Chapter 10

Deploying and implementing strategy

Introduction

So far the book has considered, based on a value and belief system, the various processes and the various approaches that can be deployed in building a strategically focused school. The book has also considered the nature and dimensions of strategic leadership which drive both processes and approaches. In this chapter we bring processes and approaches, together with the strategic leadership, into a holistic view of implementing a strategy in a school setting. This chapter revises existing ideas already established in the book, and introduces new ideas to examine how individual strategies can be implemented. The chapter also looks at how a more holistic cross-organizational view can be obtained by using a strategic map. My warning is that it is one thing to have strategic intents or plans, it is another to implement them successfully!

Consider the story of three frogs on a lily pad (Figure 10.1): one frog decides to jump off – how many are left? The answer is three; deciding to do something and actually doing something are very different. A school may have eloquently written plans which do not come to fruition. It is important to consider how any strategic approach can be translated effectively into action. This chapter is organized into three aspects of implementation: basic factors, people factors and organizational factors.

What strategic implementation strategy should do

The implementation process should aim to work back from a vision of the future and create a strategy that is action orientated and deliver specific strategic outcomes. How can this be achieved when the majority of strategic plans never come to fruition? To answer this question this chapter considers three factors, previously mentioned, when implementing strategy: basic factors, people factors and organizational factors. Using these three factors it is hoped to provide the reader with insights into his/her own strategy for organizational reality and success. To start the discussion of translating strategy into action we shall consider two underlying basic factors that are critical for success.

Figure 10.1 Translating strategy into action
Implementation — basic factors

The two basic factors that are paramount are:

- focus on a few themes which will make a real difference;
- keep the process simple.

These two criteria seem obvious but are, in fact, often neglected. Freedman (2003: 18) states: “Strategy is based around the answers to a few vital questions, rather than masses of data”. Using that concept we should ask what the few vital questions initially are in implementation? We saw in Chapter 8, in considering strategic intent statements and strategic plans, that readers were advised not to follow the detailed structures and lists of school development/improvement plans, but instead to look at a maximum of five strategic areas for development. This advice needs to be repeated. What are the key things that will make a difference? In terms of implementation what are the critical factors that will lead to successful implementation? There are always many activities and conversations that leaders can engage in with their colleagues to decide which are critical to lead to successful implementation. The three things that lead to successful implementation are focus, focus and focus!

This means that leaders need to develop both good content questions and good process questions. Working with colleagues, leaders need to define critical areas for strategic development and then take sufficient time to outline the nature and dimensions of the proposed strategic change, so that a complete picture of the critical factors for implementation can be built up. The other side of the coin to “what we are doing?” is “how we are doing it?” Here leaders need to understand the how of implementation. This involves a process of determining the key factors that need to be communicated in order to gain commitment of colleagues. I suggest that commitment will be more effective if leaders can identify the main elements of the change but also the main implementation points and the possible problems that may arise.

As well as keeping the focus, keeping the implementation process simple is an important contributor to success. This involves both defining and articulating the key stages and sign points of the implementation strategy. Planning the implementation is as important as planning the content of the strategy itself. Clarity of process and establishing definable outcomes along the way are key elements to build into the overall approach. Given that leadership and management involves working with and through people, the people dimension is analysed next.

Implementation - people factors

In this section I consider four implementation actions which involve people. First, there is a need to align the people, the organization and the strategy. This is to ensure that everyone is working in the same direction. Second, there is a need to ensure that strategy is not seen as the role of the single leader but work towards making strategy everyone's job. Thus people at all levels of the organization should be involved in the design, implementation and articulation of the strategy. Third, strategy should not be seen as a one-off process, with the strategic planning process taking place once a year, but as an ongoing developmental process. Fourth, if strategy is to be successful it will need effective leadership and if there is to be strategic
change then leadership will play a critical role. The chapter now looks at these four factors in more detail.

**Align the people, the organization and the strategy**

This is the difficult task of moving the individual and corporate 'mindset' to the strategic objectives of the organization.

Kouzes and Posner (1999: xv) put forward the view that:

> Leaders create relationships, and one of those relationships is between individuals and their work. Ultimately we all work for a purpose, and that purpose has to be served if we are to feel encouraged. Encouraging the heart only works if there's a fit between the person, the work and the organization.

