way to picture this is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

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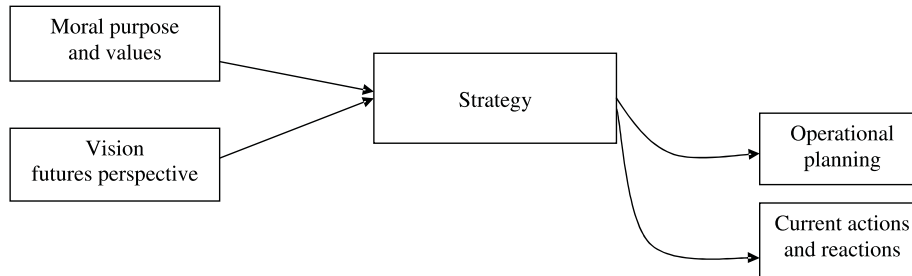


Figure 1.1 *The function of strategy*

School leaders articulate the definition of the organization's moral purpose which can be considered as 'why we do what we do'. The values that underpin this moral purpose are linked to the vision considering 'where we want to be and what sort of organization we want to be in the future'. Strategy is the means of linking this broad activity to shorter-term operational planning, thereby imbuing the responses to immediate events with elements of the cultural and value system.

Strategy is defining that medium-term sense of direction. School leaders in the NCSL study characterized it as:

It's talking about marshalling your resources and looking with a future perspective in order to achieve the maximum potential in an organization.

Your strategy is how you are going to get there, what kind of structures you put in place in the school, what measures you take to make things happen, how you use the money – all these things build up a strategy to getting where you want to get to.

A strategy to me is a plan of action, a conscious plan of action, that's taken in the light of various information that I have available at the time but the strategy takes various forms.

Strategy for me is about where you are going and why you are going.

Strategy, therefore, is translating the vision and moral purpose into action. It is a delivery mechanism for building the direction and the capacity for the organization to achieve that directional shift or change. This translation requires a proactive transformational mindset which strives for something better rather than the maintenance approach of transactional leadership.

Translating strategy into action – develop strategic and organizational processes

Davies, B. (2002) suggests a four-stage ABCD approach of translating strategy into action as shown in Figure 1.2.

Articulate	1	Strategy
Build	2	Images Metaphors Experiences
Create	3	Dialogues – conversations Cognitive/mental map Shared understanding
Define	4	Strategic perspective Outcome orientation Formal plans

Figure 1.2 *The ABCD approach*

Source: Davies, B. (2002: 204).

First the *articulation* of the strategy can take place in three ways; oral, written and structural. Oral articulation is the way leaders communicate, through strategic conversations, the strategic purpose and direction of the organization. This concept will be further developed in considering strategic conversations. Written articulations are the formal statements and plans that are clearly distinguishable from operational short-term plans. Structural articulation refers to the organizational infrastructure that supports and develops the strategic approach, for example, setting up futures or strategy meetings separate from the cycle of operational meetings. These three elements are reflected in the following school leader responses in the NCSL study:

I am constantly talking to the staff about where we are going and how they can contribute. I think it's really, really critical that you find a way to communicate the basic organizational goals to the largest number of people possible.

We separate out our school development plan and our corporate longer-term strategic plan.

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The operational management team looks after the here and now, the school development plan team looks at the duration of the plan and the research and development team actually looks a bit further into the future, outside of this.

Second, it is necessary to *build* a common understanding of what is possible through shared experiences and images. This building stage entails envisioning a clear and understandable picture of what this new way of operating would look like. This involves awakening the people in the school to alternative perspectives and experiences, and building an agreement within the school that a continuation of the current way of working is inadequate if the school wants to be effective in the future.

Third, the leadership needs to *create* through dialogue a shared conceptual or mental map of the future. What strategic leaders are able to do is step back and articulate the main features of the current organization, which might be called the strategic architecture (Kaplan and Norton, 1996; 2001) of the school, and lead others to define what the future of the school and the new architecture will be. This may involve the process, described by Davies, B. (2003), of enhancing participation and motivation to understand the necessity for change, through strategic conversations. Significantly it draws on high-quality information both from within and outside the organization which is part of the strategic analysis that underpins the dialogue.

