Becoming a strategic leader: Lessons from the UK Public Sector

Andy Bailey
Lancaster University School of Management
Lancaster

a.bailey@lancaster.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the processes through which the practice of strategizing is learnt. Drawing on data collected through in-depth interviews with over 30 strategic leaders in 10 UK public sector institutions, informal experience, rather than formally organized development, was identified as a major underlying influence in the learning and relearning of how to operate strategically. Although the importance of experience was a recurring theme, no one dominant form of informal experience was identified; rather different types of experience were highlighted. The paper concludes by suggesting that the formalisation of informal learning appears to be a most significant intervention for the development of strategic leadership in the learning and skills sector.

Keywords: Strategizing, public sector, leadership learning

INTRODUCTION: THE NEED TO BE STRATEGIC

The need for leaders within the public sector to think and act strategically has never been more acute. This is particularly true of the UK Further Education (FE) sector which has undergone radical change over the past 15 years. A significant element of this transformation has resulted from the incorporation of FE institutions and has led to fundamental changes in organizational structure, culture, and practice. The transformation in this sector is exemplified by higher levels of organizational autonomy, with colleges gaining freedom to set their own strategic agendas and direction. Prior to incorporation strategic responsibility for FE institutions lay within local
government and the local education authority. The move away from state control and towards quasi-
independence and styles of management modelled on those of the private sector (McTavish, 2003),
has resulted in these institutions becoming locally-managed and self-governing corporations and
‘free’ to take strategic responsibility, determine strategic actions and enact strategic change. As with
other public service organizations these changes have been mirrored by a rise in the rhetoric of New
Public Management; a critical element of which has been an emerging emphasis on strategy, strategic
management and strategic thinking. If strategic thinking is to be developed then there is a need to
understand the processes through which the practice of strategic thinking and strategizing is
developed. By exploring these processes we aim to explicate this key area of leadership development
in order to offer practical suggestions as to how the process might be managed in a more effective and
systematic manner.

**Developing strategizing practice**

In his review of research into strategic practice, Whittington (2002) highlights a critical
question: *what are the skills required for strategizing and how are these learnt?* Given the
importance of strategizing to all aspects of organizing and particularly to organizational success there
is a clear need to provide insight into how strategizing practice is learnt. In so doing, we address both
the question above and also the concerns raised by Liedtka, (1998) that there is a general lack of
research and knowledge about the skills of strategists and the way these skills are learnt.

**Strategizing and strategic leadership**

Before discussing the dominant processes which leaders see as influencing the development
of capabilities in strategizing it is worth briefly defining what we mean by the term. Strategizing, in
essence, can be understood as the ‘the doing of strategy’. Drawing on the ‘strategy-as-practice’
school of thought (see for example: Whittington, 1996), *strategizing* relates to the activities and
‘micro-activities’ that managers and leaders undertake when engaging in strategic work, such as
creating, implementing, monitoring, amending, and communicating strategy. In short, ‘strategizing’
is how individual leaders (rather than organizations as a whole) *do strategy* on a day-to-day basis (Whittington, 2003). As Maitlis and Lawrence state “the concept of strategizing emphasises the micro-level processes and practices involved as organizational members work to construct and enact organizational strategies, through both formal and informal means” (2003:111). This definition usefully draws out the connections between: processes and practices of strategizing; strategy formulation and implementation; and the formal and informal means through which strategy is created and realised. In understanding the types of capabilities and practices leaders are likely to need and develop when becoming strategic leaders we draw on Ireland and Hitt (1999) notion of strategic leadership as “*a person’s ability to anticipate, envisage, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate change that will create a viable future for the organization*” (1999:43).

**Learning and the social context**

The notion of how leaders learn and develop their practice as ‘strategic leaders’ places emphasis on learning through lived experience with a particular focus on the complex milieu of events and influences that occur through daily engagement within particular contexts. It is through such participative engagement that strategic leadership practices and identities are developed.

Much has been written on the prominence of experiential learning in the process of management development (see for example Reynolds, 1997) and such processes are likely to be present in learning to become a strategic leader. While experiential learning is important in developing capabilities in strategic leadership, the utilisation of additional learning perspectives may help to illuminate a deeper understanding of how managers learn strategic leadership. These perspectives are: situated learning; identity development; and observational learning.

**Situated learning: strategic apprenticeship through participation**

Engagement and interaction in social settings shape what an individual learns so that: “*organizations, people and groups create knowledge, negotiating meaning of words, actions,*
situations, and construct shared identities” (Gherardi et al., 1998: 274) through participation in practice.

Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest that participation-in-practice is less associated with knowing the world and more associated with ‘becoming’ part of the social world (Gherardi et al., 1998). Similarly, apprenticeship within a community of practice emphasises the significance of relationships among persons and activities by which tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and knowledge-in-action (Schon, 1983) are acquired through legitimate pathways of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The degree of legitimacy accorded to an individual through such pathways of participation greatly effects both access and range of learning opportunities available, subsequently influencing the development and practice of social roles and identity, such as strategic leadership.

Identity development – ‘Becoming’ a strategic leader

Through the lens of identity development, strategic leadership as an identity can be seen as a fluid, dynamic process that inter-connects an individual’s past (lived experience) with both their present identity and future aspirational identity (Gergen, 1989). Identity can be seen as a transient and developing process reflecting the notion of ‘provisional-self’ (Riceour, 1992) and looking into the future as a desired identity - captured as ‘possible-self’ (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

That is not to say that we take on an identity, like putting on a coat; rather, identities are negotiated in the sense that they are malleable, being affirmed by the individual and confirmed by other members of a particular community (Wenger, 2002). The notion of ‘becoming’ a strategic leader is related to context, to others who already hold this identity within this context, and to the process of observational learning.

Observational learning of strategic leadership

Notable people are central to processes of situated learning through participation with others, and prominent in shaping identity development (Higgins & Bargh, 1987). Ganellen and Carver (1985) argued that peoples’ interpretation and understanding of social phenomena is significantly
affected by observations of people. Hogg (2001) extends this point to suggest that learning of social phenomena such as strategic leadership is shaped through interactions with others. Bandura (1986) asserts that a process of observational learning, through the influence of notable others, shapes attitudes, feelings and behaviour. Observational learning then is a fundamental building block of knowledge creation and acts as: “one of the most powerful means of transmitting values, attitudes and patterns of thought and behaviour” (Bandura, 1986: 47).

As such, the role and impact of observational learning through notable people is interconnected to processes of situated learning and identity development. For example, access to and participation with a rich diversity of notable people, arguably generates a broader and deeper appreciation of what it is to be ‘strategic’ within a particular context.

The preceding interdisciplinary theories on social learning will be utilised to interpret the findings and help to reveal insights into the processes influencing how strategic leadership is learnt. In so doing we aim to address part of Whittington’s (2002) critical question ‘what are the skills required for strategizing and how are these learnt?’

THE RESEARCH

The English Learning and Skills sector provides learning opportunities to over 6 million learners and annually receives in the region of £7 billion of government funds. The sector offers a broad learning provision to a wide range of learners, including academic and vocational learning to 16-19 year olds and adult learners; workforce development and learning as leisure and personal development. The majority of this provision is delivered through approximately 400 FE colleges.

Method

The findings presented here are based on a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews with senior leaders in 10 separate UK general FE colleges. In each college, semi-structured interviews, lasting between one and two hours, were conducted with the Principal/Chief Executive, and at least two additional members of the senior leadership team (SLT), one typically responsible for curriculum
or teaching and learning and one responsible for resources or strategy and quality. Interviews were undertaken with multiple members of a college SLT in order to gain breadth of insight into the practices and processes within each college. To supplement the interviews secondary data were collected and analysed.

The process of analysis involved an initial review of the key themes emerging from the interviews followed by in-depth analysis of data through a process of continual iteration between elements of data and theory (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**FINDINGS: PROCESSES OF LEARNING TO STRATEGIZE**

The key features of the process of learning to strategize were:

- The role of organized or formal learning programmes was highlighted, but seen as minimal in terms of impact
- The informal role of what may be regarded as an apprenticeship in developing strategic capabilities notably through experience of participation through hearing, seeing and being guided by a ‘successful’ strategist
- Identity also played a part in relation to the recognition of self as a strategic leader and an acceptance of changing roles and responsibilities that this entailed
- The emergence of the significance of formalising the informal learning processes in the form mentoring and shadowing

**Formal Learning: Organized programmes**

Whilst greater emphasis was typically attributed to ‘on the job’ processes for learning to be strategic more formal organized programmes of development were also seen to have a legitimate, albeit, limited role to play in the development of strategizing skills.

A number of respondents discussed how formal development in ‘how to do strategy’ provided a useful baseline of theoretical understanding that could subsequently be tried out, developed and refined in a real work setting. For many the most powerful learning moments from formalised
programmes were described in relation to the peer discussions of issues of common concern and interest that take place within and around the programme and the creation of networks and communities on which to draw as their career progressed. The following extract illustrates this.

