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Strategic Leadership: An Educational Leader Imperative

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Introduction

Strategy and strategic leadership have been overlooked largely in leadership literature. The study of strategic leadership is relatively new, although Hofer & Schendel rechristened business administration as strategic management in 1978. In recent times, the role of strategic leadership in schools has earned greater significance as a result of the international trends towards school-based management (SBM); reforms in school governance requiring school leaders to adopt business-like practices, including developing an organizational vision, strategic planning, marketing, listening to customers and observing market trends; greater autonomy and self governance altering the school leadership paradigm; and education systems recognising the need to have leaders trained in management. It is argued here that strategic leadership is not a new or different form of leadership, but rather, a leadership imperative for all school leaders regardless of their chosen leadership style.

Strategy as a concept

Strategy as a concept remains elusive (see Inbar, 1991, for a discussion on the metaphors that have been used to describe strategy as a concept). Quong, Walker & Stott (1998) describe it as one of the most frustrating, paradoxical and misunderstood concepts in leadership literature. It is commonly used to encapsulate a range of activities (Davies, 2004) and inextricably linked with planning (Bell, 2002; 1998). Dimmock & Walker (2004) express concern at the tendency to connect strategic thinking to school improvement planning, the undue attention and focus currently given to particular indicators and criteria as underpinning drivers of strategy and strategic thinking (e.g. enrolment and financial criteria); and the tendency for recent literature on strategy to neglect the relevance of the cultural context of each school.

In analysing contemporary literature on strategic leadership in schools, Eacott (2006a) searched the table of contents and abstracts of each issue of fourteen different educational leadership and management journals between 1980 and 2005, identifying works that addressed some component of strategic leadership as broadly defined. This procedure produced a list of 73 works on strategic leadership in schools. More than half the works (64%) focused solely on planning, most originated in the United Kingdom (58%) following the *Education Reform Act, 1988* and nine authors were responsible for nearly third of all works (30%).

For now, strategic leadership is defined as *leadership strategies and behaviours relating to the initiation, development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of strategic actions within an educa-*

tional institution, taking into consideration the unique context (past, present and future) and availability of resources, physical, financial and human.

Strategy and the school leader

The teaching of strategy to school personnel is generally from a 'mechanistic' perspective (Farjoun, 2002) or what Levačić & Glover (1998; 1997) term 'technicist-rational' approach. This approach presents strategy to school leaders as a mechanistic pursuit towards the production of a plan. The underlying assumption of strategy and the strategic leader of schools is viewed as 'strategic rationality' (Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1996, p. 337). From this perspective, the leader's task is to identify techno-economic opportunities and problems, systematically search for alternatives and make choices that maximise the performance of the organisation.

This perspective forms the basis of the criteria from which school development plans in the United Kingdom are assessed during inspection (Broadhead, Cuckle, Hodgson & Dunford, 1996; Cuckle & Broadhead, 2003; Cuckle, Broadhead, Hodgson & Dunford, 1998; Cuckle, Hodgson & Broadhead, 1998).

Whilst this rational approach remains vital to the development of strategy research, teaching and practice, its contributions and achievements have been increasingly questioned (Farjoun, 2002). Its simple assumptions, better suited to a rational, relatively stable and predictable context and to the early stages of the field's development, seem to be at odds with the complex and constantly changing educational context. Other criticism has labelled it static (Pettigrew, 1992), linear (Henderson & Mitchell, 1997) and fragmented (Schendel, 1994).

A significant development in our understanding of school leaders and strategy has recently emerged from the work of Davies, Davies & Ellison (2005). Davies (2003) challenged the narrow view of strategic leadership in schools, then drawing on insights gained from data gathered throughout a National College for School Leadership (NCSL) project, Davies and Davies (2004) were able to identify characteristics of strategic leaders, and further develop that into a model for strategic leadership in schools (Davies & Davies, 2006).

The analysis of the data revealed that strategic leaders involve themselves in five key activities: direction setting; translating strategy into action; enabling the staff to develop and deliver the strategy; determining effective intervention points; and developing strategic capabilities (Davies & Davies, 2006, p.123).

