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# Far from the Madding Crowd?

How can hard pressed headteachers find sanctuary to prepare for the future whilst coping with daily operational challenges?

**Trevor Lee**, Headteacher, Northwood Preparatory School

# Introduction

Mapping a direction for an organisation is particularly difficult in changing times: short-term demands can overwhelm school improvement efforts. This report describes how 12 school leaders see their strategic role.

We know that making a success of school leadership is an exacting task. It is also generally recognised that, for success to be sustainable in schools, operational efficiency is not enough. A critical aspect of the work of leadership in schools is to help people develop shared understanding about the school, its activities and purposes. This includes the articulation of a strategic intent or vision of a school's future path. How do school leaders arrive at such a vision for the future? It is possible, at this initial stage, to identify three factors that can hinder the development of the strategic aspect of school leadership:

## 1. Short-term pressures can be overwhelming

The literature identifies a key difficulty for school leaders – maintaining a strategic outlook whilst under pressure to meet short-term targets. While these shorter-term improvement agendas in themselves may be beneficial, the danger is that schools will orient their teaching and organisational processes to achieve these targets but will neglect the activities and processes they need to make them successful in the longer term. School leaders might be so heavily engaged in day-to-day demands that they believe there is no time for the necessary pause and reflection to adopt a strategic perspective.

## 2. How do we map an uncertain future?

A second key problem is that organisations do not always see or comprehend what is happening in the environment. There is common agreement that the social world is subject to constant and substantial change. The pace of variation no longer allows for a 'predict and control' leadership model. The rate of organisational learning often lags behind the rate of change in the school's environment. The corollary is that setting a direction for a school is made particularly difficult because of uncertainty about the future.

## 3. Change brings role uncertainty

In the broader educational landscape, changes in conditions in schools, in particular changes resulting from government policy, have acted as a catalyst for role uncertainty for school leaders. As the school environment in which leaders' work has become increasingly complex, new challenges are posed that require diverse skills, creating a different set of expectations and accountabilities.

# The research

The setting for this research is a group of 12 schools in southern England. Interviews with the headteachers of these schools were conducted over a three-month period between March and May 2004. There is a spectrum of experience of school leadership in the sample, ranging from one leader who has experienced 21 years of headship to a respondent in his third year. Complete details of the methodology of the study can be found in the full report. Perhaps what is happening in these schools might give some clues about what is happening elsewhere.

## What is strategy?

The term 'strategy' has military origins and is derived from the Greek word for the thought processes and actions of a general, *strategos*. Traditionally, strategy has always been associated with the idea of direction-setting for a school. In school situations, strategy can involve an integration of an organisation's major goals, policies and action sequences into a cohesive whole. To be fully effective, this requires the school leaders to adopt a multi-dimensional approach to strategy (strategy as a plan, pattern, position, perspective or ploy) as opposed to a mere linear plan.

## One remedy for heads under pressure: discovering strategic sanctuary

Busy school leaders need to find time to think about the future. The dilemma is that everyday business often hijacks good intentions:

**Being in a school day-to-day, you are just looking at the operational management of the school really once term starts... management meetings during the week are simply that, it's the management of the school that week, the next few weeks, and it's certainly not bigger thoughts about the future.**

Headteacher 1

**One of the difficulties within a school is everybody is busy, everybody's head is down. The problem is actually creating the amount of time for people to objectively look at the way they do things, the way perhaps they ought to be doing them in the future...**

Headteacher 2

**What this means in practical terms is that, for some headteachers, strategies are often conceived away from the school environment and outside normal working hours, away from daily management tasks and challenges:**

**We have a relatively limited time during the day but... every four weeks we will have an evening meeting so we'll start at 4pm and finish at 10pm and we will go off and have a pub supper and continue talking. Those are very productive occasions actually... we are not talking at all about the nuts and bolts; we just have one subject or theme in mind. That's very helpful.**

Headteacher 3

### Maximising the benefits of strategic sanctuary

Having found time to address a school's future needs through finding sanctuary, how can these valuable times be maximised by strategic leaders? There is a challenge here in providing for the learning of leaders in ways that match their changing role, particularly within the constraints of time available for strategic sanctuary or continued professional development. The overall impression given by school leaders in this study is their limited capacity to recognise new information and assimilate new ideas. These leaders seem to have neither the time nor the inclination to read around educational issues, partly because of the sheer weight of demands on their time:

**I first started reading educational texts on leadership and management when I did the first part of NPQH many years ago, most of which were pretty grim texts. I only really cherry-picked parts of them.**

Headteacher 4

**I think the way that I go about strategic leadership... I think I have learnt a huge amount from my own experience here... I don't read enough about these things.**

Headteacher 5

The leaders in this study were intuitive. They rely on their instinct, often gained through many years of experience. This intuition must not be underplayed. It constitutes invaluable know-how that appears to be second nature.