Fourth, the leadership needs to *define* desired outcomes and the stages of achieving those outcomes. This will establish a clear picture of the new strategic architecture of the school. Tichy and Sharman (1993) identify this stage as involving the identification of a series of projects that need to be undertaken to move the organization from its current to its future state. The significance of this approach is that stage 4 can be embedded in the organizational culture only if time is taken to work through stages 2 and 3.

Aligning the people and the organization to the strategy

Wilson (1997: 1) states 'organisational change has two principal aspects – change in mission and strategy and change in culture and behaviour'. We believe that it is impossible fundamentally to change mission and strategy without changing culture and behaviour. Key to this is changing the mindset and the behaviour of the people within the organization. The importance of aligning the people is recognized by Grundy (1998) and Gratton (2000). The research interviewees articu-

lated a process based on strategic conversations which built participation and motivation within their school to improve strategic capability. These alignment processes work in an iterative way as in Figure 1.3.

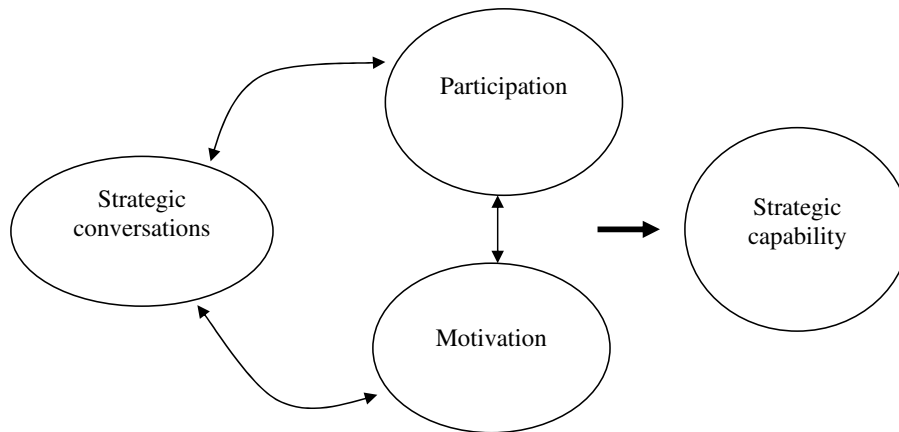


Figure 1.3 *The iterative nature of alignment and capability*

Strategic conversations: developing strategic conversations and dialogue involves discussions about holistic whole-school issues and the trends that face the school over the next few years, as described by Hirschhorn, (1997: 123–4), Van der Heijden (1996: 41–2) and Davies, B. (2002: 21). These conversations enable people to develop a strategic perspective of what the school might become. Without such conversations, however tentative they might be at first, the future will, literally, not be articulated. As one school leader in the study put it: ‘We are constantly talking, large groups, small groups, individuals, a constant feast of two-way conversations bringing people in line with where we are going.’

Strategic participation: by definition, the conversations lead to greater knowledge and participation in discussions. It can be a difficult and slow process from the previous state of being concerned only with the short term to the new state of being involved in the broader and longer-term strategic issues. It can be a process of reculturing the organization (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Stoll et al., 2002). The process of greater awareness and participation in discussion is a key way which develops the ability of the organization to build leadership in depth. The significant ability here is to build involvement in the longer-term development of the school. Strategic organizations use the abilities and talents of wider staff groupings to involve all in building and committing to the strategic direction of the school. This was expressed by a school leader in the study as: ‘Because of the high level of participation,

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because so much of it is ours, we feel much more in control of the agenda. I think that's where the strength of the school has come from.'

Strategic motivation: developing a strategic cause in which individuals are motivated to contribute leads to an improved commitment and effort. Gratton (2000: 19–20) advocates developing 'emotional capabilities', 'trust-building capabilities' and capabilities to build a 'psychological contract' as the means of engaging and motivating staff. Building a commitment to values and long-term ambitions provides individuals with a vision and sense of direction that allows them to put short-term problems and challenges into context. Involvement is more significant than documentation. As one school leader expressed it: 'Documentation is not as important as what people believe in and what people do, and it's all very well to say we have this, this and this and you can have amazing documentation but it is actually not a plan if people don't follow the actions through.'

