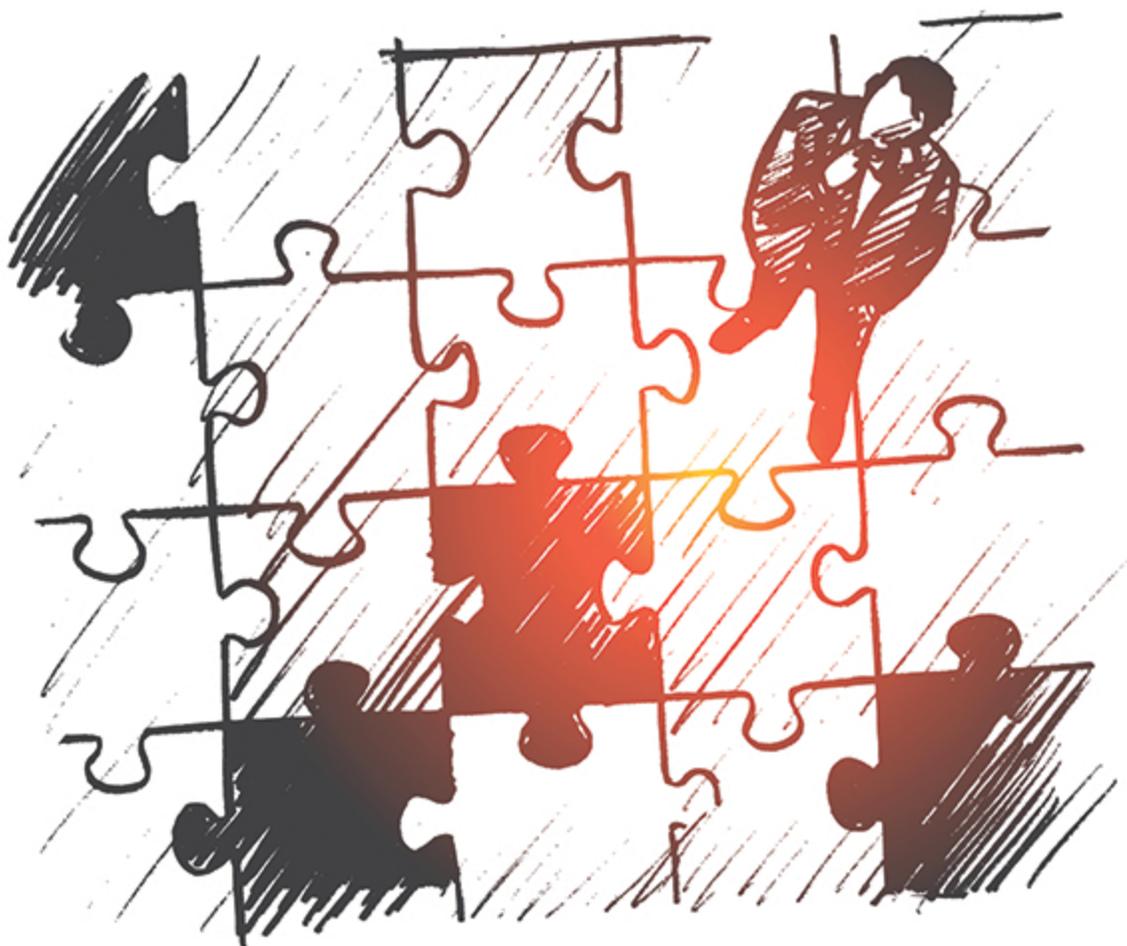


STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP



EDITED BY
VICTOR C. X. WANG

Strategic Leadership

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PREFACE

There has been a great deal written about strategic leadership. The prevalent argument is that amid the uncertainties of these tumultuous times, strategic leadership is crucial to organizational success and long-term survival. Frequently discussed questions include: What are the competencies of strategic leadership; how should strategic leadership be enacted at various organizational levels, and in various domains; and what exactly is strategic leadership? In literature, responses to questions such as these may have some commonalities, but in general the views tend to be very diverse. Apparently, one of the few points of consensus seen in surrounding leadership literature is the importance of strategic leadership to the long-term viability of organizations.

Without doubt, the topic of strategic leadership remains a hot topic for debate and development, and as organizations experience increasing pressures due to the forces of globalization, change, and economic uncertainty, coming to grips with strategic leadership is becoming an urgent item on the agenda. Of course, it is shortsighted to undertake any exploration of strategic leadership with the expectation of eventually finding “the solution” and closing the conversation. Inextricably bound with surrounding contexts, strategic leadership (as with other dimensions of leadership) is a “perennially unfinished project” (Iszatt-White, 2010, p. 409). Practice in strategic leadership is multifaceted, since strategic leadership is about not only leaders themselves but about organizations, competitors, followers, and the state of the world in general. A strong base of reliable, verifiable knowledge is needed to foster development of strategic leadership capabilities across a diversity of domains.

