



Book Strategic Leadership

How to Think and Plan Strategically and Provide Direction (The John Adair Leadership Library)

John Adair
Kogan Page, 2010
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Recommendation

John Adair is a pivotal expert on “strategic leadership” – a term he says he introduced in the 1970s – and he has written some 50 books on the topic. Employing ancient Greek history as his touchstone, Adair presents invaluable information, sharp insights, wonderful quotes and fascinating anecdotes about the history and techniques of strategic leadership in this exceptionally literate treatise. Adair uses clear, simple sentences to get his points across, creating a blueprint to help anyone become an effective strategic leader. Unlike many authors, his efficient, authoritarian – but never hectoring – style conveys every point he makes about leadership. Just as he suggests, a good leader never draws attention to his or her leadership methods. Adair’s elegant merging of form and function makes this a necessary and accessible textbook. *BooksInShort* recommends this solid read to leaders interested in personal development, strategy and ancient history, and to those who simply love great quotes and aphorisms on leadership.

Take-Aways

- Strategic leadership targets the future, though it is an ancient concept.
- The word “strategy” derives from Greek; ancient Athenians elected strategoi as their military commanders.
- Seven principles define sound strategic leadership:
- First, lead others toward the right purpose by giving direction.
- Second, establish this direction through strategic thinking and planning.
- Third, successfully execute your strategic plan.
- Fourth, organize your operation in the most efficient and effective manner.
- Fifth, create partnerships with worthwhile allies.
- Sixth, foster a strong esprit de corps.
- And seventh, develop leaders at all levels within your organization.

Summary

The Ancient Roots of Leadership

Strategic leadership focuses on the future, though it is an ancient concept. Strategy (“*strategia* in Greek”) originally referred solely to military leadership. Five hundred years before Christ, a *strategos* was an Athenian army senior commander, the equivalent of a modern-day general. Athenian citizens elected their *strategoi*, and merit figured heavily in their election.

“It is essential for you as a strategic leader to make time to think, both about the present and the future.”

The Greek philosopher Socrates contemplated the subject of strategic leadership: He believed that as craftsmen learn their skills, so too can people learn to become capable, even exemplary, leaders. Xenophon, who became a strategos of great renown, was a member of Socrates’s inner circle. He wrote about Socrates’s dialogues with his students, including his discussions of leadership.

“Marshall Saxe’s donkey...went on 20 campaigns carrying his master’s baggage, but learned nothing about the art of war.”

According to Xenophon, Socrates believed that soldiers would follow leaders who demonstrated competency and knowledge. Xenophon wrote of Socrates’s high standards for any strategos: “He must be resourceful, active, careful, hard and quick-witted; he must be both gentle and brutal, at once straightforward and designing, capable of both caution and surprise, lavish and rapacious, generous and mean, [and] skillful in defense and attack.”

“Do not send telegrams about your doings. Ask to be left alone. Results speak louder than words.” (Lord Wolseley to General Gordon upon his arrival in Khartoum, 1884)

Other leadership qualities the Greeks regarded as necessary include “enthusiasm, integrity...toughness...fairness...resilience and humility.” Intelligence is crucial, as is “wisdom gained by experience.”

The philosophers understood that strategoi might emerge from any organization. The demands of leadership vary little with the task. In a dialogue with the soldier Nicomachides, Socrates noted, “a good businessman would make a good general.” He established similarities between businesspeople and generals: Both must select people for specific tasks, punish wrongdoers and reward the virtuous, motivate others and attain their goodwill, hold on to what they have won and work hard. Socrates held that a meaningful parallel existed because businesspeople focus on profits and detest loss, as any worthy general must.

The “Three Circles” Model

To understand your responsibilities as a strategic leader, picture three interlocking circles: “task, team and individual.” Each circle represents an “area of need” that you must master, and each skill contains performance arenas that overlap with the others. A leader must develop and maintain the team, motivate individual members and ensure that everyone works to achieve the objective. A failure of leadership in any one area negatively affects the other two.