Gratton (2000) sees three core capabilities to make these relationships happen: emotional capability, trust-building capability and the capability to build a psychological contract. Emotional capability involves the organization building a climate to link individual needs with organizational needs and developing a sustainable environment. Trust links to the values and beliefs identified in Chapter 3. Do staff see the interactions in school as both honest and fair? Do staff believe leaders in the organization have the skills to take the organization forward in a successful and sustainable way? Trust is the bedrock on which inspiration and commitment can be built. The psychological contract is when individuals agree with the school's purpose and way of working, and can commit to “going the extra mile” for a set of beliefs which can be turned into action. Leaders in the NCSL study commented:

> It's about us and not the old thing of “oh well it's what the senior leadership team want”, or “oh it's about what someone else wants”, or “it's an external imposition” – it's now actually about what we want.

> We are articulating clearly our intents and I guess the stage that we are going into now is a sense of alignment where I can align the desires of the staff, the parents and the governors to move the school forward in the coming five to ten years.

These comments from leaders in the study highlight that the challenge in most organizations is to reconcile organizational and individual perspectives. The processes of involving staff in being part of the organization's values and direction are critical. How individuals come to believe in what the school is doing and can articulate broader school aims, as well as their individual targets, is a key feature of alignment. Thus, with the importance of strategy in its guiding role in the school, staff have to both understand the strategy as well as commit to it. The challenge of aligning individuals and the organization was highlighted many times in the study.

**Making strategy everyone’s job**

Strategy should be seen as influencing current behaviour but also as a source of dialogue to build future behaviour. This involves more than compliance on behalf of the staff. Kouzes and Posner (1999: xv) see this as about a discussion on the “soul and spirit in the workplace”;
Gratton (2000: 19-20) sees this as “engaging with the soul of the organisation”. Building on trust and commitment means involving everyone in the organisation in the strategic journey. This involves building a highly committed workforce with creative teams to support a culture of innovation within the school. Leaders in the NCSL study made the following observations:

The strategic view for me was about actually being owned by more people. When I started out as a head, I think I felt very much it was mine, and then after about a year or so, I felt I shared it with the senior team, and they owned it and from years three through to six I would say definitely that it had filtered down to middle leaders and I think they began to embrace the school culture. The school culture began to be more strategic as a result of that.

We are trying to involve as wide a group of people as possible. We need to share, and have everyone believe in what we are doing, so that together we can build a better fixture. It is emotional as well as a rational process.

These comments show the significance of building a deep-seated understanding of the strategic direction held by a wide cross-section of the staff and that this is a key component of successful implementation. The hopes and directions of the school can only be fully realized if everyone in the school takes responsibility for the strategy.

Make strategy a continual process
Strategy should not be articulated and then left, it should be a process of continual review and development.

One of the traditional views of strategy is that leaders write a five-year plan and at the end of the five years write another one. Nothing could be further from good practice! Strategic plans and strategic intent frameworks need to be articulated over a three to five year time frame but they should be seen as flexible documents able to be adjusted and amended when new ideas and information become available. Strategy should be seen as a framework that is constantly under review. Two of the leaders in the NCSL study commented:

We have avoided the trap of writing a plan and then next year writing a new one. We are revising and updating at key moments so that it is a living document.

Our plan is a framework that we adapt as we go along.

This should not mean that the school is rewriting its planning framework every day! What it does mean is that, after the planning framework has been established, if significant developments arise the plans should be revised and adapted. They should be seen as documents that guide action and not something that is filled in once a year and left. This is even more important when it comes to the discussions and strategic conversations that take place. These should form the basis of ongoing discussions and strategic conversations.

Mobilize strategic change through effective leadership
Leaders have to lead by example and demonstrate commitment to the strategy.
Leaders deal with the complexity of creating consistent meaning both for and within the organization. What senior leaders say and, probably more importantly, how they behave, will set the framework for strategic dialogue and strategic action within the school. It is important that leaders understand the values and norms of the school and live out these values in the interactions they have with colleagues. They also face the challenge of understanding the history of the school and where it has come from while being passionate advocates for strategic change. They need to be the voice of support for others involved in the change process. As schools change, leaders need to ensure that core meaning and purpose are not lost but are conceptualized in the new context and is articulated by others.

A leader in the NCSL study commented:

*I think it's all about sustainability and what you have to do - in fact leadership is about creating a culture within the school where everyone buys into the responsibility for leadership but you have to live it and believe in it to set the model of commitment.*

This ability to live the strategy and convey its importance to others not only in what is written down but also in what the leader says and does is a critical component of effective implementation. Mobilizing effective strategic change is one of the key responsibilities of leaders in organizations.

**Implementation — organizational factors**

In implementing strategy, from an organizational perspective, four factors need to be considered: first, how strategy can be translated into operational activities and become action; second, how strategy can be developed either in a sequential or parallel fashion; third, when to make a strategic change and what to give up in making capacity for the change, are the concepts of strategy timing and abandonment; and fourth, how the implementation process can make use of strategic maps and balanced scorecards to link individual strategic changes into an overall strategic picture. The chapter now looks at each of these in turn.

