

Strategic Leadership in all its “Nitty-Gritty” Detail: Behaviours Associated With Strategic Leaders

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Abstract

This paper identifies some challenges and opportunities currently faced by the education sector, including the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of digital technologies, and the increasing importance of equity, inclusion, and sustainability. It suggests that effective strategic leadership is required for the sector to successfully navigate these challenges and opportunities. The paper goes on to define leadership and strategic leadership before examining four clusters of behaviour associated with strategic leaders: visioning, action planning, intelligent use of data, and networking, and providing practical examples of their application. It recognises that these behaviours operate, not in isolation from other aspects of leadership, but rather within the broader context of a leader’s values, the dynamics of a leadership team, and the environments within which leaders operate.

Keywords: Strategic leadership, project vision, action planning, data, stakeholders, networking

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The education sector, and indeed the wider public service, are facing a number of strategic challenges. Some of these challenges arise directly from the COVID-19 pandemic which highlighted real issues of equality of access to education and brought existing societal inequalities into sharp focus. Consequently, leaders in early learning and care settings, schools, colleges, centres for education and across the wider education sector are facing significant challenges in relation to reducing potential achievement gaps and addressing issues of inequality (OECD, 2021).

Other challenges pre-date the pandemic. For at least the last decade, educators have been striving to foster the competencies required to live successfully in the digital world, while mediating the challenges posed by inequality of access to technologies and ethical issues of information reliability, privacy, and control (Butler & Leahy, 2022; OECD, 2019a, 2020). Increasingly, education for sustainable development is seen as an integral part of a quality education (OECD, 2019a). However, fostering the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to live sustainable lifestyles requires a delicate balance between issues of intergenerational equity, human rights, and global citizenship (Government of Ireland, 2022). There is a wealth of evidence to indicate that children born to marginalised communities do not gain the same benefits from education as their peers in non-marginalised communities (Johnson & Jackson, 2019). This, coupled with the importance of ensuring that all learners have access to high-quality learning experiences in an inclusive environment, has challenged educational leaders to align finite resources with learning needs to maximise quality, equity, and efficiency (OECD, 2019a).

As well as facing challenges, the education sector is also presented with a range of exciting opportunities. The pandemic has prompted public-service providers to move towards new ways of thinking, relating and providing services. Specific to education, the period of school closures has demonstrated the importance of high-quality learning experiences for children and young adults. The deployment of remote teaching and learning strategies, along with the attempt to ensure equality of access to them, has prompted the education sector to reassess its priorities (Darmody et al., 2020; Department of Education, 2021). Developments in areas such as artificial intelligence have huge transformative potential for tackling many of the challenges associated with personalised learning (Government of Ireland, 2021). Education for sustainable development offers creative solutions to tensions between economic growth, environmental stewardship, and social cohesion (OECD, 2019b).

In this changing and demanding context, senior leaders in the education sector are challenged to demonstrate strategic leadership in order to successfully navigate the challenges and opportunities they face. They operate at setting and school levels, as managers of early learning and care settings and as principals and deputy principals of schools. At system level, they are senior leaders in the Department of Education and its agencies such as the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST).

This paper aims to support those in strategic leadership roles within the education sector by outlining an understanding of strategic leadership, by describing key behaviours associated with it, and by discussing pertinent factors that impact on these behaviours.

Leadership

Traditional understandings of leadership focused on the individual traits of leaders themselves (Burns, 1978). This approach describes leaders in terms of their attributes, such as the transactional leader who provides contingent rewards and the transformational leader who develops a vision (S. M. Carter & Greer, 2013). However, other research strands have shifted attention away from the attributes of the leader towards a dynamic understanding of leadership that considers the interdependencies among the leader(s), the followers, and the situation. In this vein, leadership is described as “a network of relationships of people, structures, and cultures... dependent on interrelationships and connections” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2003, p. 696). Similarly, Yukl and Gardner (2020) argue for a nuanced understanding of leadership that embraces the relationship between the leader and followers, the processes that operate within an organisation, and the overall context within which the organisation operates. Their work refers to the complexity theory of leadership and concentrates on the interactions within an organisation and the adaptations that an organisation makes as it engages with its environment. Complexity theory also emphasises the importance of leadership processes rather than leadership styles. These processes include administrative processes, adaptive processes, and enabling processes (Yukl & Gardner, 2020).