“People will obey willingly only those whom they perceive to be better qualified or more knowledgeable than themselves in a particular field.”

To lead others to successful outcomes, consider the “functions” all leaders must fulfill:

- **“Defining the task”** – What do you want to achieve? Lay out your goals.
- **“Planning”** – How will you do it? Come up with methods and procedures.
- **“Briefing”** – To inspire followers, communicate your strategy clearly.
- **“Controlling”** – A leader must find and engage time, money, people and other resources.
- **“Supporting”** – Establish your “organizational” standards and values.
- **“Informing”** – Supply information to and accept feedback from your team, thus creating an important linkage between them and you.
- **“Reviewing”** – Develop and monitor performance criteria.

“Teams that come together to pursue a self-chosen task, such as trade unions or sports clubs, tend to elect their own leaders.”

Leaders operate at three different levels:

- **“Strategic” leaders** – Head up organizations.
- **“Operational” leaders** – Steer a primary component of an institution.
- **“Team” leaders** – Oversee individuals working toward specific objectives.

Strategic leadership involves seven distinct roles:

Role One: “Giving Direction”

The word “leadership” derives from *laed*, Anglo-Saxon for “road, path, track or the course of a ship at sea.” Leaders ensure that followers move in the right direction. First, determine your “purpose,” the organization’s “integrating task.” Second, identify your “aims,” as your group divides to handle various aspects of its mission. Third, address “objectives,” or your specific goals. Leaders must appreciate the broad view and apply it to specific situations, and vice versa.

“A plan is a very good basis for changing your mind.”

Understand your organization’s purpose. Ensure your followers know why their efforts matter and that they work toward the same goal. Follow moral principles. Create a vision for your firm’s future. Map this vision for your followers.

Role Two: “Strategic Thinking and Planning”

Decide your direction through strategic thinking and planning. Develop the best strategy to guide your major operations, and then implement it. Putting your strategy into action requires a long-range view. Determine your primary ends and identify the pathways leading to them. Strategically plan your significant actions only after you identify each step.

“Whatever a man directs, if he knows what he wants and can get it, he will be a good director, whether he directs a chorus, an estate, a city or an army.”

(Socrates)

Your strategy must be simple, straightforward and flexible; it should fit your organization's "purpose, values and vision." Alter your strategy when circumstances change. Establish "success criteria." List three primary lessons about strategic thinking and planning that you've learned from others or from your own experience. Listen to your subordinates before you develop your strategy. Remember, people will vest completely only in the strategic plans to which they were invited to contribute. Give your best followers an opportunity to show what they know and how they think. Make the plan as much theirs as yours, and they will work all the harder to see it succeed; that in itself is sound strategy.

Role Three: "Making It Happen"

When an executive executes, progress results. Strategic plans depend on leaders coordinating efforts and ensuring harmony; they should work with a clear vision of what must take place, who is responsible for which steps and how people should accomplish their tasks. Constantly monitor progress so that everyone stays on track. You cannot lead from behind your desk. Get out of your office and stay involved in the process.

"Focus first [on] the ability to break down the general into the particular."

Maintain control, but give those reporting to you the freedom to operate. "Leave tactics to your operational and team leaders." Coordinate multiple activities. Routinely review your strategic plan. Visit your organizational units and facilitate their working well together. Act quickly when subordinate leaders fail. "Don't interfere unnecessarily, especially if things are going to plan."

Role Four: "Relating the Parts to the Whole"

Balance the different operating groups in your organization. Consider your institution as an orchestra that you conduct. Do not assume that your current organizational structure is efficient or even sound. Make changes where necessary, but be mindful that continuous change is disruptive and instills concern among your staff. Be organized and delegate. "Ensure that the calibre and capability of your top executive team match the complexity of its environment."

"Once work has started on a project it is vitally important that you control and coordinate what is being done."

