

THE ISSUES AND THEORIES OF EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

*Muhamad Bustaman Haji Abdul Manaf
Institut Aminuddin Baki*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explore the issues and theories of Strategic Leadership to day against the backdrop of current structure and processes in the education institution. An exploratory qualitative survey method was used to study strategic management practices in nine polytechnics located in Peninsular Malaysia. The main personnel involved in this research were the Directors and all members of the planning committee from these three institutions. 73 respondents took part in the study. All respondents participated in both data collection methods: interview and questionnaire. The main finding of the study is that visionary leadership seen as the essential elements for a successful of formal strategic planning practices in participating institutions.

The paper does not attempt to measure the effectiveness of the strategic leadership but contends that educational strategic leadership is being affected by the current development of administrative and decision making processes and distribution of workload. In short the educational strategic leadership is too tied to the overloaded in basket of routine sign-off and endless committee meetings and leaders need to be free to get together and coordinate strategic visions for the myriad of change projects and to go out and explain, inspire, guide and persuade.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a subject that has garnered interest among scholars and laypersons alike. Scientific research on leadership did not begin until the twentieth century with a focus on the determinants of leadership

effectiveness. Behavioral scientists have attempted to discover what traits, abilities, behaviors, sources of power or aspects of the situation determine how well a leader is able to influence followers and accomplish group objectives (Yukl, 1989). There has been another shift, it seems, in the main thrust of leadership studies of the authors and scholars in the last part of the twentieth century. The focus of much writing on leadership in the last decade appears to be on strategic leadership. Entering into the new century, organizations such as the education institution face three key strategic challenges, each of which demands more of the qualities of leadership than managerial competence alone can provide. These challenges, according to Wilson (1996), are (1) new visions and new directions (an ability to invent the future, the setting of new directions), (2) privatization (a redefining of the roles of government and business, public cynicism of big government and societal performance) and (3) democratization (heightened demands for broader sharing of power by individuals in the decision-making of all institutions – people want leadership rather than commands).

Leader effectiveness definitions also seem to differ from writer to writer. The most commonly used measure of leader effectiveness is the extent to which the leader's organization performs its task successfully and attains its goals. The attitude of followers toward the leader is another common indicator. Leader effectiveness has occasionally been measured in terms of a leader's contribution to the quality of the organization's processes as perceived by followers or observers outside the organization (Yurk, 1989). Blanchard (1996) adds what may be considered a qualifier for effective strategic leadership, when he says that when people talk of effectiveness, they are really talking about vision and direction. Effectiveness, according to Blanchard, has to do with focusing the organization's energy in a particular direction.

This paper attempts to explore the issues and theories of Strategic Leadership today against the backdrop of current structure and processes in the education institution. An exploratory qualitative survey method was used to study strategic management practices in nine polytechnics located in Peninsular Malaysia. The main personnel involved in this research were the directors and all members of the planning committee from these three institutions. 73 respondents took part in the study. All respondents participated in both data collection methods: interview and

questionnaire. The main finding of the study is that visionary leadership seen as the essential elements for a successful of formal strategic planning practices in participating institutions.

The paper does not attempt to measure the effectiveness of the strategic leadership but contends that educational strategic leadership is being affected by the current development of administrative and decision making processes and distribution of workload. In short the educational strategic leadership is too tied to the overloaded in basket of routine sign-off and endless committee meetings and leaders need to be free to get together and coordinate strategic visions for the myriad of change projects and to go out and explain, inspire, guide and persuade.

While not measuring the effectiveness of strategic leadership, in order to develop the comparative issues, it will then explore strategic leadership to break out two central skills that differentiate strategic leadership from other leadership: formulating and coordinating a vision and communicating it to the rest of the organization. It will be argued that it is in these areas that the gap between theory and practice is the greatest for educational strategic leadership.

What is Strategic Leadership?

It would appear that the term strategic leadership is an even more nebulous term and subject to as many different explanations as leadership itself. It seems that many writers use only the term leaders or leadership when speaking of strategic leadership. For others, the term "strategic leadership" is viewed as little more than a public relations ploy, a high-gloss term that promises much but changes little (Wilson, 1996).