**Translating strategy into action**

The ability to translate the overall broader strategic aims into shorter-term activities over a period of time is the crux of translating strategy into action. The central point here is to ensure that broad strategic aims can be seen to be affecting classroom practice. One way of thinking about this is to consider how strategy can be “witnessed” as happening in the operational domain. Figure 10.2 shows how three broad strategic aims have been set. By breaking down one of them into its component parts it can be seen how strategy translates into operational activities. Thus a strategic area of development such as “Leadership and management” may break down into four strategic areas, such as school improvement planning, shared leadership, monitoring and evaluation, and resources and building. By taking one of these at the operational level, that of ‘shared leadership skills’, it is possible to again break this down into three areas. Looking at one of those area, that of ‘develop subject leadership skills', we could consider how we would witness subject leaders adopting the strategic objective. Figure 10.2 suggests that if we look at how the subject leaders are involved in classroom observation,
monitoring standards, and how they undertake work scrutiny of pupils' work and how they use data for improvement, we would be able to witness strategy effecting individual practice. Figure 10.2 shows the flow of strategic objectives into operational action. School leaders need to be able to draw up strategic plans and frameworks and ensure they are translated into action. This needs to be given priority and mapped out to ensure success.

![Figure 10.2 Moving from the strategic to the operational](image)

**Adopting a sequential or parallel approach**

Often in models of leadership, the development of leaders is seen as being hierarchical. I wrote an analysis of this in Davies (2003) which is adapted in the following text. Marsh (2000) articulates a sequential linear process ascending through three stages: administration, management and, finally, leadership. These stages assume that there is first the development of administrative skills, then management skills and, finally, leadership skills. Indeed, the NCSL (2001) five levels of leadership development is a sequential process identifying the levels of emergent leadership, established leadership, entry to headship, advanced leadership and consultant leadership. Is this the same with strategy? Do leaders first do the straightforward managerial adjustments and, when they gain confidence, move on to more complex and radical change. This could be considered a sequential view of strategic development. While some, or even the majority of, leaders may adopt this approach, the NCSL research project identifies that strategically orientated leaders do not work in this way. These strategic leaders operated a twin-track strategy. They work both at significantly improving and extending the life of existing approaches and strategies, while at the same time building capability and capacity to move to a significantly enhanced level of operation. This we would call making the
strategic leap or bridging the s-curve gap. In considering what strategic leaders do, we can see that this consists of improving what we already do but, significantly, moving to a much higher level of performance. In an outstanding piece of analysis and conceptualization, Mike Jeans (a management consultant and former KMPG consultant) develops the ideas behind the sigmoid curve with a chapter “Bridging the s-curve gap” (Jeans, 1998).

Many readers will be familiar with the s-curve or sigmoid curve (see Figure 10.3). It suggests that organizations go through a process of growth, success and eventual decline. The axes represent organizational improvement (vertical) and time (horizontal). The analysis suggests that at point A the organization has been successful and should reconsider its operation and reflect on what it needs to do to get on to the next and higher curve. It can either continue as it is and decline to B or move on to the higher curve C.

Figure 10.3 The sigmoid curve (adapted from Handy, 1994: 5 and Jeans, 1998: 24)

Jeans (1998) puts forward a significant development (in Figure 10.4) on this analysis. He suggests that organizational leaders attempt to do two things. First, they try to significantly improve the existing way of operating. In doing so they intend to stop the curve flattening and to elongate it. While doing so they also develop capability to shift to a whole new way of operating, at a much higher level. This can be called the strategic leap (see Figure 10.4). He gives this very valuable insight from the business world:

When Midland Bank (now part of HSBC) decided in the late 1980s to set up a telephone banking operation, it did so by creating a separate organisation, First Direct. This was arguably a second-curve operation, bearing little resemblance to Midland Bank’s existing traditional branch banking operation. This did not, however, mean that the latter was ignored. Indeed Midland engaged in a great many first-curve initiatives, such as branch closure/amalgamation or staff reduction to elongate the life of the operation. (Jeans, 1998: 126)
In the education sector, I have been privileged to work with Greg Barker and Derek Wise, outstanding headteachers from the primary and secondary sectors respectively. In a series of strategic conversations with them, we discussed how they both focused on improving the current way of operating (elongating the sigmoid curve) and preparing the ground for a strategic leap to a totally new way of operating. What follows is a case example of how they adopt a twin-track strategy.