There are many attempts to define the skills and capabilities of effective strategic leaders. Since strategic leadership is about creating a viable future for an organization, the effective strategic leader is very much forward-looking and has a well-developed capability to anticipate or envision the future. But “the future” is not a static, well-defined target. The future is in a constant state of change. The future is uncertain, ambiguous, and discontinuous. Effective strategic leaders must therefore possess mental agility and flexibility, and be able to undertake speed innovation (Ireland & Hitt, 2005). Looking to the future, perceiving potential opportunities, and anticipating possible threats means strategic leaders must have wisdom and the “ability to think outside the box” (Norzailan, Othman, & Ishizaki, 2016). The opportunities and threats perceived by strategic leaders are those that are not obvious to others, and thus strategic leaders are creative and have the ability to see “the unfamiliar” (Norzailan, Othman, & Ishizaki, 2016).

Anticipating or envisioning the future necessarily entails understanding multiple levels of context, from the encompassing global context through to the organization and the employees themselves. Hence, strategic leaders require objectivity and potential to look at the broader picture, but at the same time take into account factors at the micro level of the organization. It is the strategic leader’s responsibility to incorporate aspects of both the analytical and human dimensions to effectively drive organizations forward. Driving an organization forward is about decision-making that takes into account the organizational typology, its culture, strengths, and limitations, and then integrates all of these organizational realities and resource constraints with “philosophical thoughts” (Malewska & Sajdak, 2014, p. 45).

Commonly, discussion around strategic leadership refers to “the” strategic leader as being an individual. Indeed, most of research around leadership in organizations uses the individual leader as the “unit of analysis” (Kriger & Zhovtobryukh, 2013). However, with the trend toward flat organizational structures, there is a need to reconceptualize strategic leadership through the lens of shared or distributed leadership. The conceptualization offered by Barney and Hesterly (2010) is useful here, as they challenge us to view all people within an organization as having the potential for leadership given the right time and place. From this perspective, analysis of strategic leadership within an organization must not be limited to “single-actor” theories, but rather analysis should occur within the frame of inter-related, “coexisting, and evolving networks of leaders” (Barney & Hesterly, 2010, p. 411). Proponents of the collective strategic leadership report on the advantages of drawing on an individual’s different leadership skills and expertise to solve problems as they emerge, thus impacting positively on the “strategic cognition” of the organization. Such adaptive strategic leadership is entirely consistent with the knowledge economy and the need for an organization to constantly learn and innovate (Barney & Hesterly, 2010).

The distributed view or collective view of strategic leadership is a relatively recent development with much research still to be done to develop a better understanding and theories to guide practice. For example, what happens when an organization experiences a crisis and there are pressures for the better equipped individual to take the reins (Barney & Hesterly, 2010); and how and when does horizontal and vertical leadership come together? Collective strategic leadership is mostly about leadership horizontally in the organization, and in literature collective forms of leadership are generally treated as separate from vertical leadership models. Research in hybrid (horizontal and vertical) is very limited.

The apparent dichotomy that exists between vertical and horizontal leadership brings to the fore the question of how strategic leaders conceptualize and frame their organization. In thinking about the conceptualizations held by strategic leaders, another important matter is raised in the present discussion of strategic leadership literature: the importance of framing and ultimately sense-making in shaping the decision-making activities of strategic leaders. Decision-making is, as one would expect, a core undertaking in strategic leadership roles. How strategic leaders frame and categorize organizations, and how they make sense of this together with the surrounding contexts is critical to thinking and problematizing existing elements of the organization. How strategic leaders make sense of the organization and its context dictates their mental models. The mental models, in turn, dictate their decisions and how they will seek to influence the mental models of others in order to promote change. Sense-making, as a critical capacity for leaders, has attracted considerable attention in literature. In strategic leadership, dealing with change is central, and change in the present time is not only frequent but also very rapid, and an organizational crisis is a relatively common occurrence. Unfortunately, though there is much written about sense-making and leadership, little is known about mental models and sense-making of strategic leaders in times of crisis (Combe & Carrington, 2015). Furthermore, it is quite evident that there is a need for further research in sense-making in strategic leadership when one considers that the complexity of sense-making increases according to the rising complexity of the world.

