

## **Relationships matter - Strategic Leadership**

*(By Chris Smith, Principal Consultant, Bath Consultancy Group)*

Leadership is about relationships not just simply the qualities of the successful leader. There are many books and articles about leadership often offering a post-event explanation for what individual leaders achieved. While hindsight is enlightening these books tend to focus on the personal qualities and strengths of the leader and how they personally made the difference. While they typically offer part truths and helpful insights, such recipes for success offer little practical value because leadership is always contextual. We need to understand about more than just the thinking and actions of the leader to complete the picture.

Less visible and recognised are the relationships between a leader, their followers and the organisation's common purpose or endeavour. This puts leadership into a different light and it is certainly not just simply about the heroics of those at the top of the organisation. Indeed leadership must be exhibited by people throughout an organisation if a common purpose is to be achieved.

A key element of strategic leadership is to help connect other leaders to the purpose of the organisation. The strategy for delivering this purpose will then be developed by those who are engaged, through a mix of formal and informal processes.

**"A leader is best  
When the people are hardly aware of his existence,  
Not so good when people stand in fear,  
Worse, when people are contemptuous.  
Fail to honour people, and they will fail to honour you,  
But a good leader who speaks little,  
When the task is accomplished, his work is done!  
The people will say, "We did it ourselves."**

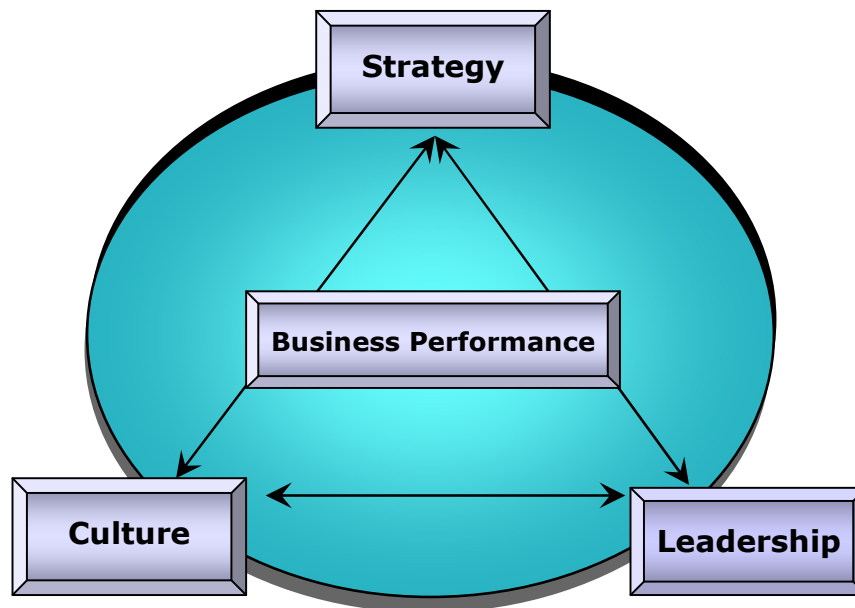
Lao Tzu, 'Tao Te Ching'

The nature of a relationship is that it is a continuing interplay. Each participant is not only responding to the others but is influenced by forces in the surrounding environment. The leader is not able to simply decide and act but has to develop his or her relationship with the common purpose and understand the significance it holds. A leader must also evolve a relationship with the followers. At the same time the followers are also interacting with each other and their environment as well as the leader. This is a continuously emerging process with the participants engaged in a dialogue of word and action.

## **Strategy, leadership and culture**

As well as the interplay in relationships, there is also a wider connection between the strategic direction, the culture (the way things are done) and the leadership. Alignment between these is essential to success in delivering performance and achieving the strategic intent or common purpose. A strategic change will require some adjustments in the way things happen in the organisation, which is a shift in the culture. True leaders are those who articulate and frame the shifts required, engaging others and taking action to achieve it.

Of course organisations which do not change in line with their environment are not standing still but are being overtaken. The strategy and culture must continually evolve if the organisation is to progress. Leadership at all levels is about enabling and encouraging this progress.