“I'm not sure that you can learn [how to strategize] through a course of study and I think if you speak to most Principals who prior to CEL went on a Senior Principal Programme they would say the best thing about it was meeting their peers and talking to them about issues that they faced.” - Principal / Chief Executive

As well as positive aspect of formal programmes, a number of concerns were raised about the value of such programmes in developing strategizing skills. These centred on the challenge of replicating ‘real life’ experience in the classroom. However, observations of good practice where identified and the value of exploring and debating both written and live cases was highlighted. The value from this was identified as the interaction created either with the ‘champion’ of a live case or between course members when exploring written cases.

The importance of formal programmes appears to reflect mechanisms for sharing and reflecting on experience.

“One thing I would say about learning [to operate at a strategic level] is that you may go and listen to somebody and you may disagree with them or you may think they're talking a load of rubbish, but the important bit is you've thought about what they've said and they've made you clarify what your own thinking is. It's about sharing experiences and seeing if things can be done differently.” - Principal / Chief Executive

Similarly, formal programmes enabled participants to help shape the development of their identity as a ‘strategic leader’ through benchmarking and associating with other strategic leaders. Further, the act of being selected or enrolling onto a formal programme, such as an MBA, appears to facilitate the creation of an alternative identity for external consumption and for some respondents represented a ‘rite of passage’ to more senior organizational positions.

The powerful role of discussion and sharing of experience and insights was a recurring theme, in various contexts: within the senior leadership team, throughout the institution, between institutions and on taught programmes. A key message arising out of the research was the value that respondents
placed on having the opportunity to share ideas, discuss strategic issues and options and learn from others. The opportunity to learn with peers was extremely important to respondents.

While sharing is important, leaders saw the opportunity to observe, hear and work alongside notable people of critical importance in developing capabilities in strategizing.

**Informal learning: The role of notable people**

A most prevalent process for shaping strategic leadership learning was through observation of notable people. Observational learning provides examples of good and bad practice for leaders to use as guiding frameworks for their actions in particular situations. It also enables benchmarking for individuals to assess their own practice and if recognised as appropriate, enhances the learning curve and avoids many potential risks and hardships of learning by doing.

The influence of notable people on how the art of the strategist is learnt occurred in a number of ways: through working with such people and seeing how they deal with strategic issues; gaining detailed insight into their strategic practice through hearing about how these leaders strategize; or having the opportunity to engage in dialogue with these notable people around the various approaches and the underlying rationales for their actions.

We heard explicitly about the value of working alongside skilful strategists in the development of strategizing skills:

“The best way to learn top level strategic leadership is to work with top level leaders” – Principal/Chief Executive

“How can those skills be learnt? It’s very much about watching how other people do it. I mean [my Principal/Chief Executive] is probably one of the best strategists I know, one of the best leaders I know, and have ever worked for. Working with him you really learn a lot, and, it's that experience, it's that knowledge and awareness, that you can, you know, you recognise, you learn, you watch, and then you, it's almost like it's repeated all the way through the organization” – Vice Principal / Chief Executive
It was emphasised that observational learning alone was not sufficient to develop capabilities of strategizing and that there was a complementary need for role experience to refine the broad symbolised learning acquired through the observation of notable people.

**Informal learning: Role participation**

The learning gained from observing notable others is tested, refined and advanced through role experience. Experiences that shape strategizing practices are varied, however experience gained from role and position is important in developing strategic practices.

Leaders recounted various influential experiences, both past and current, and explained how different roles and positions had contributed to their own strategic development. One leader explained how a series of senior roles had provided the opportunity to engage in significant strategic activity which was central to the honing of his strategic skills.

“I've had three senior positions, each of them going to a college which was in a dire mess. So I think that taught me an awful lot. One of the colleges was in a financial state. The Principal had gone, the senior management team virtually gone, and the new Principal recruited me as his first appointment and we set about recruiting a new management team, changing the college, putting it on a sound financial footing, working with the Learning and Skills Council, there were quality issues as well to deal with. It was a sharp learning curve but it gave me the appetite and experience as a Vice Principal to be a Principal.” - Principal / Chief Executive

What was identified as particularly beneficial was the opportunity this role had provided in gaining access and insight into the strategic activity of a number of colleges which in turn enabled observation of the varying strategic leadership practices of different senior teams.

Experience through participation in strategic roles is clearly important in developing strategic skills and such roles enable leaders to engage with notable others and facilitate enacted experiential learning. Indeed, participation in a variety of contexts can extend and deepen learning both through
observation and enactment as well as providing insights into different cultural and organizational practices.

