



STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: THE CORE COMPETENCIES

A WHITE PAPER

BY RHONDA THOMPSON ALEXANDER
LEAD CONSULTANT, IUVO CONSULTING

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction	4
What Is Strategic Leadership?	4
What Difference Does It Make?.....	5
Becoming a Strategic Leader	7
Assess.....	7
Develop Strategic Leadership Competencies	8
Conclusion.....	11
Bibliography	13
About The Author	14

Executive Summary

There are many factors that contribute to the success of an organization. Arguably, at the top of that list is the ability of the organization's leader to think and act strategically – that is, how proactive the leader is at understanding the organization's environment at any given time and applying that understanding to the organization's goals to generate a strategic plan for the future. Leaders who are able to think and act strategically understand, welcome, and value change, and they welcome opportunities for themselves and for the organization to learn. Strategic leaders are able to unify the organization toward a common goal, particularly during times of change, and they refuse to accept complacency. They understand that to remain relevant, the organization must embrace an ever-changing industrial environment. Thus, it is vitally important for leaders to learn to think and act strategically. This white paper presents the organizational advantages that accompany strategic leadership, and it presents core competencies that leaders can develop to become and grow as strategic leaders.

Introduction

Most leaders know that the one thing in life that never changes is the fact that *everything changes*. In fact, many leaders spend a great deal of their time coping with and adapting to change. Bob Johansen (2012) calls the typical organizational environment “VUCA”: volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. For organizations to thrive, leaders must find ways to navigate the twists and turns that come with new opportunities and threats.

How can leaders manage through such tumultuous organizational conditions?

They become strategic.

Strategic leaders are able to adapt to changing conditions and lead organizations to success through learning, vision setting, directing, and motivating. They are able to think in ways that allow them to process incoming information about the status of the organization and determine the best way to use that information to the organization’s advantage. Strategic leaders are not just deep thinkers, they are analyzers – constantly evaluating the organizational and industrial landscape and linking that information to the organization’s mission and goals. Their ability to think and act strategically is intentional, and any leader can develop and hone this skill.

What Is Strategic Leadership?

Strategic leadership employs an ongoing learning process that includes “strategic thinking, strategic acting, and strategic influencing skills” (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014, p. 4). Strategic leaders are flexible, which gives them the ability to help organizations navigate the unknown. Through observation, assessment, and experience, they are able to anticipate challenges, interpret the impact on the organization, and make the necessary changes required to

keep the organization moving forward toward its goals, while remaining competitive in its market.

Strategic leaders go beyond managing day-to-day duties or visioning the long-term growth of the organization. They influence and empower members of the organization through the setting of shared goals and visions. They take carefully calculated risks based on rational information that they have gained while leading the organization, and they inspire others in the organization to be innovative when faced with challenges. In doing so, strategic leaders help organizations thrive over the long term.

Strategic leaders are learners. They are not afraid to assess themselves or the organization as a whole. They rarely bury their heads in the sand. In fact, strategic leaders are more than willing to utilize assessments and tools that will help them evaluate themselves and the organization so that they can identify what they already do well, as well as the areas in which they need to improve. Strategic leaders continuously learn, and they influence the organizations they lead to become continual learners, as well. Strategic leaders are in an “ongoing state of formulation, implementation, reassessment, and revision” (Center for Creative Leadership, 2004, p. 2).

What Difference Does It Make?

Organizations with strategic leaders at the helm are likely to be successful over the long term, because they are better able to deal with change. Strategic leaders are able to envision the impact of their decision making beyond their own functional areas. They are able to see how



STRATEGIC THINKERS EXIST IN THE PRESENT AND IN THE FUTURE. THEY ARE CONSTANTLY ASSESSING WHERE THE ORGANIZATION IS AND WHERE THEY WANT THE ORGANIZATION TO BE.

their organization interacts with and reacts to external forces, and they are able to implement strategies with those effects in mind. Moreover, they are able to influence others in the organization to think in the same way. They teach others to evaluate their environment, notice trends and changes, and innovate to use that information to the organization's best advantage.

As a result, strategic leaders create learning organizations. These are organizations that have the ability to jointly reflect upon and understand what is and what could be (Ackermann & Eden, 2011). This shared information is used in the context of the organization's goals to produce a competitive edge for the organization. Learning organizations create working environments that are creative, innovative, and embracing of new solutions to challenges.



LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS ENCOURAGE MEMBERS TO TAKE MEASURED RISKS IN THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ORGANIZATION'S SUCCESS.