Building capability: the strategic conversation and enhanced participation build greater personal and organizational capability and capacity. Given that the major resource of any organization is the quality of its human capital, then enhancing that quality should be a major organizational focus. It is useful to differentiate between capability and capacity. Capacity can be considered the resource level that is available at any given moment to achieve an objective. Capability is that mix of skills and competencies possessed by the people in the organization which is needed to achieve the task. The right number of people may not, at a particular juncture, have the right skills. However, when they do, it can be said that both capacity and capability are present. Boisot (1998: 5) states that 'we shall use the term capability to depict a strategic skill in the application and integration of competencies'. This idea was seen by a school leader as: 'the ability to work at challenges together to bring skills of other people to bear so the organization can learn to solve problems and not just rely on simplistic external solutions'.

Determining effective intervention points – the right things at the right time

The leadership challenge of *when* to make a significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing what strategic change to make. The issue of timing can rest on leadership intuition (Parikh, 1994) as much as on rational analysis. When individuals in the organization are ready for change, when the organization needs the change and when the external constraints and conditions force the change, all have to be

balanced one against the other. Such judgement is manifested in not only *knowing what* and *knowing how* but also *knowing when* (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001) and, as important, *knowing what not to do* (Kaplan and Norton, 2001). Therefore we could add to this list knowing what to give up or abandon in order to create capacity to undertake the new activity. This was illustrated by two school leaders responding in the project:

I wrote a paper and that basically argued that the climate was right for change, there are some issues that need to be changed but if we are going to do it, then it needs to be part of a coherent programme rather than piecemeal. But the challenge for me personally is this idea of abandonment, that if we take on these initiatives and new things come on, I know I have to give some things up.

The strategic timing is absolutely important. It can make or break a school. If you try and do it at the wrong time it could be disastrous.

Several of the school leaders in the study talked about the critical issue of strategic timing, of getting the time right for change for themselves and others in the school. School leaders also talked about this timing being intuitive: 'I think from my own point of view a lot goes on fairly intuitively ... I know I can't go down that road because I'm not ready or they are not ready. So timing is so critical.' Choosing the right time and saying 'No' if it was not the right time was critical for strategic leaders in the study. Getting the timing right for the school community was about being able to choose which external initiatives to implement that would complement the schools' own agendas for improvement. This was clearly illustrated by one respondent: 'I think you get better at being a strategic leader the further you go along, because there comes a point when you actually develop the capacity to say "No we are not going to do that" or "No it's irrelevant. We are not going to do it".' Strategic timing affects all the people in the school community. If the strategic timing is wrong it can have devastating effects on the school. People will be divided, and realizing the strategy will therefore be impossible.

As we have said, in addition to the critical skill of strategic timing is that of strategic abandonment. If a school adopts a new way of doing things or adopts a new strategic priority, how that fits into an already crowded agenda has to be considered. The result is that leaders have to downgrade the importance or abandon existing strategies not because they are wrong in themselves but because they have become less significant in comparison to new factors. As one school leader said:

I see abandonment as being two different issues. One is the abandonment of things that are not working and actually taking people's time and

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energy. That's easy to do. The other side of it was to actually say OK this is working well and we are really comfortable with it and it is getting the results we want, but actually there is another strategy here that takes us onto the next stage but we can't run them both together. This has to be suspended or abandoned in order to give the other one time to grow.

This concept of strategic abandonment is a very powerful one. The difficult aspect of strategic abandonment occurs where the school has to give up acceptable current practice to make capacity available for future improved practice.

Developing strategic capabilities

Prahalad and Hamel (1990) use the term 'core competencies' while Stalk et al. (1992) use the term 'strategic capabilities'. These can be illustrated by 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; and assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Creativity in problem-solving and teamworking are necessary to give the school deep-seated strategic capabilities or abilities. The pressure to deliver short-term targets can lead to the postponement of longer-term more significant developments. Davies, B.J. (2004: 1) argues that:

it seemed to me that the challenge was to continue the necessary short-term improvements in standards, while at the same time, developing a commitment to the 'bigger picture'. It was important to put in place organisational structures and processes for developing thinking, which would in the longer term, sustain high standards and provide more effective learning experiences. There would be no unsustainable 'quick fixes'. These parallel developments needed a strategy. Some developments we could easily plan for but for most we needed to build capability.