Strategy has been defined by Davies (2004) as encompassing direction-setting, broad aggregated agendas, a perspective to view the future and a template against which to evaluate current activities. For the purpose of this paper, a strategic leader has been defined as an individual, who has organizational leadership responsibility and needs to represent that organization in the interaction with other organizations and individuals that compose the external environment. Strategic leaders must envision a desired future for their organization and then direct the flow of internal and the influence of external events toward that goal or vision. Thus, the strategic leadership environment consists of internal and external

complexities that directly and indirectly affect the organization. The new, more complex environment requires leaders to continuously rethink organizational design and processes and question sustained allegiance to a static organizational structure. Strategic leaders in the 21st century need to perpetually evaluate organizational structure using a process designed to promote the evolution of strategy, human resources, and organizational culture to meet competitive demands.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter (1996) points out one important difference for strategic leadership today that will be even more critical to leaders of the future than to those of the past. Leaders must become *cosmopolitans* who are comfortable operating across boundaries and who can forge links between organizations. Leaders must take their ability to craft visions, inspire action and empower others and use it to encourage people from diverse functions, disciplines and organizations to find common cause in goals that improve the entire organization.

A concise checklist and summary of the common elements driving strategic leadership was published by Hesselbein (1994) provides a useful guide for the examination of the educational strategic leadership. She calls it the **10 Check Points to Strategic Leadership**:

1. Understand the environment. To understand the strategic context for planning, leaders need to understand the environment – global to local – and identify major trends for the organization.
2. Revisit the mission. Develop a powerful and shared mission.
3. Answer three fundamental questions: What is our business? Who is our customer? And what does the customer value?
4. Communicate the vision. Leaders communicate the vision until it permeates the outer edges of the corporation.
5. Ban the hierarchy.
6. Challenge the gospel. There are no sacred cows. For business or government one of the most difficult tasks is the planned abandonment of what works today but will have little meaning for the future.
7. Dispersed leadership. The more power you give away, the more power you have, leadership has little to do with power and everything to do with responsibility and you share responsibility.
8. No matter what you call it just do it. Leaders need to lead by example with clear consistent messages, great involvement of people in

decisions that affect them and pushing shared decision making across to the outer circles of the corporation. The mission becomes theirs: the investment is theirs: the energy flows and dispersed leadership becomes a reality.

9. The power of language. People today need a covenant, not a contract.
10. Lead from the front. Do not push from the rear. Do not be a skillful fence sitter. Walk the talk, never break a promise. Communicate the vision.

While Davies (2004) put forward nine factors associated with strategic leadership which cover the abilities to undertake organizational activity. The strategic leader should be able to:

1. be strategically oriented, which involves the ability to consider both the long-term future, seeing the bigger picture as well as understanding the current contextual setting of the organization.
2. translate strategy into action or operational terms.
3. align people and organizations as a whole to a future organizational state or position.
4. determine effective intervention points or the key moment for strategic change in organizations.
5. develop strategic capabilities or core competencies of the staff and strategic leaders display personal characteristics.
6. have dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present.
7. absorb new information, assimilate and learn from it and more importantly to apply it to new ends.
8. change and adapt to new environment in a responsive and proactive way.
9. make right decision, to the right people, right place, right time and within the right budget.

Vision and Mission

As noted earlier and reinforced above, strategic leaders must create a vision and actively lead to organization in embracing that vision through to the future. It is evident that the strategic leadership in education institution has and is working diligently and effectively at understanding

the external environment and developing the strategic programs and mission statements. Strategic leaders develop and communicate a compelling, understandable strategic vision for organization. That strategic vision is a mean of focusing effort and progressing toward a desired future. Vision is both an image of a future state and a process the organization uses to guide future development.

When a leader discovers the need for major revitalization of the organization, it becomes necessary to find ways to inspire people with a vision of a better future that is sufficiently attractive to justify the cost of changing familiar ways of doing things. Successful visions in mature organizations are rarely the product of a single individual. The vision evolves over a longer period of time and is the product of a participative process. To be motivating, a vision must be a source of self-esteem and common purpose for members. The core of the vision is the organization's mission statement. The mission statement is a general picture rather than a detailed blueprint and it should reflect the major themes and values in the vision. Educational strategic leadership has created a vision and mission statement.