**Informal learning: Confidence and identification as a strategic leader**

A strong and emerging process influencing the development of these leaders was a sense of seeing themselves as a strategic leader. Through benchmarking with notable others, enacting roles, and sharing ideas and reflections with colleagues, leaders appeared to strengthen their identification with their role as a ‘strategic leader’. Associated with increased identification was a concurrent growth in confidence and self-belief that they could operate strategically and be strategic.

Some leaders expressed the need to seek out opportunities to learn, by focusing on gaining exposure to different environments and experiences to recreate an identity more fitting with that of a strategic leader.

Identity development is argued to be associated with our past, a sense of where we have come from, the present in terms of the person I am now, and the future related to the aspirations for the person I wish to become; such aspirations are grounded in the past and have impact on behaviour in the present. For many leaders their past identities associated with being a professional specialist had to be left behind and some found this a difficult transition, particularly in dealing with the tensions which can arise between their professional role as educators and that of strategic leader. Arguably, where there are constraints on the mechanisms shaping identity transition the development of strategic leadership capabilities may be limited.

The following comment illustrates the emerging development of identity as a strategic leader built through a pathway of opportunities exploited:

“I went down the route of staff development officer, then curriculum development manager and then became a Head of Division, that was all at the same college. Having become a head of division there was nowhere else to go in that college so I looked around for a job as a Vice Principal and I came here as a Vice Principal . . . the Principal left and I got the post at the
end of the year, so for three years I have been the Principal here.” - Principal / Chief

Executive

The aspiration to become a strategic leader and the identification of oneself as having the appropriate skills can be driven by comparison with notable others one is working with.

“I suppose one of the drivers for promotion was the belief that I probably could do the job as well if not better than many of the people who were managing me...Anyway I'm a Principal now after becoming a Vice Principal with a very clear intent of using that as a stepping stone to becoming a Principal”. - Principal / Chief Executive

Confidence and identity development appear to be significantly associated with these leaders in becoming a strategic leader. Yet the barriers to becoming a strategic leader seem to be significant. To help overcome such barriers there was frequent mention of various forms of support in a quasi-formal manner.

**Quasi-formal: Learning by ‘doing’ with support**

Linked to both observed and enacted learning was the role of support. In talking about how new and aspiring leaders learn the skills of strategizing, leaders often mentioned the benefits to be gained from having appropriate levels of support. Leaders commented on the enhanced value if these experiences were also linked to a slightly more formal type of experience identified here as: managed experience, mentoring and shadowing.

**Managed experience** - Leaders spoke of a requirement to learn through experience balanced against the risks of failing. In essence, this is the provision of opportunity to take actions and make decisions for real, but within parameters and under ‘supervision’. The value of quasi-formal structures was seen as important to help accelerate the learning curve under safer conditions.

“I actually think to do the job under supervision is pretty valuable. It has to be for real. Real experience and real knowledge comes when you've done this for real and you've seen what cause and effect is and you can probably then apply cause and effect to later decisions and later situations that you might meet.” - Vice Principal / Chief Executive

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Mentoring - Given the importance that many people place on learning from others with more experience or of proven ability, it is not surprising that we also heard of the value of mentoring.

“You don't know it all when you become a Principal, which is a real problem; and accepting that other people can give you guidance on how they've approached an issue or problem is important. So to me I think it’s quite important, that there is some sort of mentoring programme, support for Principals from other Principals who are experienced, who've done it by learning by doing. I think that's essential.” - Principal / Chief Executive

Shadowing - The value of learning from others was highlighted again in terms of ‘shadowing’. Respondents placed a high premium on the idea of having an opportunity to spend time in different work environments and to experience different strategic situations, approaches and styles.

One Principal / Chief Executive explains in hindsight that the opportunity to shadow a fellow Principal would have been valuable:

“I think [a key developmental experience] would have been work shadowing somebody like John, somebody, who had been a Principal for a period of time and had achieved a degree of success and stability for the college” - Principal / Chief Executive

Another leader also recognised the potential value of such activity:

“Work shadowing . . . that's quite an interesting and innovative way of doing it [learning to strategize] and just sort of walking alongside somebody else for a few days to see what would happen.” - Vice Principal / Chief Executive

However, not everyone saw the value of shadowing, drawing the contrast with shadowing and the need to gain ‘real’ experience. This raises issues as to how such activities are managed to balance the informal and accidental processes shaping learning with appropriate formal or quasi-formal processes.