School leaders in the study commented:

The staff are very good 'knowers' but not very good 'learners.' We have

to change that over the longer term to build a learning community.

The more long-term things are those that you know where you want to get to but you are not quite sure yet how you are going to do it so you need to build some kind of capability within people – so for instance developing a learning focus school. Now that requires a lot of people to change and to do that you need more time so people need to go on courses, need to do some reading, need to build them some coaching and all that takes much longer. Once people learn how to do that they have their own views about what learning focus in schools is so then we have to come together and talk about it.

I think the new capability which I'm trying to work on more than anything else is to develop the reflective practice because ... if my staff can reflect on what they are doing, if they can be life-long learners whatever the strategic intent may be ... whatever it is we are adopting; if they can be learners rather than knowers I think that's absolutely vital. And we are not there yet.

This capability-building approach is a central factor in a strategically focused school and is one of the key activities of a strategic leader.

Deploying a repertoire of strategic approaches in their schools

Strategy is often equated with strategic planning when in effect strategic planning is only one of a number of approaches to strategy. A valuable classification of strategic approaches is provided by Boisot (2003). He considers there are four approaches to implement. These are:

- strategic planning
- emergent strategy
- intrapreneurship or decentralized strategy
- strategic intent.

Strategic planning is a rational, linear approach whereby a coherent set of objectives can be achieved by undertaking a predetermined number of steps and activities. It can be summarized as 'You know where you want to go, you know how to get there and you know how to recognize it when you have arrived'. While this may fit some of the organization's activities, other activities may not be so predictable. It is

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associated with detailed, written plans.

Emergent strategy can be considered to be one that results from learning from current activities. When an organization responds to new challenges, certain responses will be more successful than others. As the organization replicates the successful activities and does not replicate the less successful ones, it builds a strategic framework to guide future action. Initially this is a reactive strategy, a response to external changes, but it subsequently builds a strategic framework for future action.

Intrapreneurship as Boisot (2003) calls it, or decentralized strategy as it is more usually known, occurs when organizations find difficulty coping with the detail of strategic direction and planning in a complex and ever-changing environment. Therefore they decide to come to terms with the turmoil by deploying a decentralized approach. Thus the centre of the organization will lay down core values and key strategic directions but will give the subunits in the organization the freedom to work out the detail of this strategy.

Strategic intent is a framework in which the organization sets key strategic goals which 'stretch' the organization to new levels of performance. While the organization knows where it wants to go and what it wants to achieve, it does not know how to achieve it. The organization engages in a series of capability-building measures to establish the capacity to achieve its objectives. So the organization moves towards the future by building a series of strategic intents and the capabilities that are necessary to achieve them (Davies and Ellison, 2003).

One key factor that emerged from the NCSL research was that the strategic leaders in the study used different strategic approaches in different situations. They used a portfolio of approaches in a sophisticated way to meet complex needs. So, in areas where it was possible to have a clear plan, they used a rational, linear strategic plan. At the same time many found the concept of strategic intent a very useful approach:

Strategic intent is a wonderful way of unifying and clarifying positions, particularly in times of great turbulence and change. It's not a detailed vision where we would see where we are going, with all t's crossed and i's dotted ... it's a feeling of where we may be heading, which brings everybody along with you.

The use of decentralized strategy was evidenced in secondary (high) schools and not in primary (elementary) schools. Interestingly, emergent strategy was often used for developing information technology (IT) capability in the school.

Characteristics strategic leaders display

The NCSL research established significant characteristics of strategic leaders in schools:

- Strategic leaders have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present.
- Strategic leaders prioritize their own strategic thinking and learning.
- Strategic leaders create mental models to frame their own understanding and practice.
- Strategic leaders have powerful personal and professional networks.

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 needs to make and act 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 wish. It is the ability to live with the ambiguity of not being able to change the organization fast enough, together with the ability to maintain the restlessness for change and improvement. Individuals who have these abilities, challenge ideas and processes to seek better ideas and processes. This is shown in the following responses from two school leaders:

Everyone, whether you have an open mind or not is frustrated at times and it can be for very positive reasons and it can be for very negative reasons. It's probably about sifting through those levels of anxiety, worry, concern, frustration and actually turning them into something more positive.