At this stage of the discussion, it is very clear that strategic leaders need many capabilities for strategy formulation and implementation in order to deal with change in our complex, ever-changing society. Dealing effectively with change and ambiguity requires strategic leaders who are astute, flexible, creative, innovative, visionary, and who can also build ownership and alignment within their workgroups to implement change. An effective strategic leader in a modern organization will inspire others to undertake creative activities and generate innovative ideas. The strategic leader will influence others to align with a conceptual vision and instill core values

aligned with that vision, such that others will willingly work toward the realization of that vision. At the same time, teams will feel responsible for their own actions (Malewska & Sajdak, 2014).

Evidently, strategic leadership is very complicated. The effective strategic leader is well-equipped with capabilities spanning from the business and technical aspects through to the human dimensions, including empathy, interpersonal communication, basic psychology of motivation and influence. Strategic leaders must be able to see both the macro view and micro views of the organization, and form a deep understanding of how every component of every view interrelates and influences the whole. Underpinning such an expansive set of capabilities must necessarily be a theoretical and empirical knowledge of the discipline of strategic leadership itself.

A great many leaders and managers alike have turned to strategic leadership to inspire and guide their visions, and to formulate the directions so essential for the long-term growth and success of an organization or a country. Equally, studies over the past two decades have found a great many leaders have exhibited an absence of strategic thinking to the detriment of organizational performance and longevity (Goldman, 2012). Among the reasons for the lack of strategic thinking in organizational leaders is lack of understanding and confusion in both theory and practice about what strategic thinking means, and frequently there is confusion between the term “strategic thinking” and “strategic planning” (Goldman, 2012). The need to teach and promote development of strategic thinking capabilities is well-established, but the best methods of doing this remain open for discussion. Much of the process of learning to think strategically within organizations takes place informally through a messy, iterative process, which is influenced by factors such as organizational culture and typology, as well as workgroup characteristics and demographics (Casey & Goldman, 2010). While “learning on the job” is commonplace and has value if well-mentored, it is oftentimes a “trial-and-error” affair. There is undoubtedly a need to equip future strategic leaders with more formalized knowledge and to develop a grounding in fundamental theory and principles. As is necessary, strategic leadership is in fact recognized as an academic subject, and is taught formally in both education and business areas.

The goal of strategic leadership is to drive innovation, and maximize team performance to enhance organizations’ long-term growth and success in today’s complex world of fast-paced, dramatic change. Strategic leaders can see opportunities that others cannot and leverage the organization’s resources to the advantage of the organization. An organization with high strategic thinking capital is well-positioned not merely to succeed and survive long term, but also to introduce radical change and initiate productive, profitable trends in its respective industry. The importance of strategic leadership to organizational success and survival is known and documented.

Research on strategic leadership has been going on for decades, but since it is so complicated, the struggle to understand it continues. Interestingly, the context of strategic leadership is relatively underexplored in the great volume of literature surrounding leadership styles and how those styles influence individual, team, and group outcomes (Carter & Greer, 2013).

There have been efforts to teach and guide leaders on how to practice strategic leadership, which have precipitated a number of readily available textbooks. If we look deeper at many of the existing textbooks, we realize the vast majority of these books were written from a practitioner's perspective. In other words, these books were not based on empirical research. Much of what is written in practice textbooks about strategic leadership are "a-theoretical" case studies rather than empirical research. Case studies can be valuable when combined with theory. Naturally, these existing books have failed to better serve the needs of today's graduate students who, if they are strategic thinkers and leaders, must be equipped with empirical research on such an academic subject. It is against a background of theory that case studies must be analyzed if they are to best provide useful insights and examples of practice in specific contexts.

Theory is at the heart of the scientific process and also at the heart of our understanding and actions. Theories provide principles, explanation, and show interrelationships among variables, and they provide the framework for understanding situations. Theories are "testable," and so applying theory is a catalyst for constant exploration and reevaluation of what is known. Theory therefore provides both a basis for best practice and a launching point for ongoing development of knowledge and understanding.

The importance of theory as a basis for practice is evidenced in the growing call for more empirical research and theory development in the field of strategic leadership (Carter & Greer, 2013; Gardner, Lowe, Moss, Mahoney, & Coglisier, 2010). In contrast to the somewhat "ad hoc" methods of practice that may emerge from solely "trial-and-error" approaches to learning strategic leadership, knowledge of leadership gained from empirical research provides a strong foundation for developing practice that is thoughtful, deliberate, well-informed and generally more likely to be effective. Furthermore, armed with empirical knowledge, strategic leaders are well-positioned to analyze practice and evolve toward increasing effectiveness. With this in mind, the aim of this book is to highlight best practices alongside existing empirical research in strategic leadership. Emergent administrative techniques and business practices used in educational establishments and corporate worlds are presented. The book provides a critical overview of current theoretical knowledge of strategic leadership directly derived from empirical research and is also a useful guide for best practices in strategic leadership.

—Victor C. X. Wang
Geraldine Torrissi-Steele

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