There is no more powerful force driving an organization toward excellence and success than an attractive, worthwhile and achievable vision widely shared. An organization driven by accelerating technological change, staffed by a diverse multicultural mix of highly intelligent knowledge workers, facing global complexity and multiple mission demands would self-destruct without a common sense of direction. "Conflicting forces and agendas would explode the organization into thousands of bits of human shrapnel speeding off in every direction, only rarely hitting a meaningful target."¹

The key is connecting with people in a meaningful way to persuade them to change their perceptions about what is important for them and for the organization. The key to gaining widespread commitment to a new vision is to present the vision in such a way that people will want to participate. This certainly cannot be done through coercion or manipulation, for people must freely and enthusiastically accept the vision or they will not have the will to work for its attainment. This involves discussing the vision with them in terms that address their own legitimate concerns and interests. This means connecting with people about what is right and worth doing. Leaders accomplish this through the three main

tasks of the leader as spokesperson: communication, networking and what Warren Bennis calls "living the dream."

Writers on leadership theory agree that the best leadership frames the organization's mission and values in ways that members find transcendent: the goals of the business are transmuted from the drudgery of ordinary work into goals that are worthy of heroic efforts and even sacrifices. One example, related by Brian Dumaine in "Way Do We Work?" (*Fortune*, December 26, 1994, P. 196), tells of the difference between three stonemasons:

In the day of misty towers, distressed maidens and stalwart knights, a young man, walking down a road, came upon a laborer fiercely pounding away at a stone with hammer and chisel. The lad asked the worker, who looked frustrated and angry, "What are you doing?" The laborer answered in a pained voice: "I'm trying to shape this stone and it is backbreaking work." The youth continued his journey and soon came upon another man chipping away at a similar stone, who looked neither particularly angry nor happy. "What are you doing?" the young man asked. "I'm shaping a stone for a building." The young man went on and before long came to a third worker chipping away at a stone, but this worker was singing happily as he worked. "What are you doing?" the young man asked. The worker smiled and replied, "I'm building a cathedral."

A compelling vision like the one the third stonemason had is the kind of vision that the strategic leadership for educational leaders need to develop for the organization and then that same leadership must ensure the vision is woven into the fabric of everyone's daily work. Implicit in successful vision creation are the vital leadership activities of communicating and relating effectively with people throughout the organization.

The Key to Successful Strategic Leadership: Communicating the Vision and Mission

Communicating the message of the vision is crucial because without effective communication, that message remains weak. Leaders must be

able to explain the vision in clear terms so that followers can understand, accept and commit to that vision. Leaders must be able to make every employee see how the vision is relevant to his or her job and how the vision can be achieved. This is not a “post it on the intra-net and announce its presence” exercise. It is also not a task to be handed off to mid-level or unit leadership for they too need to be convinced and will have missed out on the formulation of that vision and the “why” and “why-not” discussions that were part of that formulation. One problem facing our strategic leaders today is how many layers of the organization they can personally reach their efforts to communicate the vision.

Major change can threaten trust and ultimately even confidence in leadership. Ineffective or nonexistent communication, especially in time of change and uncertainty, may then result in mistrust, confusion and cynicism and a drop in morale, belief in the organization and confidence in the leadership. Persuasive communication is therefore particularly critical in periods of major change such as the educational institutions are currently undertaking.

Max DePree (1989) writes that good communication is a prerequisite for teaching and learning and that good communication is not simply sending and receiving or a mechanical exchange of data. No matter how good the communication, if no one listens all is lost. The best communication forces one to listen. Good communication draws out an awareness of working together. Teaching and learning underlie business literacy and action.

Business literacy is the “Why” of what organization does and the action is what they do. An increasingly large part that communication plays in expanding (or re-engineered?) cultures is to pass along values to new members and reaffirm those values to old hand (DePree, 1989).