One of the things that drives me is that I am never satisfied.

Strategic leaders prioritize their own strategic thinking and learning

A very significant number of the school leaders participating in the study referred to their own learning and stressed the importance of new knowledge to promote the strategic direction for the school. A good

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example of this is a school leader who learnt about new thinking related to children's learning, which prompted him to take the school in a new direction:

We were invited onto a school improvement programme some years ago and it's the first time I'd heard about Howard Gardner and 'Multiple Intelligences' and that really did fire me up because it brought it home to me what kind of learner I was and why I had succeeded in some parts of the curriculum and failed fairly miserably in others ... so I did a lot of personal research. I felt this is the school I want, this is how I see learning going ... and then other ideas come to you ... accelerated learning, emotional intelligence and the work of Csikszentmihalyi – all of that was kind of burning inside. This is this type of school I want for these children.

Another school leader referred to the necessity of understanding strategy before being able to develop it in school; introducing strategy in school had been as a consequence of 'my own awakening to strategic understanding'. The school leader also stressed that: 'In order to do that I have to break it down in my own head first.' Self-learning was vital for this school leader and promoted the development of others.

The need to reflect or think was often highlighted:

I often sit down and just brainstorm – just when I'm on my own, because that is my thinking time.

Thursday is my thinking time and my reading time ... so every Thursday I won't see anyone, I don't talk to anyone; unless it's a parent who is making a complaint in which case I deal with it immediately. But Thursday is my time just to think, to read and to reflect and that's what I do. You know to be realistic it doesn't happen every single Thursday and sometimes when you walk through that door you don't know what is going to hit you, but my plan on a Thursday is that's when I do my thinking and reading time. Reading may be about what is happening in school or it might be actually reading some of the children's work but Thursday is my thinking and reflecting time.

We can have a free discussion about the direction that we want to go. Often I am leading that conversation because again that is part of the privilege that I have through my reading. I am getting lots of really good ideas and testing them out.

If we are to develop creative schools, then the importance we attach to thinking and learning needs to start with the leader if that individual is going to both model and develop creative thinking in the wider group of staff and students in the school.

Strategic leaders create mental models to frame their own understanding and practice

One of the ways that school leaders can make sense of complexity is to create mental models and frameworks to aid their understanding. In the study, a number of the school leaders stressed the importance of having a theoretical model to support strategic developments and the importance of sharing that model with others in the organization, as reflected by two respondents:

I went into this process of school development planning splitting it into operational targets and setting strategic planning and futures thinking.

There is usually quite often a bit of theoretical underpinning so that if we are going to do something in terms of changing the management structures or management styles or whatever, we will do a little bit of the theory ... so that people understand why we are actually going down this route and why we are making the changes.

One school leader articulated well her model of an approach to strategy, stressing the importance of initiating a new way of thinking: 'I am working on my own model of strategic change ... through a process which I call awakening, articulation and alignment.' This school leader felt that the mental model enabled her to lead change. She had taken a strategic approach to the problem of complacent staff and she had used new ideas to challenge colleagues to think in different ways. While the focus of this change was the school's approach to teaching, the example underpins school leaders' approach to strategy.

Strategic leaders have powerful personal and professional networks

Strategic leaders constantly scan their environment locally, regionally and internationally. They seek both to develop new ideas and to benchmark current practice in their own schools with those of colleagues in the wider educational community. The ability to develop personal and professional networks that provide alternative perspectives from those prevalent in their immediate educational environment is a key skill of strategic leaders.

This has become possible on a global basis with the rapid expansion of technological communication. The significance of these networks for developing strategic ideas was highlighted in the study:

We are focused on opening out our networks because then you get all the ideas from everywhere and then you can't be hidebound. We are in that world, we have to work with that world, so get out there and get in it.

You need an imagination and to feed that imagination you have got to go on visits to lots of different places, to be more creative to see how things are possible.

I do have a huge network of colleagues. It's because I am out and looking at things that I can see things from different perspectives. I don't think a lot of people in the schools do the strategic stuff, I don't think a lot of people talk and look outside.