In addition, the NCSL project uncovered significant characteristics that strategic leaders exhibit. These were: a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present; prioritising their own strategic thinking and learning; creating mental models to frame their own understand-

ing and practice; and having powerful personal and professional network.

Examining the list of behaviours and strategies further highlights the significance of strategic leadership. Educational leaders can no longer dismiss the role of strategic leadership as something that belongs in the commercial sector and has no place in education. Yet, there are still those who question its role within education (Kelly, 2005) or challenge its ability to meet the needs of education (Bell, 2003; Mulford, 1994; Ponting, 2005; Rice & Schneider, 1994). According to Forde, Hobby and Lees (2000) strategy is an overrated feature of good leadership.

Whether we like it or not, the educational context of 2006 is far removed from that 20 years ago, or even five to ten years ago. Parents are continually wanting more from their children's school, with competition for students challenging educational leaders to act in new and different ways to ensure that they maintain their market share.

Strategic leadership is in essence, taking proactive responsibility for the future and long-term development and direction of the whole institution (Foskett, 2003). It is crucial to enable organizations to survive in a competitive market economy. Strategy has been a feature of profit-making organizations for a long time. It is important for ensuring success because it is the key to all other management processes. Adopting new leadership approaches as a result of socio-political changes is arguably taxing, frustrating and making the work of principals more demanding (Southworth, 1999). The enlargement and enhancement of the role has not always been supported by the necessary leadership and management development (Spicer, 1995). However, strategy and strategic leadership remain important to all other managerial processes.

Implications for the practitioner

Education systems throughout the world are attempting to enforce forms of strategic leadership on the work of educational leaders by mandating school development plans. In the UK it was done through the *Education Reform Act 1998*, and more recently in New South Wales, the Department of Education and Training now requires schools to adopt a three-year planning cycle. However this is not strategic leadership, this more closely aligns with operational or action planning.

Effective strategic leadership requires an educational leader and school community to think at least six to seven years into the future. When an enrolling parent walks into the school, the leader needs to be able to articulate what the school is striving for and what that parent can expect throughout his/her child's time at the school.

There are many different versions of how a school can establish a strategic direction (see Cheung & Cheng 1996; Cheung & Cheng 1997; Eacott, 2006; Jordan & Webb 1986; Kundu 1991; Milliken & Gallagher 1998; Pertridou & Chatzipanagiotou 2004; Sallis 1990; Tsiakkiros & Pashiardis 2002) however what is most important, is the meaningful involvement of key stakeholders. Whether this is achieved through school councils, parents and citizens committees or a school planning committee is irrelevant so long as each stakeholder group is given the opportunity to meaningfully contribute to decisions.

Research on effective schools has shown that parental involvement in decision-making and activities positively correlates with increased satisfaction and support for the school (Gamage, 1998). Similarly staff participation is linked to job satisfaction, morale and building

trust and confidence in leadership (Timperley & Robinson, 2000). Once the school has a strategy, it becomes the guiding framework for all decisions within the school (Eacott, 2004). Decisions made at the organisational level, staff level and student level need to align with the overarching strategy of the school. The systems and structures designed at the organisational level, for example meeting structures, communication systems, decision-making models, need to reflect the school's strategy. The professional learning opportunities offered to staff, pedagogical practices and annual reviews need to meaningfully reflect the overarching strategy of the school. The expectation of students and their role within the school needs to reflect the basic premises of the strategy. In essence, the school's strategy becomes the blueprint for action.

Strategy is an iterative process. It has an emergent quality that requires constant monitoring and systematic evaluation of progress. The educational leader needs to be consistently asking themselves and others, where are we now? Where to next? How will we know when we get there? There is a need for a transparent system of data collection to enable effective monitoring and predetermined points of evaluation. Pivotal to the success of this aspect of strategic leadership is developing the analytical skills of others to ensure thorough evaluation.

Conclusion

Strategic leadership is an imperative dimension of effective leadership within both commercial and educational settings. Whilst schools exist for purposes other than profit and the day to day running of schools can continue without a well articulated strategy, it would be foolish for a leader to quickly dismiss its potential. Through effective strategic leadership, a leader can align the entire school community in the active pursuit of a common purpose and maintain the school's focus on improvement.

Note: The list of references for this article are available from the author: Scott.Eacott@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au

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