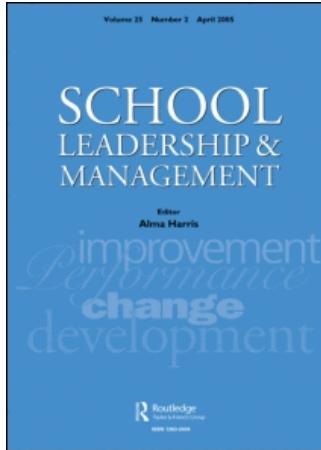


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Rethinking School Planning: a case study of Southlands Community College

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ABSTRACT *This paper examines the school development planning process at Southlands Community College and considers that, while it has been a useful process to date, fundamental rethinking is now necessary. In particular, it advocates the utilisation of the concepts of 'strategic intent' and 'futures thinking' in order to enhance the capacity of self-managing schools to manage in an increasingly turbulent environment. The paper demonstrates, through a case example, how one school is meeting the challenge of developing new approaches to school planning.*

Introduction

Without careful consideration, school development planning can easily be a bureaucratic management strategy that does not affect the lives of teachers and pupils. (Stoll and Fink 1995: 79)

In 1994 after one year of our 3-year development plan, the Senior Management Team sat down to evaluate how effective the plan had been. What had we achieved in the first year? How had it served its purpose in raising student achievement and had it met the requirements of the range of external groups it attempted to facilitate? We then considered what we needed to do to update the plan for the coming year.

It soon became clear that what we had achieved in the year had been reasonable in terms of quantity (we were able to tick off a number of our stated tasks), but less so in qualitative terms. It also became clear that we had completed a lot of tasks that were not mentioned on the original plan. These tasks were in response to a number of enforced changes. What caused us the greatest concern was that we had been taken off-task in a number of important areas and had made little progress towards certain targets. Further evaluation suggested that most staff did not pick up the plan after its completion (partly because it weighed so much) and some felt little real ownership or involvement with its intentions. We also realised that to update the plan we would need to totally re-write it, so much had happened since its inception! We reluctantly had to accept the evidence that, as a meaningful tool to facilitate improvement, our planning model and process were somewhat lacking in effectiveness.

The plan had seemingly served only two useful functions. First, it had been a 1-year action plan to deal with those aspects of the work of the school that were predictable. It was noted that a great deal of additional, reactive work had taken place dealing with less predictable issues and occurrences. A second function had been as a requirement for those external agencies that wanted to feel reassured by the presence of a plan even if it bore little resemblance to the real world.

This scenario may be familiar to colleagues and this article attempts to offer help in providing a practitioner's view of a realistic alternative approach. I intend to describe the planning developments, specifically the adoption of the Davies and Ellison models (1992 and 1997a) within my institution over the last 4 years that have transformed our thinking and our strategic planning and which we have found to offer us a number of advantages. We have recognised the need to find models of planning that facilitate major improvement in student achievement whilst our institution is faced with constant change and high levels of turbulence. As I have described, the traditional approach to planning, based on linear, rational and short-term models has proved to be cumbersome, ineffective and to have a short shelf-life. The need to make effective decisions within a context of the vagaries of political directives, constant changes in resource provision and rapidly evolving technologies demands long-term, robust and yet flexible responses to planning.

I intend to support our belief that the latest Davies and Ellison model (1997a) has offered our institution far greater opportunities to take control of our environment. It has allowed us to free-up the thinking processes and strategic planning capabilities of the majority of our staff. I will also suggest that, from our experiences, the model could prove to be a useful and adaptable tool in a wide variety of self-managing educational organisations.

Our Community College is a non-selective, grant-maintained, inner-city, 11–18, mixed comprehensive school of 1250 students in a London borough. The borough has been described as a 'flagship' for the educational reforms put forward by the last Conservative administration and, as such, represents a particularly turbulent environment. The school is in a highly competitive environment. There are three other grant-maintained secondary schools and a privately funded Technology College. Of these four schools, three are selective by ability and/or aptitude, one school has Technology College status and another has a Language specialism. The resultant effect of this has been to create an environment where the less able students of the borough have little 'choice' as to where they are educated. The three LEA controlled secondary schools consist of an all boys' comprehensive, a Technology College with a very poor reputation and a mixed school. Our Community College is seen as the 'top of the bottom'. We have 60% of our students with reading ages well below their chronological age and 53% on free school meals. We are a multi-ethnic school and have a majority of students from areas of social deprivation. We have been unable to gain Technology College status despite having a sponsor from the top 50 companies in the country.

With such a skewed intake the College has been particularly affected by the constant externally-imposed changes although we recognise that we have had some degree of cushioning against the effects of constant change through the more

generous funding that comes with grant-maintained status. We would argue, however, that in order to meet the needs of our particular students, to recruit and retain staff and to provide and maintain an appropriate learning environment for our students we have needed the extra funding. The College cannot compete with its selective neighbours on examination passes at 5A*–C grades; last year our students gained 21%. We are pleased that 98% of our students gained a qualification at GCSE and the College recently came top in the borough in an NFER value-added survey, demonstrating that our students are out-performing their peers in the selective schools.