It can be seen that strategic leaders place a high importance on networks and networking to draw in ideas and inspiration for strategic change and development. This is a very important personal characteristic of strategic leaders.

A model for strategic leadership

This chapter has established a number of elements, which contribute to the development of a strategic leadership. While any single leader may not display or deploy every single element, the strategic leaders in our study displayed many of them. In providing insights for leaders wishing to review their strategic role, a model can now be established to support them in their self-reflection.

It is imperative that a school leader is strategically focused. Strategic leaders need to drive the strategy formation in their schools; without their interest, enthusiasm and understanding the school would not be strategically focused. Therefore, the model we propose focuses on the school leader. If school leaders are also to be strategic leaders they need to understand themselves, their school and others in the school community and the wider community. They need to be context-focused. Strategic leaders need to care about others in order to want to involve them and need self-confidence in order to involve them. They need to be people-focused. Individuals can make a difference but strength comes from staff working together to achieve the same goals (Barth, 1990). If people are working together, decisions and implementation of decisions will tend to be better as there will be a higher level of trust and morale. Finally, they need to both understand and lead the processes and approaches that contribute to a strategic approach.

A significant perspective can be drawn from Gardner's (1999) notion of multiple intelligences, and schools should consider a range of collective capacities to foster and develop the use of experience, skill and understanding to develop strategic intelligence. Our definition of strategic leadership would be based on a conceptualization of strategic intelligence which could be summarized (Davies, B.J. 2004) as three types of wisdom:

- a people wisdom
- a contextual wisdom
- a procedural wisdom.

This is illustrated in the model in Figure 1.4.

People wisdom

The people wisdom part of the model is illustrated in Figure 1.5.

Senge (1996: 45) suggests that: 'We are coming to believe that leaders are the people who 'walk ahead', people who are genuinely committed to deep change in themselves and their organisations. They lead through developing new skills, capabilities and understandings. And they come from many places within their organisation.' There is little purpose in having a future view for a school or setting priorities which require action, if these are not shared. As Korac-Kakabadse and Kakabadse (1998: 1) suggest: 'It could be argued that executives always had visions for their organisations, but whether these visions were shared is another matter.' If it does not affect the people within the organization, it will not be implemented. Having people wisdom to involve and energize staff to deliver the strategy is crucially important.

Visioning, or foresight, as a process requires an interpersonal intelligence (Gardner, 1999). The strategic leader must identify the concerns and feelings of the people in the organization; involving those people and enabling them to participate is key to the strategic process. People wisdom is essential in order to understand what motivates people and how to work co-operatively with them. As Mintzberg (1994) suggested, strategic planning by the top of an organization can ignore the realities of planning experienced by those doing the job. Many of these ideas are, it seems, influenced by the context and the culture of the school and by the experiences of the strategic leader, which is why 'people' is one of the three wisdoms at the centre of the model.