Equally important to the success of the communication process is trust. Followers cannot trust a title or a faceless name. Certainly, the top management can issue direction and directives through the chain and expect that they will be executed, but when it comes to the important elements of vision, values and major programs that are expected to become part of the everyday culture of work-life, more is required. Townsend and Gibhardt (1997) state that a sense of stability is important. Juniors at all levels feel the need to know more about their seniors than just their names – and if seniors do not make an effort to define themselves, those

juniors fill in the blanks with whatever image fits the information available. Once individuals decide who their bosses are and whether they can be counted on to do or not do, they can then decide whether to stay or to go. Further more if they decide to stay, the individuals can settle on a level of commitment, depending on how closely the boss's perceived values and vision match their own (Townsend and Gibhardt, 1997).

Leader and communicator are not synonymous terms; it is possible to be a powerful communicator and not be a leader. It is also possible for someone to reach a position of power and still be a poor communicator.

To summarize this discussion on vision and communicating a vision, it is not enough to simply identify an appealing vision and set of values for the organization. Vision and values must be transmitted by persuasion and inspiration, not by directive and policy statements. The theory holds that effective leaders use a combination of captivating rhetoric, metaphor, slogans, symbols and rituals. The process of mobilizing commitment should begin at the top of the organization with the inner circle of executives. Other executives should participate in the process of reshaping the organization's culture and embodying the vision in it. However, the primary responsibility for this difficult leadership task should never be delegated to others or the effort is unlikely to succeed. Commitment to the vision is closely related to follower trust in the leader. Trust is dependent on the perceived expertise of the leader but it also depends on the leader's consistency in statements and actions.

Leaders demonstrate commitment to values by their own behavior and by the way they reinforce the behavior of other (Yulk, 1989). Educational strategic leadership can practice none of these elements if they remain trapped behind their desks by the workload, becoming just a name or even worse just a position without a face or a personality.

Organizational and Work Culture Challenges

The sheer size of an organization can create grave problems for the leader interested in vitality, creativity and renewal. Large organizations such as the educational institution develop certain characteristic failings, some of which are destructive or organizational vitality. An organization that is very large can lead executives to create huge headquarters staffs to monitor and analyze. Substructures proliferate, an elaborate organization

chart emerges and obsessive attempts to coordinate follow. In large organization the chain of command becomes excessively long. Decisions are slowed and sometimes even blocked by too many screening points and multiple sign-off. The greater the size and complexity of the systems, the harder it is to ensue the kinds of two-way communication necessary for effective functioning.

Educational strategic leadership must recognize that even if they themselves favor a free flow of information, many at the second, third, and fourth levels may act to block, filter or distort the downward flow. This can occur simply because of a lack of clear understanding of the “why” and “how” of a project or directive. Therefore greater efforts need to be made to have project sponsors and strategic leaders take the project to the rest of the organization. Unfortunately, inflexibility and unresponsiveness that is built into the structure and systems can thwart these efforts. For example, jobs are not very flexible. A traditional organization is hung upon a skeletal system of position-based leaders. In addition, if you have an organization full of job-holders and a hierarchical framework to keep them in place, the traditional patriarchal leaders work fine as long as the organization isn’t exposed to a constantly and radically changing environment. When faced with changing times, the organization is going to require more leaders with sophisticated skills. This describes the situation that the educational finds itself in today. As the story of the stonemasons illustrates, it takes a culture change to have the member of the educational realizes he or she is not just in the organization for a job, but to be a part of something bigger or something more important. It takes active participatory leadership to gain people’s trust in the organization and, as discussed, to successfully change the culture. Individuals need to realize that security of employment is not in the particular job but in the organizational need to have the talents of the individual employed in the organization somewhere and in differing jobs along the course of one’s career.

In many cases, leaders in large organizations are expected to assume the administrative responsibility and to provide more overall direction and integration of group activities. In this event, the amount of time available for one-to-one contact with individual subordinates is further reduced.

The decreased opportunity for interacting with individual subordinates in large groups has important implications for the leaders of these organizations. There is less time available to provide support and encouragement to each subordinate and to engage in other interpersonal behavior necessary for maintaining effective relationships with subordinates. Group size also has implications for the team-building activities of a leader. As organizations grow larger, separate cliques and factions are likely to emerge. These sub-groups often compete for power and resources, creating conflicts and posing a threat to group cohesiveness and teamwork. Educational strategic leadership need to devote more time building organization identification, promoting cooperation and managing conflict. However, the pressure to carry out more administrative activities causes leaders to neglect these important organizational maintenance roles until serious problems arise; the result is crisis and reactive management (Yulk, 1989).