Strategic leadership in its broadest sense is concerned with the behaviours of those at the apex of an organisation and the impact of these behaviours on the organisation's processes, outcomes, and performance (Luciano et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2020). It is defined as “a process of providing the direction and inspiration necessary to create and implement the vision, mission and strategies to achieve organisational objectives” (Lussier & Achua, 2010, p. 418). There is strong consensus in the literature that strategic leadership is a hallmark of successful organisations (Naidoo, 2009; Schutte & Barkhuizen, 2009; Shenhar, 2004). Samimi et al. (2020) have delineated four specific outcomes of effective strategic leadership: enhanced performance, better strategic choices, improved innovation, and greater adherence to social and ethical issues. This reflects research by Shenhar (2004) who argues that a strategic approach will improve an organisation's vision, organisation, processes, and tools.

The Behaviour of Strategic Leaders

In developing an understanding of strategic leadership, Iszatt-White (2010) calls for researchers to move away from theoretical definitions of leadership and to concentrate on the “specific behaviours we are talking about and what they really look like in a given setting” (p. 411). In this regard, many researchers across a number of cultural contexts (C. Carter et al., 2020; Chan, 2018; Luciano et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2020; Shenhar, 2004) have attempted to explain such behaviours. This paper now draws together the common threads running through their work and presents four clusters

of behaviour associated with strategic leaders: visioning, action planning, intelligent use of data, and networking.

Visioning

One cluster of behaviours centres on actions that are designed to unify and motivate followers to pursue an agreed vision. A project vision is defined as a “statement that expresses the value of a project in short, clearly articulated and preferably emotive terms” (Shenhar, 2004, p. 572). In developing a vision, Yukl and Gardner (2020) refer to the need for strategic leaders to have a core ideology that is both strong and relevant while others cite the need for strategic leaders to “make meaning” and become “a powerful symbol or collective representation” (C. Carter et al., 2020, p. 68). Samimi et al. (2020) see the construction of a vision at a broad, organisational level as a core behaviour of strategic leaders while Shenhar (2004) sees defining and nurturing a vision that motivates members of an organisation as essential to effective strategic leadership.

This process of articulating and sharing a vision so convincingly that it will strengthen performance and promote cohesion is referred to as strategic visioning (Luciano et al., 2020). Iszatt-White (2010) identifies a number of specific behaviours related to strategic visioning. These include clarifying, rehearsing, upholding, and elaborating. *Clarifying* involves sharing the original vision with key stakeholders and responding to their perception of it. *Rehearsing* involves continually reminding members of the essential elements of the strategy, and *upholding* refers to the process of maintaining the values and aims that are central to the strategy. *Elaborating*, or organisational storytelling, is the development of the vision into practically implementable actions.

In the 2021/22 academic year, 884 school leaders received additional supports for their schools¹ under the Department of Education’s Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) scheme, designed to address concentrated educational disadvantage. A recent evaluation of the DEIS scheme highlights the importance of effective strategic leadership in ensuring its success and places a particular emphasis on school leaders “creating a shared purpose and vision” for the school and “communicating this compelling vision” to all members of the school community (Department of Education, 2022b, pp. 17-19).

Senior leaders at school and setting levels are undoubtedly being called upon to implement both national and local initiatives designed to meet particular challenges such as those posed by inclusion, digital technologies, or sustainable development. To support them in their role, it is worth considering the convergence between the Department of Education’s (2022b) thinking on vision and that of Iszatt-White (2010) outlined above. As a first step in meeting these challenges, therefore, these leaders

¹ This comprises 687 primary and 197 post-primary schools and over 180,000 students (www.gov.ie).

might consider situating all such initiatives firmly within a clear and compelling vision for their schools and/or settings and thereafter capitalising on every opportunity to clarify, rehearse, uphold and elaborate on this vision as the initiatives develop within their schools and/or settings.

