Strategic conversations

If we assume that schools are made up of different individuals who think about their role and the nature of the school in different ways, it may also be reasonable to assume that the school is not just a collection of these views but that, through the interaction of these individuals, a unique and powerful perspective can be developed to enhance the school.

Schools are a network of individuals linked together through a series of interconnections largely based on conversation. This is powerfully illustrated:

> Often much more important is the informal learning activity consisting of unscheduled discussions, debate and conversation about strategic questions that goes on continuously at all levels in the organization. (Van Der Heijden, 1996: 273)

What is required to create an effective individual and institutional conversation? The first way is for leaders to model behaviour. How do they interact with colleagues on a day-to-day basis? Do they just react to the current demands or do they engage people in thinking and talking about the future? Leaders need to take the informal opportunities to interact with others to discuss the problems of the present, but also to engage in a dialogue about the challenges of the future. The conversation over coffee or walking to the car park can be just as important as more formal meetings. It is also necessary to work with other leaders in the school to encourage them to do likewise so the culture in the school builds reflection and dialogue.

Leaders also have to make changes to the nature and pattern of meetings, so that the first item on the agenda is a strategic or future item and the meeting does not move too quickly into the day-to-day material. One good way is, in whole-staff meetings in primary schools or departmental meetings in secondary schools, for each person present to take it in turn to start the meeting spending ten minutes explaining their most significant example of student learning, to start a conversation on the nature of learning and where they need to go in the future. The danger is that the bigger strategic issue is tackled onto the end of a long agenda. My most vivid memory of a whole-school meeting was when we were asked to discuss two items. First, we were asked to consider whether boys should be allowed to play with large footballs in the upper playground. Second, we were asked to consider what the whole-school language policy was. By putting the football issue first we wasted valuable time and energy before moving on to the core strategic issue. How we structure meetings has a critical impact on the ability to engage in strategic conversations.

School leaders in the NCSL study made some powerful points:

> With strategic conversations we have constructed a common vocabulary that helps to build a common vision. It is through quite intensive personal contact with the key stakeholders to create an understanding that we could make things happen in the school.

So we have to keep having these conversations, but we have to have them at lots of different levels so that we keep everybody involved, carry everybody forward.

These two leadership voices highlight a number of significant points that emerge from developing strategic conversations:

- establishing a common vocabulary;
- understanding how staff could make things happen;
- consensus-building;
- outlining staff visions;
- building reflection;
- keeping everyone involved;
- carrying everyone forward.

How can we build an environment in which strategic conversations are sustained and developed? One of the most powerful tools I have used, working with school leaders, for building discussions and conversations is the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) matrix. While it is an analytical tool, the more I use it the more powerful I believe it is for stimulating strategic conversations.

The BCG matrix, used in a business context, has four dimensions: those items of outstanding success we call star products; those items that give us a reliable steady income we call cash cows; products that are not working out as well as we expected and of which we are unsure what to do next with we call problem children; products that are very unsuccessful we call dog products. The matrix can be seen in Figure 6.2.
students or among staff themselves. Finally, we could look at individual members of staff. Thinking about their own school, participants are asked to pick one of these categories (products, process or people) or a mixture of them. Then participants focus on the two most outstanding areas, then the two they would consider reliable, two where they have concerns and two where they were sure the school was performing badly. The first two stages are:

- to ask participants to put two items in each category for their school;
- to ask them to discuss their items with their fellow participants, with each participant sharing in turn their items in the four categories.

The discussion and debate is the crux of the exercise, and sufficient time should be allowed to build common understanding and create a coherent team view of the present state of the school.

The exercise then moves on with the participants considering what would have to be done to ensure that, if the exercise was repeated in four or five years' time, we sustain and reinforce the outstanding and reliable items, while addressing the problematic and poor areas. The point about strategy is that there is a need to build capability within the organization to undertake this process and to avoid the quick-fix solution.

In undertaking this exercise with governors, senior staff and middle leaders in schools, it can be seen that they immediately focus on the broader strategic needs and engage in conversations. It is the quality and the richness of the conversations that always impresses me the most. The next important finding is that it focuses a discussion on priorities. While we need to address areas for concern, it is important to remember the 80:20 rule. This suggests that 80 per cent of the organization is doing well and 20 per cent of the organization less well. However, we spend 80 per cent of our time addressing the 20 per cent of problems and ignore the 80 per cent that is doing well. As a result, this area of success can be neglected and can deteriorate.

This approach is, of course, taking the known and moving forward—as such it is only a starting point to get colleagues to talk about major focused items. It is then necessary to move to an exercise that enables colleagues in schools to 'look back from the future'. The looking back from the future activity can involve staff, parents, students or governors, or any combinations of these groups. The idea is to build a conversation and perspective of what the school will look like and what it
should be doing when the students starting school this year will be in their final year at school. Use topics focusing on students' experiences such as:

- What will they learn?
- How will they learn?
- What sort of skills and abilities will they need to have?
- What sort of people do we want them to be?
- How will technology help them?
- What will the school buildings look like?

All these questions can be used to enable strategic conversations about the future of the school and to develop an approach that allows ideas to move to that desired future state. The final consideration would be to pose the question: 'If we were to repeat the BCG exercise in five years' time what differences would there be?'

_Meetings, Bloody Meetings_ was the famous title of Video Arts management training programme on managing meetings. The theme of the training video is that people had meetings 'to meet' and that the meetings did not always serve a useful purpose. In schools we have both formal and informal meetings, and we need to make sure that meetings serve a strategic as well as an operational function. The informal meeting is just as important as the formal one as a vehicle for developing strategic conversations and ideas.