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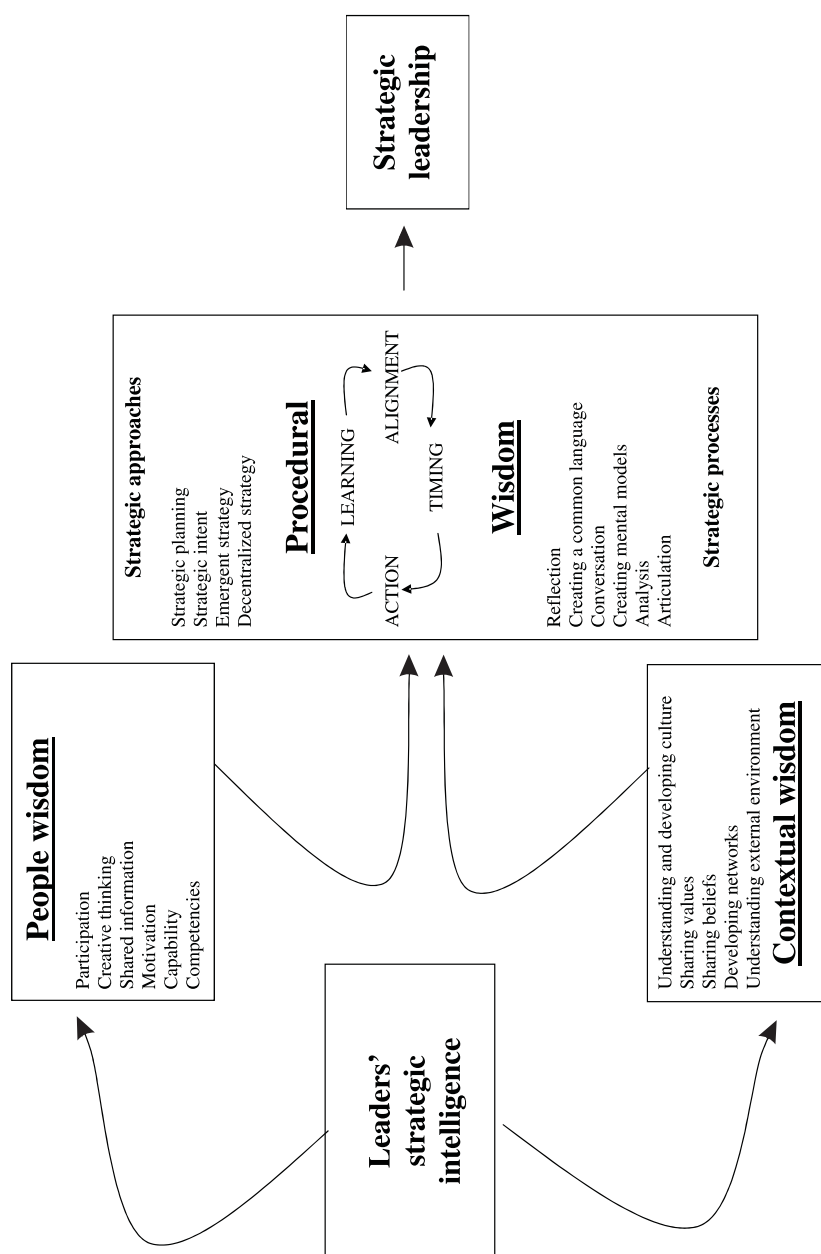


Figure 1.4 A model for strategic leadership
 Source: Davies, B.J., (2004: 167).

All the leaders in the project expressed the necessity of involving others in the strategic process, in both the creation of ideas and in the decision-making process. While people would be involved at different levels and to different degrees, it is important that all in the school community – staff, parents, children and local community – are involved. De Pree (1993: 99) argues for ‘lavish communication’, which can occur in an organizational culture which promotes truth and which does not limit the distribution of information, an organization where people are the centre of all that happens. This capacity is seen through the empowerment of the people and their ability to take part in strategic thinking and action.

People wisdom

Participation
Creative thinking
Shared information
Motivation
Capability
Competencies

Figure 1.5 *The people wisdom element of the model*

Contextual wisdom

If a clear sense of purpose is to be set, the strategic leader must understand both the history of the school and the current living experiences of those in the organization. Strategic intelligence needs to have what Davies, B.J. (2004) calls a contextual wisdom (Figure 1.6), the capacity to see the school in relationship to the wider community and the educational world in which it belongs. This wisdom is a response to new ideas and events, the ability to listen to others; it is an understanding of the uniqueness of a particular school environment. This means that there can be no quick fixes, no transferable blueprints for a strategic leader to take from one successful school to create a similarly successful school. Solutions have to come from within the unique context, through understanding the culture, and sharing beliefs and values.

The relentless pace of life in school often prevents strategic leaders from being reflective, which is one reason why networking is important. Similarly, isolation may prevent school leaders from being exposed to new ideas. Long-term aims for school improvement should be kept under review and revised in the light of new contextual infor-

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mation. Strategic intelligence uses the knowledge of the environment. It is about seeing the big picture, about being able to create the right agenda for the school by knowing what examples of excellence exist and what is appropriate for their unique environment.

Contextual wisdom

- Understanding and developing culture
- Sharing values
- Sharing beliefs
- Developing networks
- Understanding the external environment

Figure 1.6 *The contextual wisdom element of the model*

Procedural wisdom

Procedural wisdom focuses on a strategic learning cycle, which enables the appropriate choice of strategic approach and appropriate choice of strategic processes.