Action Planning

The second cluster of behaviours identified here relates to making the vision a reality through effective planning and implementation. This is defined as setting out “what to do and how to do it to achieve the highest competitive advantage and the best value from the project outcome” (Shenhar, 2004, pp. 571-572). In planning and implementing strategy, Elbanna et al. (2016) advocate a process of action planning and monitoring. They define this as a formal process whereby specific tasks are identified with clear targets, assigned responsibilities, and realistic timelines. They caution, however, against too rigid an approach to action planning as it may lead to inflexibility and inability to respond to dynamic environments. Wang et al. (2012) concur and advocate two principles to mitigate against an inflexible approach to action planning. The first is the ‘loose-tight’ principle that involves tight procedures with flexibility in their implementation. The second principle they refer to is the ‘value of paradoxes’ which claims that the ability to successfully deal with inconsistencies and apparent contradictions is central to effective strategic leadership.

Within this cluster of activities, a particular importance is ascribed to strategic leaders having structures in place to facilitate effective oversight of operations and administration (Samimi et al., 2020; Yukl & Gardner, 2020). This involves establishing structures that allow for a genuine learning process, whereby a plan can be altered in view of emerging circumstances and the impact of the first phases of implementation. It also involves having systems in place to both monitor performance and to deal with conflicting demands, including both system demands and demands associated with interpersonal relations.

In order to achieve this oversight, Elbanna et al. (2016) call for leaders to attend to three distinct aspects: organisation, processes and tools. *Organisation* refers to the project structure and teams; *process* refers to areas such as communication, monitoring, decision-making and review; and *tools* are the resources required for implementation. This cluster of activities resonates strongly with what Moore (2013) refers to as the organisational capacity of a public-service organisation. Further exploration of the literature suggests a need for strategic leaders to “manage down to make sure that the organisation has the operational capacity to actually deliver” (Höglund et al., 2021, p. 1614). In managing down, it is argued that strategic leaders need to optimise the opportunity employees have to succeed and to afford them a degree of autonomy in executing their functions.

The recently published *Chief Inspector's report September 2016-December 2020* highlights the broad range of national initiatives that were introduced into the system over a four-year period.² The report noted the demands these initiatives place on settings and schools, on the Department itself and on other related agencies that work with schools. It also highlighted the fact that these initiatives can lead to teachers "feeling significant pressure to implement new projects, while also delivering on the curriculum objectives and assessment requirements" (Department of Education, 2022a, p. 269).

The pandemic has necessitated a revision of the range and scope of these strategies and a more careful consideration of the pace at which they are implemented. The process of action planning and monitoring, with effective oversight, may be of particular benefit to senior leaders in the Department of Education as they seek to ensure that the reforms envisaged in specific national initiatives form part of a cohesive whole-of-system approach and are fully aligned with each other.

Intelligent use of Data

Researchers (Davies, 2003; Groundwater-Smith & Hunter, 2000) claim that the systematic gathering and interrogation of data to inform decisions is an important strategic leadership behaviour. The importance of this third cluster of behaviours considered here lies in the fact that leaders have privileged access to information within their organisations, so that how they frame and distribute this information can have significant operational consequences (Luciano et al., 2020; Samimi et al., 2020), particularly if operating in complex environments characterised by unpredictability and turbulence. In looking at how strategic leaders should gather and process information, Yukl and Gardner (2020) refer to "organisational ambidexterity" (p. 342), while Iszatt-White (2010) refers to adapting or using information to inform a "continuous process of self-formation and reconstruction" (Iszatt-White, 2010, p. 419).

In a similar vein, other researchers (S. M. Carter & Greer, 2013; Chan, 2018; Nye, 2014) argue that strategic leaders should use the information they gather to deepen their understanding of the challenges and competing expectations posed by both the internal and external environments. They contend that the main aim of information processing for strategic leaders is to enable them to discern opportunities and threats in the environment, recognise trends, and gain an in-depth understanding of their organisation and how different stakeholders conceptualise it.