The typical manager works long hours. This is definitely true of most educational strategic leaders. A workweek typically lasts at least 50 hours and many of the educational managers and other senior management staff, including teachers, take work home with them. Most find it difficult to forget about their jobs when at home on vacation.

During the typical day, there is seldom a break in the workload. There are continuous requests for information, assistance, direction and authorization from a large number of people, such as subordinates, peers, superiors and people outside the organization.

CONCLUSION

Educational strategic leadership cannot be constantly captured by the office, the computer or endless meetings. They must be where the staffs are, leading and listening. It is particularly important during this time of change that leaders communicate frequently and personally with educational personnel and communities. Communicating means not only telling them what is going on but also listening to their concerns and doing something about them. Counseling and mentoring are not just esoteric terms. They are an essential part of the leader's tool kit. This kind of hands-on leadership style can only take root when it is driven from the top-down with leadership-by-example programs.

Max DePree (1989) speaks of every corporation, every institution needing tribal storytellers. He tells the story of a village in Nigeria where electricity had been introduced. Each family got a single light bulb in its hut; a real sign of progress. The trouble was that at night, though they had nothing to read and many of them did not know how to read, the families would sit in their huts in awe of this wonderful symbol of technology. The light bulb watching began to replace the customary night time gatherings by the tribal fire, where the tribal storytellers, the elders, would pass along the history of the tribe. The tribe was losing its history because of a few electric bulbs.

The story helps to illustrate the difference between just managing an organization and providing real leadership. Our Director or School Principals can be seen as being some of our tribal storytellers. The penalty of not allowing them to practice their art is to lose one's history and binding values. Tribal storytellers, the tribe's elders, must insistently work at the process of corporate renewal. They must preserve and revitalize the values of the tribe. They nourish a scrutiny of corporate values that eradicates bureaucracy and sustains the individual. Every company has tribal stories. Though there may only be a few tribal storytellers, it's everyone's job to see that the things as unimportant as manuals and light bulbs don't replace them (DePree, 1989).

Top management, as some of our tribal elders in this analogy, need to be out with the tribe as often as possible speaking of organizational values and renewing the culture. The quality "manuals" and the E-mail and intranet exist as "light bulbs". The organization cannot let the "manuals" and light bulbs" replace the strategic leadership role as tribal storytellers. The educational leaders need the time to get out amongst the rest of the educational sectors and personally represent and evoke the change, values and culture espoused by the strategic leadership.

Having formulated the vision, educational strategic leadership must be freed up to lead the organization forward to the vision. They must demonstrate stewardship, be the "champions" of change, inspire and communicate. They must close the leadership "gap" between our strategic leadership in education institutions and the rest of the public organization. A review of the writing and theory of leadership and strategic leadership would indicate these are key elements to success

and effectiveness in large and complex organizations undergoing the constant change and renewal necessary in the environment of today and the future.

REFERENCES

- Bennis, W. *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989.
- Davies, Barbara and Davies, Brent. *Strategic Leadership School Leadership and Management*. 24:1 (February 2004): 29-38.
- DePree, M. *Leadership In An Art*. New York: Dell Publishing Group, 1989.
- Handy, Charles B. *Understanding Organizations* 3rd. Ed. New York: *Facts On File Publications*, 1985.
- Hesselbein, F. *Strategic Leadership. Executive Excellence* 11.8 (Aug. 1994): 13-17
- Kouzes, James M. and Barry Z. Posner. *The Leadership Challenge: How To Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done In Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995.
- Nanus, B. *Visionary Leadership: Creating A Compelling Sense Of Direction For Your Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992.
- Townsend, Patrick L. and Gibhardt, Joan E. *Five-Star Leadership: The Art And Strategy Of Crating Leaders At Every Level*. New York: John Wiley & Sone, Inc., 1997.
- Yulk, Gary A. *Leadership In Organizations*. 2nd Ed. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1989.