The strategic learning cycle part of the model highlights strategic leaders having the ability to harness the abilities of others; to have the inner courage to drive the organization forward to the desired future. The model highlights the need to have the people heading in the same direction sharing the same values, beliefs and future view. The motion forward is driven by the restless cycle of learning, aligning, timing and acting. The learning cycle (Figure 1.7) is driven by dissatisfaction, by leaders thinking that different and better scenarios are possible, and by leaders encouraging others to think in different ways.

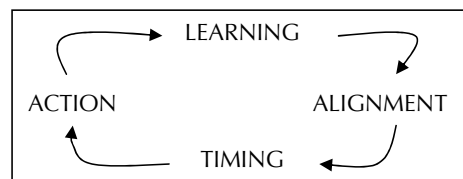


Figure 1.7 *The strategic learning cycle element of the model*

The strategic approaches and strategic processes centre on this cycle of learning from experiences, of evaluating actions, of aligning the people with the decisions, of choosing the right time to act and of taking action. The cycle is continuous.

The strategic approaches part of the model outlines that strategy formation can take four different approaches depending on the context and circumstances. In schools, strategy may involve an integrated approach of four elements: strategic planning, strategic intent, decentralized strategy and emergent strategy (Figure 1.8), each being appropriate given the context, the level of understanding and the time frame in which the organization is operating.

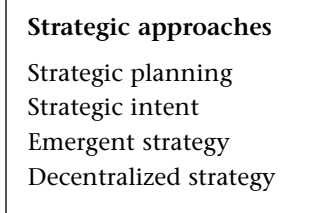


Figure 1.8 *The strategic approaches element of the model*

Traditional strategic planning by itself is an inadequate approach. It is clear that there is more than one approach to strategy and that schools find the mix of strategic approaches which is best for them. There is little to be gained from writing a plan in isolation. There is everything to be gained from the process that lies behind the plan and the action that follows on from it. The focus needs to be on creative thinking and strategic conversations rather than filling in documents. If schools are about learning, then the notion of strategic intent, of building capability within people and allowing thinking time to develop the intentions, and of taking an emergent approach, of learning by doing, are vital to support the plan and critical to school success.

The strategic processes part of the model are highlighted in Figure 1.9. These processes are the key to procedural wisdom but also depend on people involvement and on an understanding of the context.

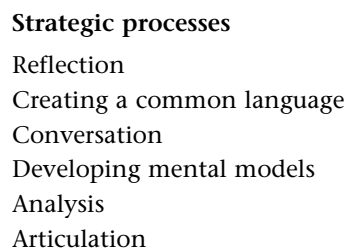


Figure 1.9 *The strategic processes element of the model*

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It is important that the leader should take time to understand theoretical models in order to develop a common understanding and a common language for the school community. This facilitates the alignment of everyone to a common cause in order for a school to continue to improve. Participants in the project stressed the importance of analysis, in terms of self-evaluation of effectiveness, and reviewing the whole process of strategy through involving others. The findings of the research also stressed the necessity of having both oral and written articulations of the strategy, which could be shared with others. This reinforces the importance of strategic conversations for building capability and motivating others and the necessity of people owning the plan and being committed to it.

Conclusion

The driving force within the model (Figure 1.4) comes from the effort of trying to understand, interpret and act on change. The challenge is in enabling everyone in the school to make their own contribution towards creating the shared, desired future. The model demonstrates that change for a strategically focused school has to be in its people, through the way those people relate to each other, in the context, through shared beliefs and values, and in the procedures established to focus on the future.

Achieving the future view is not merely a matter of spending more time on planning or writing more elaborate plans. Rather, it is a matter of changing the way we understand strategy. What is important is improving the involvement and therefore the processes for action in order to link the present action with the desired future. This model is based on the notion that if we change the processes, the mindset and values will also change. If we involve the people in every aspect of an integrated approach, then a strategically focused school is possible. The learning, which feeds the context and people wisdoms, and therefore the strategic intelligence, is constantly reinforced by choosing the right time, by strategic conversations to align the people and by taking action.

The strategic leader has a key role in creating urgency and momentum for organizational learning, thinking broadly and imaginatively, and working with others to help them to think about how to use models to support improvement. It is difficult to imagine that a school can find a way forward without the school leader being strategically intelligent.

Suggested further reading

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