Senge (2000, p.78) concurs and argues that information should be used to facilitate systems thinking which will provide "a different way of looking at problems and goals not as isolated events but as components of larger structures". In using information this way, Pisapia (2006) refers to a concept of reframing, whereby strategic leaders

² These include initiatives in digital learning, creativity, wellbeing, modern foreign languages, and education for sustainable development.

use information to examine the same situation from a variety of perspectives and to interrogate the underlying values and assumptions. Chan (2018) further develops this by calling on strategic leaders to use information gathered to interrogate the cause of opportunities and threats and to be innovative in their approach to solutions.

Since 2012, all schools are required to use the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) process to identify clear targets to bring about improvements in learning outcomes. SSE is also central to national educational policy, being the primary means of supporting schools as they mediate change. The ability of school leaders to accurately analyse good quality data and to use this analysis to inform their judgements and their agreed actions for improvement is central to effective SSE (Timperley, 2014). Analysing baseline data and data from formative and summative assessment, and using these data to identify expected outcomes for learners, are also critical to the success of the DEIS action-planning process (Department of Education, 2022b).

Therefore, as they engage in SSE or DEIS action planning, school leaders should be particularly cognisant of the need to collect the most meaningful data in the most efficient way and to analyse and interpret the data carefully. They should also be open to using data to challenge particular assumptions and as an opportunity to be innovative and creative in their target setting.

At system level, it may also be beneficial for senior leaders to reflect on how the Department of Education can provide data to schools in a meaningful and accessible way to inform their planning process.³ Currently the Irish system has a range of both context and outcome data on each school. The potential exists for these data to guide and support effective action planning for improvement if the data were available to schools in an accessible format.

Networking

Iszatt-White (2010) notes that strategic leaders need to be cognisant of the demands of a range of stakeholders. Yukl and Gardner (2020) contend that a key behaviour of a strategic leader is engaging with the external environment to ensure the ongoing sustainability of an organisation. Quong and Walker (2010, p. 23) suggest that “collaborating with multiple stakeholders to put in place strategies to respond rapidly to complex problems” is critical for strategic leaders. The fourth cluster of behaviours described here, then, relates to the process of building and managing relationships outside of an organisation and representing it publicly. Chan (2018) refers to this process as networking and suggests that the process is as important for public-service organisations as it is for organisations in the private sector.

³ Internationally, there are many examples of how different systems do this. See, for example, the Austrian online portal system: https://www.bmbwf.gv.at/en/Topics/school/krp/8_p_p.html.

Samimi et al. (2020) also highlight the importance of engaging with external stakeholders as a behaviour of strategic leaders and argue that it can bring many benefits for an organisation, including access to resources, reputational benefits, and enhanced ability to navigate future crises. Luciano et al. (2020) call for strategic leaders to engage proactively with the environment, claiming that such engagements will maximise an organisation's degree of freedom, allowing for enhanced strategic decision-making and thereby decreasing the stakes of any one specific decision.

Looking at Our School (Department of Education and Skills, 2016) is a quality framework for schools which describes effective practice in teaching and learning, and in leadership and management. In articulating how school leaders can develop leadership capacity, the framework encourages them to "build professional networks with other school leaders" and to "actively involve themselves in professional associations for school leaders and managers at all levels, up to and including international level" (Department of Education and Skills, 2016, p. 22). Similarly, one of the key features of effective leadership in DEIS schools is the involvement of leaders in communities of practice (Department of Education, 2022b). Participation in these communities affords school leaders an opportunity to build and manage relationships with other school leaders and to use the learning gleaned from this networking to improve their own organisations. The involvement of setting and school leaders in these and other formal and informal networks can be a very important means of successfully navigating potential challenges.