Case example: Greg Barker, St Vincent’s Primary School

Part of the problem has been that, in some people’s eyes, we were already successful. Why, then, change a winning formula? Some were content with the way things were, they were comfortable with existing strategies because they appeared to be working. For some, therefore, there was little motivation to change. So part of the agenda was to improve what we already did to ensure we did not start to peak and go down the sigmoid curve to point B but the other strategic agenda was to reconceptualize how we could operate in a totally new way. As I learnt more and more about whole-brain learning and Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences, I became discontented with the existing situation and the task became clear – there would have to be a significant development programme to introduce the staff to this new science of learning and to promote the introduction of accelerated learning techniques. The work of Davies and Ellison (1999) on school planning has helped me to develop a more holistic and more strategic view of school improvement so that, even in the turbulence that schools now find themselves, it is still possible to remain focused on the core purpose of helping our children to become effective life-long learners. Thus from a new perspective of multiple intelligences and accelerated learning, together with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990 and 1997) concept of “Flow”, we prepared a staff development programme that would totally re-engineer our concept of learning and how we would structure our learning and teaching process.
Case example: Derek Wise, Cramlington High School

We worked on twin-track strategies. At one level measures to raise the expectations of the staff and the aspirations of the students. In particular we introduced a new timetable (four periods in the morning, two in the afternoon): a new curriculum to go alongside it with staff held accountable for both discipline and results. We also improved the learning environment with carpeted classrooms, improved student toilets and social facilities. We publicly shared examination results and, because the curriculum structure consisted of 90 per cent common core, we were able to compare faculty areas with each other and to ask pointed but essential questions such as why is this faculty/department/member of staff doing better or worse than that faculty/department/member of staff given that they have exactly the same students? With the students we shared data on their progress, set targets and celebrated success wherever we could find it. We established regular reviews of departments, and guidelines for schemes of work and what we considered to be good teaching and learning. At the same time we were aware that we needed to create capacity and capability for significant change - a strategic leap in performance. If we were to be a school where “Learning is our business” we must recognize that learning is a highly individual matter and students learn in different ways with preferred styles to access and process information. The decision was taken, therefore, to make a leap to our new sigmoid curve by re-engineering the learning process. We adopted the accelerated learning cycle (Smith, 1996) as a framework and planning tool to design lessons. The cycle blends our developing knowledge of neuroscience, motivational theory and cognitive psychology to increase student engagement in learning and their motivation to achieve. To achieve this we set up a research and development group and identified pilot departments to 'make the leap' to new ways of working. Strategic timing was critical; we needed to move when we had enough capacity and capability to make the change.

Considering strategic timing and strategic abandonment

Barbara Davies and I wrote (Davies and Davies, 2005) “Determining effective intervention points - the right things at the right time”. This still seems a very good summary of the key issues and it is replicated below.

The leadership challenge of when to make a significant strategic change is as critical to success as choosing what strategic change to make. The issue of timing can rest on leadership intuition (Parikh, 1994) as much as on rational analysis. When individuals in the organization are ready for change, when the organization needs the change, and when the external constraints and conditions force the change all have to be balanced one against the other. Such judgement is manifested in not only knowing what and knowing how but also knowing when (Boal and Hooijberg, 2001) and, as important, knowing what not to do (Kaplan and Norton, 2001). Therefore we could add to this list knowing what to give up or abandon in order to create capacity to undertake the new activity. This was illustrated by two school leaders responding in the NSCL project:
I wrote a paper and that basically argued that the climate was right for change, there are some issues that need to be changed but if we are going to do it, then it needs to be part of a coherent programme rather than piecemeal. But the challenge for me personally is this idea of abandonment, that if we take on these initiatives and new things come on, I know I have to give some things up.

The strategic timing is absolutely important. It can make or break a school. If you try and do it at the wrong time it could be disastrous.

Several of the school leaders in the study talked about the critical issue of strategic timing, of getting the time right for change for themselves and others in the school. One school leader also talked about this timing being intuitive:

I think from my own point of view a lot goes on fairly intuitively ... I know I can’t go down that road because I’m not ready or they are not ready. So timing is so critical.

Choosing the right time, and saying “No” if it wasn't the right time was critical for strategic leaders in the study. Getting the timing right for the school community was about being able to choose which external initiatives to implement which would complement the schools’ own agenda for improvement. This was clearly illustrated by one school leader:

I think you get better at being a strategic leader the further you go along, because there comes a point when you actually develop the capacity to say “No, we are not going to do that” or “No, it’s irrelevant. We are not going to do it”.

Strategic timing affects all the people in the school community. If the strategic timing is wrong it can have devastating effects on the school. People will be divided and realizing the strategy will therefore be impossible.