As a learning organization, members are free to contribute to the success of the organization, and they are likely to take ownership of their work product, producing outcomes that better the organization as a whole. Strategic leaders encourage members of the organization to work together to attain a common goal by encouraging them to think higher than their position alone. Leaders of learning organizations discard the idea that only senior managers can influence the forward motion of the organization. Instead, strategic leaders encourage followers to build communities, placing emphasis on the interdependence and interconnectedness of groups within the organization (Byeong Yong, 2006).

In developing learning organizations, strategic leaders create healthier places to work, because they promote independent thought, improve quality, increase individuals' ability to embrace and manage change, and develop a more committed workforce (Byeong Yong, 2006). The culture of learning organizations includes an enthusiastic approach to challenges. In fact, challenges are seen as opportunities, rather than as things to avoid. Through flexibility, responsiveness, and creativity, learning organizations thrive in circumstances that would otherwise be detrimental to them.

Becoming a Strategic Leader

Step 1: Assess

the first thing that must take place is self-evaluation. How well and to what extent does the leader think and act strategically? To answer these questions, the leader must be willing to self-assess. This will help to determine the leader's "strategic baseline," or the level at which the leader currently thinks and acts strategically. To determine the level of strategic thinking, leaders must evaluate themselves in terms of their ability to survey the organizational environment for threats and trends that can affect the organization's ability to compete, to consider all information – both internal and external, to see the relationships and patterns in the organization's data, and to understand their own biases (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014).

To identify leaders' propensity to act strategically, they must consider how well they set strategic priorities, manage long- and short-term success, provide followers with equal measures of direction and autonomy, support risk taking, recognize the need for change, and review mistakes to determine opportunities for learning and growth (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014). Tools can be used to assess how adaptive leaders are and how likely they are to react

strategically to changes in the industrial and organizational environment. They can also identify whether the leader is likely to view challenges as opportunities, resulting in an ability to learn ahead of their competitors. The assessment's results will begin to paint a picture for the leader regarding the degree to which they learn from mistakes and how likely they are to inspire a group of individuals to adopt and work toward a common vision.

Step 2: Develop Strategic Leadership Competencies

Leaders who are strategic are involved in myriad activities that allow them to capitalize on ever-changing organizational environments. This paper presents six of those activities which can be seen as core competencies for strategic leaders, reflecting the important functions in which they regularly engage: proactivity, openness to change, evaluation, consideration of all possibilities, directing, and learning. The development of these competencies is essential to strategic leadership, serving as a starting point for leadership development efforts.

Be Proactive

To become proactive, strategic leaders should evaluate the organizational landscape by talking to clients and stakeholders to determine what their challenges are. Strategic leaders are constantly scanning the organizational environment for changes, opportunities, and threats. They are able to plan for changes before they actually happen, making them agile – that is, able to sense and respond to significant alterations in the competitive environment (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014). They should also conduct market research to gain an understanding regarding how new products from the organization may be received by the public.

Be Open to Change

Once leaders notice that the organization's environment is changing, they can begin to initiate organizational change. So that the entity can survive, the strategic leader must act swiftly and effectively when faced with uncertainty and ambiguity. What is more, strategic leaders must face the challenges that come with their own ways of thinking. They must be willing to identify and set aside their own biases in exchange for new ideas and new ways of solving problems (Malewska & Sajdak, 2014). Leaders who wish to become more open to change should be willing to evaluate and address their own assumptions about the organization or industry. They should also encourage feedback from others regarding potential blind spots (areas where they may not be aware that a bias exists).

Evaluate

Once leaders are aware of the lenses through which they view new information and challenges, they are better equipped to evaluate incoming data related to the organization. Moreover, they are able to separate extraneous information from that which is salient to the organization in its current situation. They are also able to synthesize various pieces of information to identify trends and complex patterns to help them interpret perceived upcoming changes (Malewska & Sajdak, 2014).

To enhance their ability to evaluate, leaders can intentionally look at the informational details as well as "the big picture." They can also change their physical environment as they consider new information. Changing one's environment can promote clear thinking and help leaders see data in new ways. Finally, leaders can become better evaluators by looking for

information that challenges their way of thinking. In doing so, they increase the likelihood that they are being objective.