**You build up on that bank of experience... that process of sieving, watching, looking, learning, talking, thinking and reflecting is vital: that's what informs a lot of that strategic forward thinking.**

Headteacher 6

School leaders have complicated choices to make, eg to shape events or to adapt to them; to implement changes immediately or at a later point. I suggest we need an innovative style of continued professional development, referred to here as tutored intuition, where the professional insights of strategic leaders are informed by educational research and policy discussion. For instance, a group of like-minded leaders might commit to local discussion groups when relevant research topics are explored and reflected upon. This need not be seen as yet another demand on teachers' time but rather an essential part of a collegial, professional support network that can occur in a social setting.

### Translating strategy into action: the value of consensual decision-making

A further challenge is to translate strategy into action. Good strategies need to be implemented. To this end, the modern school requires leadership that fosters collaboration and co-ordination. Managerial wisdom involves not merely the knowledge of when to change but also an understanding of how best to effect changes in complex organisations that comprise multi-perspectives and multi-constituencies. There is strong support by respondents for a consensual, consultative approach to strategy. Strategic conversations to achieve consensus could be low-key 'corner seat stuff with individuals' or more formal occasions with larger gatherings.

The headteachers interviewed for the study saw the need to make the consideration of the future development of schools a personal reality for those who translate strategy to action.

Leaders in schools influence in three ways: directly, indirectly and reciprocally. The literature suggests the indirect effects are the biggest and the most widespread. This is reflected in the data here. The strategic leaders in this study work with and through others. Respondents in this study recognise that they rely on others because their strategic ideas are mediated by colleagues throughout the organisation.

With the emphasis on consensual strategy, the headteacher can be relieved of the weight of expectation of doing it all alone. The responsibility for direction-setting is shared but of course the headteacher is uniquely placed to exercise influence within this process.

## You can't do it all at once: the logic of incrementalism

Leaders in the schools in this study say they achieve most by incremental, emergent changes. This finding has a direct similarity with Collins' (2001) research into the development of major successful companies in the USA. Change in these companies is also described as an organic, cumulative process:

**There was no seminal meeting or epiphany moment. It was sort of an evolution thing.**

Pitney Bowes

**Little by little, the themes become more apparent and stronger... it proceeded smoothly rather than an abrupt shift.**

Wells Fargo

**Our change was a major change, and yet in many respects simply a series of incremental changes.**

Abbott

The headteachers in this study emphasise the importance of allowing time for the achievement of longer-term strategic intent through emergent strategies. They are always implementing minor variations, improvements or modifications. The main thrust of strategic change is delivered in incremental, gradual steps as opposed to more radical, rapid plans. The point was made in the interviews that continuous minor changes all add up over a period of time and it is possible to witness quite significant improvement over time if strategy is delivered in bite-sized chunks. Through refinement and incremental efforts, strategic leaders have greater opportunities to direct their schools in appropriate ways.

## Conclusions

Successful strategic leaders recognise the difficulty in balancing short-term imperatives with the need for a strategic perspective. This study suggests they need to be checking their daily routines against their agreed, long term strategic intents, which can also act as a template to measure progress. The formulations of these intentions can be enhanced by:

- finding strategic sanctuary
- tutoring their intuition through the creation of discursive groups
- translating strategy to action through consensus

Successful strategic leaders recognise the logic of an incremental approach. The positive message of this enquiry is that practitioners can reflect on the past and present to shape and influence the future of their schools in effective and innovative ways.

## References

Collins, J (2001), *Good to Great*, London: Random House

# Research associate reports available in spring 2005:

## **Leading First-Age Learning**

**How 12 school leaders are applying the University of the First Age philosophy and methodology in Newcastle-upon-Tyne primary schools**

Helen Walker, School Improvement Adviser, Newcastle Local Education Authority

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T: 0870 001 1155  
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