As we have said, in addition to the critical skill of strategic timing, is that of strategic abandonment. If a school adopts a new way of doing things or adopts a new strategic priority how that fits into an already crowded agenda has to be considered. The result is that leaders have to downgrade the importance or abandon existing strategies, not because they are wrong in themselves, but they have become less significant in comparison to new factors. As one school leader said:

I see abandonment as being two different issues. One is the abandonment of things that are not working and actually taking people's time and energy. That's easy to do. The other side of it was to actually say OK this is working well and we are really comfortable with it and it is getting the results we want, but actually there is another strategy here that takes us onto the next stage but we can’t run them both together. This has to be suspended or abandoned in order to give the other one time to grow.

This concept of strategic abandonment is a very powerful one. The difficult aspect of strategic abandonment occurs where the school has to give up acceptable current practice to make capacity available for future improved practice.
Creating a strategic map and implementation structure for the school

While it is important to consider, as we have done above, how to implement an individual strategy, it is also necessary to look at reviewing the whole strategic picture. This can focus on how we review the overall strategic implementation process or how an individual strategic implementation affects the wider school strategy. Starting from scratch, I would suggest that leaders might consider the following two ways to build a holistic view of developing a strategically focused school:

1. Map the strategic architecture of the school.
2. Develop a series of implementation activities to align the school to the new strategic goals or recognize how a proposed change affects the strategic architecture.

We will now consider each of these in more detail.

Map the strategic architecture of a school

It is important for strategic leaders to have a strategic map or framework to guide them in developing the strategic capacity and capability of their school. A useful term for this could be the “strategic architecture” of the school. Hamel and Prahalad (1994: 118-19) define this as:

*Strategic architecture is not a detailed plan. It identifies the major capabilities to be built, but doesn't specify exactly how they are to be built. It shows the relative position of the major load-bearing structures, but not the placement of every electrical outlet and doorknob.*

Kaplan and Norton (1996; 2001) have used a strategic tool called the balanced scorecard, which looks at establishing a number of strategic benchmarks for establishing a framework for strategic mapping and implementation. A very perceptive approach along these lines has been used by Jeans (1998), who uses the KMPG global model to create a strategic map. I have adapted this to create a strategic architecture for a school in Figure 10.5.

This can be seen in more detail in Figure 10.6.

![Figure 10.5 The strategic architecture of the school - overview](image)
Develop and implement a series of strategic process activities to align the school to the new strategic goals

The strategic architecture model provides a strategic leader in a school with the framework to create a strategic map of the organization. By examining the elements in each of the five areas of the model, the leader can assess the existence and relative strengths of the components within each of the five areas. In building a vision of where the school needs to be in, say, five years’ time the leader needs to assess the gap between the current position and the future position. Turning that gap into a series of strategic activities can be achieved by adapting Jeans (1998: 138) “projects in the organizational systems model” as shown in Figure 10.7. This shows how using the three implementation factors of basic, people and organizational might interact with the changes in each of the five strategy areas.

The significance of this approach is that it provides a series of implementation initiatives and strategies for the school to adopt. It does bring the different elements of strategic implementation together in one coherent map of what the school needs to do and how it is doing it. There is a danger that individual initiative may overlap and conflict. By having an overview of the strategic implementation structure, leaders in schools can take a holistic view of what is the strategic implementation position of the school.

The monitoring and evaluation process is an ongoing one and should be considered as a feedback loop. It is a process that is incorporated in the planning frameworks in the strategic intent statements and strategic plans in Chapter 8. However, it is important to monitor the pace of implementation and evaluate if all is going according to plan, or whether alternative approaches are necessary. Monitoring and evaluating the implementation stage is a critical factor in ensuring that strategy turns into action.
Conclusion

Implementation benefits from the idea to “keep it simple”. To this end the chapter initially considered the basic factors in implementation along with ‘focus on a few themes that will make a difference’. Then I followed the task of the two challenges of understanding the people and understanding the organization. In understanding the people dimension the chapter put forward four ideas: align the people, the organization and the strategy; make strategy everyone’s job; make strategy a continuous people process; mobilize strategic change through effective leadership. The chapter then moved on to look at four organizational factors: translating strategy into action; adopting a sequential or a parallel approach; considering strategic timing and abandonment; and, finally, creating a strategic map and implementation structure for the school.

Strategy is an attractive concept, and plans and documentation abound in school. However, the basic questions to be asked are “do they ever get implemented?” and “do they make a difference?” This chapter should be read often as a reminder that implementing a strategy is the key to success and we should not get distracted by more and more elegant strategic designs and documentation and so not spend enough time on implementation and effect. We need to improve the educational opportunities of all our children, and that can only happen if our strategies are implemented.