Consider All Possibilities

Strategic leaders must often make difficult decisions, based on complex information. Very rarely is there a clear-cut, best choice; thus, strategic leaders must have the ability to weigh all possibilities and make decisions based on a vigorous decision-making process. To develop in this area, leaders can be open to input from the teams they lead, and they can consider which decision may be best by determining the impact of suggested options on long-term and short-term goals.

Direct

Strategic leaders are able to direct members toward a common goal, particularly during times of change. Strategic leaders are adept at creating meaning and purpose for the organization's members through the communication of vision, shared values, and the organization's mission (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014). When members are able to identify with these components, buy-in is generated, trust is built, and members become engaged with the organization. Thus, to develop this important competency, leaders should communicate frequently with the organization's members to ensure that they are onboard with the leader's vision, and to ensure the leader is able to dispel any misunderstandings or myths surrounding the efforts being made. Leaders should also be willing to reward members who support and promote team alignment. In this way, leaders will be able to motivate followers and reinforce the values and behaviors that promote the organization's success.

Learn

Strategic leaders are often considered to be the “thinkers” of organizations. They have no problem with the notion that they don’t know everything there is to know. In fact, they foster environments conducive to inquiry, they consider their mistakes and failures to be opportunities for growth, and they look for lessons that can be learned from both positive and negative situations (Huges, Beatty, & Dinwoodie, 2014). Furthermore, they promote this type of learning among the people they lead. Strategic leaders know – and they help others understand – that learning is vital to the survival of the organization. Thus, learning is an essential competency of strategic leaders.



“THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT WILL EXCEL IN THE FUTURE WILL BE THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT DISCOVER HOW TO TAP PEOPLE’S COMMITMENT AND CAPACITY TO LEARN AT ALL LEVELS IN AN ORGANIZATION.”
(SENGE, 1990, P. 4)

Leaders who desire to become better learners should take the time to identify the lessons they can learn from the decisions they have made. They should analyze the outcomes of those decisions with their teams and with stakeholders to identify insights that the leader may not have previously noted. Additionally, leaders can foster learning environments in their organizations by rewarding others in the organization who prove themselves to be creative thinkers and knowledge sharers ((Malewska & Sajdak, 2014).

Conclusion

Strategic leaders help organizations evolve into learning organizations, while helping members perform to their fullest potential. By developing the necessary core competencies, strategic leaders can help followers understand how the organization’s strategy pertains to their

daily tasks, and how those tasks relate to the accomplishment of the organization's vision and goals. Furthermore, these competencies help the organization link its ability to learn to its ability to remain competitive. Leaders who desire to become more strategic should continually survey the organizational landscape for new opportunities to learn and for ways that they can proactively navigate the organization through turbulent and uncertain times toward success.

IUVO CONSULTING,
LLC

Bibliography

Ackermann, F., & Eden, C. (2011). *Making Strategy: Mapping Out Strategic Success* (2nd Edition ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Byeong Yong, K. (2006). Managing workforce diversity: Developing a learning organization. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality and Tourism*, 5(2), 69-90.

Center for Creative Leadership. (2004). *Strategic Leadership: An organizational Imperative*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Huges, R., Beatty, K., & Dinwoodie, D. (2014). *Becoming a Strategic Leader: Your Role in Your Organization's Enduring Success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Johansen, B. (2012). *Leaders Make the Future* (2nd Edition ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishing.

Malewska, K., & Sajdak, M. (2014). The intuitive manager and the concept of Strategic Leadership. *Management*, 18(2), 44-58.

Senge, P. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

About The Author

Rhonda Alexander is an educator, empowerer, and encourager to leaders and entrepreneurs.

She is the lead consultant at IUVO Consulting, LLC, a Virginia-based, leadership and organizational development consulting firm, which she started in 2015. Ms. Alexander is passionate about helping leaders and organizations be the best they can be. Her organization's motto, "We're here to help," demonstrates her team's desire to work closely with organizations to provide the support they need to launch, diversify, and grow. Ms. Alexander's experiences in management, leadership, organizational development, and government regulatory requirements give her a unique perspective and provide for outside-the-box solutions for complex leadership and organizational challenges.

Ms. Alexander holds a Bachelor of Science (BS) degree in Molecular Biology from Hampton University, a Master of Science (MS) degree in Clinical Chemistry from Virginia Commonwealth University/Medical College of Virginia, a Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree from Old Dominion University, and she is currently pursuing a Doctor of Strategic Leadership (DSL) degree from Regent University. Ms. Alexander is the single mother of one daughter, Maiyah, and resides in Virginia Beach, Virginia.