

## B. Characteristics that Strategic Leaders Display and Develop

As well as explaining what they do, successful strategic leaders in the study talked about the characteristics that they possessed. We found that:

- i. they challenge and question; they have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present
- ii. they prioritise their own strategic thinking and learning and build new mental models to frame their own and others' understanding
- iii. they display strategic wisdom based on a clear value system
- iv. they have powerful personal and professional networks
- v. they have high quality personal and interpersonal skills (EQ)

We now expand on these characteristics in order that heads can reflect on them for developing themselves and their colleagues.

### i. They challenge and question; they have a dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present

One of the key characteristics of strategic leaders is that they are constantly challenging the status quo – the existing way of doing things. They are conscious of the school not being a 'cruising' or 'strolling' school. While not dismissing current approaches and strengths, strategically-focused leaders are constantly looking for the next development idea or phase and they realise that what is good enough for now will not remain so. They are forward-looking and futures-orientated. They see the future as affording better opportunities; they see change as desirable not undesirable; they see challenges rather than problems. In brief, they are improvers not maintainers. They see a constant need to keep up-to-date and draw in ideas about how they may challenge current patterns and do things differently in the future.

This may involve a degree of creative tension which emerges from seeing clearly where they wish to be, what their vision is, and facing the truth about their current situation. Strategic leaders have the ability to live with the reality that the organisational culture may not be as forward thinking as they are. A key characteristic of strategic leaders is the ability to live with the ambiguity of maintaining their restlessness for change and improvement while, at the same time, not being able to change the organisation as fast as they would like. This dissatisfaction or restlessness with the current situation can lead to a degree of frustration which has to be managed. Individuals who are able to do this are able to challenge current ideas and processes to seek better ones.

A primary headteacher illustrates this:

*Part of the problem has been that, in some people's eyes, we were already successful. Why, then, change a winning formula? Some were content with the way things were, they were comfortable with existing strategies because they appeared to be working. For some, therefore, there was little motivation to change. So part of the agenda was to improve what we already did to ensure we did not start to peak and go down the Sigmoid Curve to point B but the other strategic agenda was to reconceptualise how we could operate in a totally new way. As I learnt more and more about whole-brain learning and Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, I became discontented with the existing situation and the task became clear - there would have to be a significant development programme to introduce the staff to this new science of learning and to promote the introduction of accelerated learning techniques. The work of Davies and Ellison on school planning has helped me to develop a more holistic and more strategic view of school improvement so that, even in the turbulence that schools now find themselves, it is still possible to remain focused on the core purpose of helping our children to become effective life-long learners. Thus from a new perspective of multiple intelligences and accelerated learning together with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow' we prepared a staff development programme that would totally reengineer our concept of learning and how we would structure our learning and teaching process.*

## ii. They prioritise their own strategic thinking and learning build new mental models to frame their own and others' understanding

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. The time for reflection and thinking is critical in order to understand new ideas. Equally important is the ability to conceptualise these ideas in such a way as to create new, clear models of understanding and to communicate them to the wider school body. If we are to develop creative schools, then the importance that we attach to thinking and learning needs to start with the leader so that that he/she can both model and develop creative thinking in the wider group of staff and students in the school.

A common theme in the leadership and management literature is, first understand yourself, then understand the team and then understand the organisation. The importance of this was articulated by one headteacher in the study as “It’s also about understanding – understanding the institution and understanding yourself, understanding the other players as well in the organisation and so that you can actually take the whole thing forward. The challenge of modern headship is that often the urgent crowds out the important”. Earlier in this booklet, we referred to one of the headteachers in the study who recognised this and tried to put in place a strategy “The first two years of headship I ran around like a headless chicken trying to do everything and then I realised I was actually no good to the staff or myself and I decided to give myself a timetable to think.”

So a recurring theme in the study was the importance for strategic leaders to spend time on their own professional development in terms of providing time to think and develop new ideas. This gave them the ability to develop new frameworks for understanding and action which they could share with others in the school community.

## iii. They display strategic wisdom based on a clear value system

Strategic wisdom requires a clear value system on which to base decisions. Once that is established, it needs the ability to balance a number of factors. Strategic leaders need the wisdom to balance the effects of ideas on themselves, others and schools in both the short and long term. This links to the earlier point regarding effective intervention points. The deployment of both analytical intelligence (to do the right thing) and emotional intelligence (to do it in the right way) is critical here. The balance of short- and long-term expediencies and needs was often seen by the heads as requiring reflection and judgement and, often, intuition. Benchmarks for judgements were referred to as the need to consider ‘the common good’ or what is ‘in the best interests of children’. This was supported by headteachers in the study with statements such as “Never, ever to lose sight of the number one objective – education of children” and “The strategies are important but when they are achieved we will move onto others. But the strategies must be within a set of values”.