It is often assumed that senior leaders are continually engaged in strategic analysis and action, which builds an understanding of the environment and internal capabilities to frame the choices that are available. However, in our experience senior leaders spend very little time formally generating or reviewing strategy. They spend much more time asking questions to understand what is happening, establishing priorities and communicating to others the desired direction and its implications for the organisation. They have to inspire others to want to work toward the common purpose.

### **Strategic leadership – connecting with the common purpose**

The key to inspiring others is the strength of a leader's commitment and belief in the common purpose. The clarity of the leader's belief and their commitment to achieving it, their passion, are central to their ability to engage, align and energise others. Passion is infectious and will excite others while indifference or a purely transactional approach will rapidly be picked up on and reflected in the attitudes of others.

So a significant role in strategic leadership is to connect the underlying purpose of the organisation with the strategy and to engage others so that they are part of the process and can make the connections for themselves. The strategic leader does not have to work it all out and tell others but rather to orchestrate the strategic process.

Although the strategic analysis provides the mechanism for being clear about direction and to reappraise what is emerging, it is passion that gives the emotional commitment and the belief in the value and benefit of what you are doing. This value should benefit not only shareholders but must also be for customers, people and the wider stakeholders in the organisation.

### **The role of leadership**

It is a role of leadership to bring to life a vision for the organisation and much of this is done through relationships. Understanding a vision enables people to connect the underlying purpose with the strategy and put their work and actions into this context. Increasingly in a world of knowledge workers who have considerable flexibility in what they do, where and with whom, it is about helping them to see the meaning in their work.

The leader's role can be about sensing what is emergent in the world around them as well as in the organisation itself and articulating these patterns and connections so that others identify with what is said. The leader puts their finger on something others understand and agree with even if they could not quite say it themselves. It also releases them to make sense of what is happening in their own part of the organisation, they can connect the wider insights and direction to their local context and make decisions and take action accordingly.

Having the vision and the strategic story is not enough, of course. To engage people one needs to understand their reality, to come alongside them and at least partly see the world from their perspective. Only when they feel that they are understood - why they are enthused or resistant, excited or worried - will the leader begin to gain their trust.

This trust is needed to enable them to make the changes in the way they do things that are needed to realise the strategy. It is not about the leader having the answers for them. It is about setting the questions, providing the frames of reference that enable them to see how things are and how they might be different. It is then about releasing their capabilities and their energy to bring about the change needed. Again this is a continuing process not a one off event.

The leader's ability to build effective relations and generate trust depends in part on whether the leader is seen to be consistent and true to their own values. This is not to say that they cannot make mistakes or fall short of their intent, this only makes them human. It is to say that they should be clear about what they stand for and believe in and they should align their actions to achieve this.

In summary, leaders have a real commitment to the underlying purpose of their organisation. They generate a strategic process which engages others in understanding their world, identifying strategic direction and the changes needed to bring it about. Leadership is a continuing relationship between leaders, people and their shared purpose.

### **Ten Limiting Mindsets in Understanding Organisational Leadership: A Provocation**

Below are some common limiting mindsets that we have encountered about leadership together with a counterpoint to challenge this thinking.

### **Limiting Mindsets**

### **Counterpoint**

1. Leadership is what is done by leaders.	There is no leadership without a leader, a follower and a shared endeavour.
2. Leadership resides in the individual.	It resides in the pattern of relationships between people – how the leaders connect and are given authority in the first place.
3. Leadership resides at the top.	Leadership is distributed throughout the organisation, wherever responsibility needs to be taken.
4. Leaders are about affecting change within the organisation.	Leaders are those who affect change but who are also willing to be changed by what they encounter both within and beyond the organisation. Leadership happens at the boundaries.
5. Leaders set the vision and direction for others to follow.	Leadership starts by empathic listening, then challenging, then orchestrating.
6. Leaders need to get people to understand.	Leaders need to engage hearts, will and mind, in true dialogue.
7. Leadership is judgement.	Leadership begins when you stop blaming others or making excuses.
8. Leadership is developed by individuals going on leadership courses.	Leadership development is a mix of challenging experience and supported reflection.
9. Leaders are the organisational heroes.	True leaders take risks by giving credit to others and creating others as leaders.
10. Leaders have the answers.	The key to Leadership lies in the quality of the questions that are asked.