At national level, collaboration between the Department of Education and the education partners has been a feature of educational practice since at least the 1990s, when it was introduced as part of the social partnership approach to public-service policy (Hislop, 2012). This approach was most recently deployed in dealing with one of the most significant challenges faced by the education sector when "the experience of calculated grades and accredited grades demonstrated that significant change can be advanced through genuine collaboration between education partners" (Department of Education, 2022a, p. 300). The involvement of students in this collaboration is a welcome innovation and the broadening of the partnership approach to afford a more meaningful involvement to students is an issue that warrants further consideration by senior leaders in the Department of Education.

Discussion

This paper has identified four clusters of behaviours, which, if deployed effectively, can lead to enhanced organisational performance. It recognises that there are other aspects to strategic leadership that impact on the effectiveness and impact of leadership behaviours. These include personal characteristics of a leader, the dynamics of a leadership team, and the various environments in which the team operates.

Upper echelons theory⁴ (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) highlights the potent influence that a leader's values can exert on an organisation. This influence may be both direct and indirect; a direct impact arises when leaders have to choose between different strategic options while an indirect one may occur when values colour a leader's perception of their environment. Marquis and Lee (2013) concur but also suggest that other individual characteristics of a leader can influence both the range of strategic options considered and the decision-making processes employed. Among the characteristics they see as related to strategic leadership behaviour are hubris, core-self-evaluation, and risk taking.

The understanding of leadership offered in this paper includes the leader, the followers, and the overall context within which they operate. However, the concept of a leadership team and the dynamics between various components of this team may not be adequately captured in this broad conception. Luciano et al.'s (2020) *Framework for Diagnosing System Dynamics* addresses this lacuna. Their framework contends that effective strategic leadership is defined by the collective practice of leaders in realising common goals at the highest level of an organisation. They further make the case that an effective strategic leadership system "combines the importance of the separation afforded by working independently as well as the integration afforded by working interdependently" (Luciano et al., 2020, p. 687).

Finally, focusing exclusively on leadership behaviour may not give due consideration to the relationship between the environment and strategic leadership. Schutte and Barkhuizen (2014) highlight three types of environments that strategic leaders must attend to: the macro, the meso and the micro. The *macro* refers to emerging global trends and their impact on an organisation. For strategic leaders in the education sector, elements of the macro environment include the impact of rankings in international comparisons of student attainment and global research on topical issues, such as the impact of school closures on marginalised learners. The *meso* refers to how national legislation and policy impact on an organisation. Key aspects of the meso environment for an educational organisation include national curricular reform and national educational priorities. The *micro* focuses on the organisation itself and whether its processes are aligned with external and internal demands. Among the aspects of the micro environment that an educational organisation needs to attend to are its culture, its organisational structure, and the wellbeing of its members.

4 Upper echelons theory contends that the human factors of the leaders, such as their experiences and values, are critical in determining the outcomes of strategic situations.

Conclusion

This paper began by identifying a number of challenges and opportunities currently faced by the education sector. These include equity of access, reducing achievement gaps, and capitalising on the potential of education to contribute towards the realisation of a digital, sustainable, and inclusive society. In supporting leaders in meeting these challenges and opportunities, the paper focused on “leadership in all its nitty-gritty detail” (Iszatt-White, 2010, p. 410) or on what strategic leaders actually do. It identified four clusters of behaviours of strategic leaders: articulating a vision; effective action planning; using data intelligently; and networking or engaging with stakeholders. These four clusters of behaviours, if deployed effectively, may enable the education sector to be more effective in its service delivery and more responsive to its continuously-changing environment, and thereby ensure its ongoing sustainability as it deals with its current challenges and opportunities. Awareness of these behaviours may prove particularly useful to leaders at setting/school level as they engage in SSE processes, action planning for the DEIS scheme, or the implementation of national or local initiatives. Leaders at system level may also find value in these behaviours as they seek to align various strategies and to support schools and settings in the implementation of such strategies.

Höglund et al. (2021) argue that strategic leaders “must be prepared to adapt to changes in the political aspirations or substantive challenges in the surrounding environments” (p. 1,612). It is hoped that the behaviours described in this paper will assist strategic leaders in the education sector as they adapt to the many changes and challenges they currently face.

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