The various units in your company must support each other to achieve their purpose. Develop and execute a staffing plan. Make sure your organization achieves the right mix of "centralization and decentralization." Organize your private life so you can be a more effective leader. "Time management is about the quality of your time, not the quantity."

Role Five: "Building Partnerships"

Socrates spoke of the importance of developing allies, which means building valuable partnerships. Every great endeavor requires allies: Great Britain emerged victorious in World War II only with the help of the United States and Russia. Exercise wise judgment when you choose partners. Make sure that your union will be productive. You and your partners must share a mutual purpose, just as the UK, Russia and the US did when they came together to defeat the Nazis. Sometimes, common enemies make stronger bonds than common friends.

"When things are going wrong, your presence should have a calming effect."

Understand the importance of developing alliances. Find potential partners who can make your organization more productive. Go into the field to enhance your relationships with consumers, allies and suppliers. Teach and enable your employees to work creatively with employees of other organizations and with people from other "nations and cultures." Honor and respect your partners and your community.

Role Six: "Releasing the Corporate Spirit"

You alone cannot create a robust esprit de corps, the cohesive, self-fulfilling exuberance that binds and inspires an organization. Esprit de corps is an organizational quality you elicit in collaboration with your employees. Seek to establish *asabiyah*, an Arabic term meaning "group cohesiveness." Of necessity, you will work with groups that have a strong sense of *asabiyah* and with those that do not. During World War II, British Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery wrote, "I made the soldiers partner with me in the battle. I always told them what I was going to do, and what I wanted them to do. I think that the soldiers felt that they mattered, that they belonged." This is the spirit you want to develop among your staff.

"Keep the general end in sight while tackling daily tasks." (Chinese proverb)

People can accomplish monumental tasks. Recall your own experiences with leaders who could summon greatness from his or her followers. Trust others, but carefully define and enforce what your organization requires from its strategic, operational and team leaders.

Role Seven: "Developing Today's and Tomorrow's Leaders"

"Only the best organizations show real and sustained commitment to selecting and developing their business leaders." Leaders are made, not born. Senior leaders must develop their successors. Don't assume that you and your senior executives are the only true leaders and that everyone else is a manager or employee. Credit every employee with being a leader, and regard yourself as "a leader of leaders."

"A leader should, first and foremost, possess and exemplify the qualities expected or required in their field."

Create a companywide leadership development plan for your entire organization. Be responsible for your senior managers' development. Hire managers based on their leadership traits. Provide team leaders with at least two days of leadership training per project. Offer senior management training, and ensure that your line managers

feel that they function as “leadership trainers.” When your organization requires a corporate culture boost, you as the leader must show the way.

Strive Daily to Become a Better Leader

You develop yourself to lead, and leadership forces you to develop yourself. Commit to your strategy, enact your plans and own the consequences. The latter quality alone makes others want to follow your lead. “Thought leadership is wider than you, wider even than the management hierarchy.” To pose correct, intuitive questions about what lies ahead, broaden your perspective to become open to new ideas.

“Authority flows to the one who knows.”

Being a leader who thinks and leads by awareness means embracing every avenue that brings information. Those avenues include your subordinates, your allies, your friends and – never forget – your honed instincts.

Leadership is outer-directed in that it deals with the people you lead and the objectives and tasks that are your responsibility. At the same time, leadership is inner-directed, because dedicated managers always strive to become better leaders.

Fortunately, this is not a complex or confusing undertaking. Leadership above all is practical: “You learn it by doing it.” Leadership involves both knowledge and experience. One sparks the other. Ultimately, leadership is a never-ending journey. Become your own odyssey.

About the Author

John Adair has pioneered leadership programs in which more than one million managers have participated. His 50 books include *How to Grow Leaders*, *The Inspirational Leader*, *John Adair’s 100 Greatest Ideas for Effective Leadership and Management*, and *Not Bosses, But Leaders*.