In a perceptive presentation to the 2002 International Thinking Skills Conference, Robert Sternberg articulated that leaders need wisdom because they need:

- creative abilities to come up with ideas
- analytical abilities to decide whether ideas are good ideas
- practical abilities to make your ideas functional and to convince others of the value of your ideas
- wisdom to balance the effects of ideas on yourself, others and institutions in both the short and long run

Put simply, wisdom may be defined as the capacity to take the right action at the right time. But the right action is based on a whole set of moral and ethical positions. The strategic leaders in our study acknowledged the importance of clarifying the underlying value system in a proactive way so that when difficult strategic decisions had to be made they were able to benchmark their decision on a predetermined set of principles. The dangers of not clarifying values were identified by two headteachers. “You also need to look at yourself and find out what your core values are because if you try and work outside your own values system it’s not going to work. And you shouldn’t ever take on a headship if the governors don’t know what are your non-negotiables in terms of values.” and “Well the other thing is you do not fudge and compromise. The one lesson I have learned in life is once you start to fudge compromise you make it worse.”

The significance of leadership and values being dispersed was highlighted by one headteacher as: “At any time, any member of the school may be called upon to lead in their particular area; therefore in order to ensure consistency and direction then it has to be within certain agreed values.”

The headteachers in the study put a very high importance on clarifying values and making decisions in the context of those values. They also involved others in trying to make difficult judgements in an informed way.

#### iv. They have powerful personal and professional networks

Strategic leaders constantly seek to 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. Our research shows that strategically- focused leaders invest considerable time and energy in building and sustaining networks locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. These are not confined just to benchmarking current practice but are for ideas where visioning and future-oriented dialogues are facilitated. They are constantly seeking new ways of thinking and working and they seek to build their own solutions from a wide range of sources.

The leaders are involved in national networks through Networked Learning Communities of NCSL, international visits for staff through LEAs, the British Council and the Technology Schools’ Trust, Vision 2020 groups, and local networks, either formal or informal. Often such networking involves staff from many parts of the school, including support staff, rather than being seen as the privilege of the senior team. In several schools, the network extends to other groups in the community and to industry and commerce.

It was seen in the project 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.

#### v. They have high quality personal and interpersonal skills (EQ)

Key characteristics mentioned in the research interviews were personal confidence and resilience which were cited as necessary when driving through the early stages of strategic change. This was seen in parallel with the ability to listen to others and also to admit mistakes when the evidence suggested that a different strategic course should be taken. This ability to both focus on strategic ends but also to have the flexibility to adapt if circumstances changed was seen as important. This links to the wisdom concept and the significant key to success in relating to others is that ‘how’ something is done is as important as ‘what’ is done.

All of these qualities affect the way a leader learns and is able to change. Most leadership researchers agree that leaders need to have important interpersonal skills such as empathy, motivation, and communication. Bennett (2000, p.3) expands the importance of personal values:

*“If moral leadership is to be exercised and pedagogy re-engineered with any degree of success, then future leaders will need a firm set of personal values. No doubt many will have their own lists, but integrity, social justice, humanity, respect, loyalty and a sharp distinction between right and wrong, will all need to be included. Strategic relationships will soon flounder unless such a value system is held with conviction and exercised on a regular consistent basis.”*

Although not specifically included in Bennett's comprehensive list, social intelligence is important for strategic leadership because the processes of decision-making, solution implementation and organisational improvement are rarely free of emotion. Social intelligence includes having a thorough understanding of the social context, and is defined by Gardner (1985, p.239) as the ability *‘to notice and make distinctions among other individuals ... in particular among their moods, temperaments, motivations and intentions.’* So a key component of social intelligence is the ability to discern emotion both in self and in others. Gardner identifies this as both intra- and inter-personal intelligence. The ability to connect the involvement of others and to resolve conflicts will be increasingly vital in a context of developing strategic relationships and finding creative solutions. Bennett (2000, p.4) also identifies the importance of strength and courage; *‘visionary projects, delivered with passion, will fail unless the leader has the ability to counter adversaries and remain confident until the conclusion has been reached.’*