DISCUSSION

The findings very much reflect the dominance of three key areas shaping the learning processes of becoming a strategic leader:
- Formal – organized programmes with a special emphasis towards sharing and reflection between colleagues through discussion and dialogue
- Informal – influence of notable people and experiential learning through role participation; building confidence to be a strategic leader and aspiring identification with strategic leadership
- ‘Quasi-formal’ – guided support in terms of managed experience, mentoring and shadowing

Rather than seeing these elements as separate processes, in reality for the respondent leaders, there was considerable overlap and interaction as represented in Figure 1:

![Figure 1: Processes of becoming a strategic leader](image)

**Figure 1: Processes of becoming a strategic leader**

Figure 1 illustrates how different processes discussed above relate more strongly with one of the three dominant themes. For example ‘organized programmes’ and ‘sharing’ are within formal activity and in contrast, ‘participating roles’ and ‘notable people’ are within informal activity. The quasi-formal theme integrates the overlap processes of managed experience, shadowing and mentoring.

As previously highlighted it would be a misrepresentation of the data to see these elements as standalone. The process of learning to become a strategic leader embraces all of the processes in a fluid and systemic way. The necessity to see such an integrated approach is outlined in the discussion, but emphasis is needed on a ‘balanced approach of all three elements’ in order to enhance the efficacy of strategic leadership development interventions.
An apprenticed process of ‘becoming’ strategic

The findings provided evidence for an argument to be drawn together into a conceptualization of strategic leadership learning, through lived experience as an apprenticed process of becoming strategic. But emphasis needs to be placed on the emergent and accidental form of apprenticeship.

It is clear that ‘situation’ influences the availability and variety of roles in which leaders can participate. Through participation and experience these roles appear to orientate perspectives, capabilities and behaviours towards ‘becoming’ strategic. The leader’s roles and experience of participating in colleges at increasingly senior levels, provides an affirming process, enabling growing confidence in acting, and being allowed to act strategically.

Through this emergent form of apprenticeship a pathway has been illuminated. For many this pathway to becoming a strategic leader is accidental. However, is this emergent and accidental pathway an appropriate or inevitable form of apprenticeship to become a strategic leader?

Formalising the informal apprenticeship

Some respondents discussed the nature of the challenge of learning to strategize reflected in the lengthy, ongoing, primarily experiential and individualised process described above. ‘Off the job’ processes such as formal programmes and conferences were seen as no substitute for this, although there was widespread recognition of the necessity for some form of organized intervention. Perhaps the place of an organized apprenticeship for strategic leadership needs to reflect the following principles oriented around personalised understanding:

- Creating awareness of learning needs and exposure to new perspectives
- Developing personal and collective reflection allied to strategic encounters
- Becoming proactive in being placed into strategic roles – ‘doing’ strategic work
- Shadowing and observing others and engagement with Principals / Chief Executives
Being mentored and coached on the job

This range of learning processes were described with relatively little disagreement between respondents, although there are distinct variations in emphasis as to which had the most impact. This is consistent with the emphasis that some people placed on the need for a degree of individuality in the learning process.

There appears to be a clear need to structure individual learning from experience to shape the emergent and often accidental apprenticeship in order to enhance the development of strategic leaders. In essence, it would be desirable to formalising the informal processes. Arguably however, this may be most difficult to put into practice; it may be significantly more feasible to start the other way round: informalising the formal interventions. Such an approach would echo best practice interventions from the private sector through quasi formal interventions in the form of coaching, mentoring and shadowing linked to stretch assignments (James & Burgoyne, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided insight into the processes that senior leaders within Further Education colleges see as contributing to the development of strategic capability and as such, the paper has contributed to our understanding of how ‘learning to strategize’ occurs and may best be supported. Throughout the data, considerable emphasis has been placed on ‘learning by doing’, as illustrated by the value given to ‘real on the job experiences’ and action based learning opportunities. This is in line with Whittington (2001), who argues that if strategy is understood as practice then the “acquisition of the tricks and stratagems necessary for effective practice is not something that relies a great deal on formal learning, more on participation, or at least observation, of the activity itself” (2001: 4). It is also clear that leaders see significant value in quasi-formal processes in managing the risk associated with strategic inexperience. Managed experiences and the provision of support and guidance offer value in the development of strategizing skills and are something to be developed, although questions must be raised about how realistic this is in senior positions, when individuals are
so often expected to ‘hit the ground running’. This is a challenge that leaders, organisations and those commissioned to support leadership development need to address.
REFERENCES