Earlier Developments

In 1996 we utilised the Davies and Ellison (1992) model to produce a 3-year development plan. We believed at that time, that the format of 'core' and 'support' areas, supplemented by Strategic Management Papers, would be more accessible and that our middle managers would be more able to work successfully with their staff using the grid layout. In the introduction to the 1996 plan the Headteacher described the Senior Management Team's thinking behind our search for a more appropriate model:

The management of development planning has, over the past 5 years, been a significant part of the work of senior and middle managers. We have recognised the requirement for longer term planning as a framework for managing short-term objectives at both whole and part organisation levels. This has been positive in improving our strategic thinking but burdensome in time and sometimes repetitive. We have also had difficulty in demonstrating in the documentation the strategic thinking which in turn can lead to loss of clarity of management levels of accountability. (Southlands School Development Plan 1996)

Whilst it should be recognised that the production of this plan was immediately prior to an OfSTED inspection and, therefore, it contains statements specifically for their consumption, there are a number of comments that testify to the frustrations experienced through the planning process. There are also insights from the comments made in the plan into the acceptance of responsibility and accountability for action as well as some clues to the headteacher's beliefs with regard to strategic planning that support the Davies and Ellison developed model (1997a):

The documentation needs to be as short and simple as we can get it and be the result of a constant interchange of ideas and information which will create strategic development and action planning which will permit all participant groups to engage ... Middle managers will need to plan strategically within their own area of accountability and in alignment with the whole-college strategic plan. These plans can be short statements of intent. (Southlands School Development Plan 1996)

There were clear indications that, whilst there was recognition that the 1992 model was an improvement on previous practice, there were still concerns as to its

effectiveness. It is interesting, in the light of the new model, that there is mention of 'intent' and the 'constant' nature of the interchange of ideas. This suggests that the rational nature of the planning process was being challenged and that a more responsive and flexible approach was needed.

Why do we Need a New Strategic Planning Model?

Dealing with Turbulence

Boisot (1995: 37) defines turbulence as 'the major transformation in the strategic environment which strategy must deal with'. He argues that this transformation has been accelerating and that organisations have had to learn to deal with greater complexities within their environments. He concludes, using survival as the base for organisational success, that:

In sum, we can think of an organisation enhancing its survival prospects not by seeking out *the* unique strategy or strategic approach that fits its circumstances but by expanding its strategic repertoire. (1995: 45)

We believe that we need to find a model that offers within it such a range of strategic repertoire.

The level of turbulence that the College has experienced over the last few years has, as in most schools, been great. We were initially slow to respond and were constantly placed into a reactive mode of operation. In the future we see the level of turbulence increasing. The 'New Labour' government's initiatives require us to review our status and to go back to working with the LEA; new technologies are appearing by the day. Our budget this year is, through an unfortunate quirk of fate, £300,000 less than last year. We do not know what our future funding will be or what level of autonomy we will retain. The borough is opening a new school, 1 mile from our present site and we have just appointed a new Headteacher for September 1998. These levels of turbulence are not new to schools; what is important is that these, predominantly external, influences are not allowed to deflect us from providing our students with the best education we can offer. As Boisot (1995: 45) concludes, 'this requires that strategies for *reducing* uncertainty be complemented by strategies of *absorbing* it'.

Dealing with Change

Our past experiences have shown that the use of an appropriate strategic planning model can provide greater effectiveness in dealing with such rapid rates of change. We have also learnt that to attempt to deal with such change through an inappropriate inflexible model can lead to delay and lack of flexibility to the detriment of our organisation and, particularly, of our students. The challenge for school leaders is illustrated by Everard and Morris (1996: 215) who wrote that 'as the environment becomes more turbulent, so it becomes more important to develop their (managers'/ leaders') skill in coping with change, and indeed in steering it'.

The approach to planning taken by schools can either stifle improvement or act as an agent for change. Johnson and Scholes (1997) describe 'unfreezing mechanisms' that are necessary in some organisations to overcome traditional routines and approaches.

If resistance to change and organisational inertia are the result of the organisation becoming trapped in its own paradigm and routines, there is a need for an 'unfreezing' of the paradigm. (452)

They go on to state the likely necessity that this 'unfreezing' process will need to be managed/led and the importance of adopting an appropriate strategic planning model.

For example, strategy workshops could be useful ... In such ways, the taken for granted may be questioned and challenged, advocates of new ideas may be provided with a platform, and those resistant to change may be identified. (453)

Achieving Intentions

I have described above the frustration that occurred when strategies outlined in our previous plan failed to come to fruition. We had not taken into account research into strategic planning that demonstrates the difficulties of achieving the original intended outcomes of specific strategies. The following two comments are typical descriptions of the problems we have experienced.

The reason that leakages occur between intention and realization is that the strategic level of the organization cannot act like an all-seeing central planner and that, in the course of a plan's implementation, unanticipated opportunities and threats will emerge which have to be dealt with incrementally in ways not originally foreseen by the strategy. (Boisot 1995: 34)

Managers often make the mistake of assuming that because they have specified a strategy which requires operational changes in work practices, and explained to more junior management what such changes are, the changes will necessarily take place. (Johnson and Scholes 1997: 468)

We have endeavoured to find an effective model for strategic planning that helps us to overcome these difficulties.

The New Approach at Southlands

The leaders of the College believe that the re-conceptualised model (Davies and Ellison 1997a) offers three particular aspects that provide a superior approach to planning in schools.

- (1) The Futures Thinking perspective with a 5–15 year view of the important trends likely to impact on schools, including the use of scenarios, gives a long-term view that will facilitate a more proactive and flexible planning strategy.

- (2) Strategic Intent will strengthen the College's ability to absorb turbulence and deal with unpredictability.
- (3) The focus of reflection on appropriate planning approaches will assist participants in the process to consider more creative and flexible ways forward and to become more able to deal with change.

It is also helpful, in moving people's thinking forward, to have a model that articulates the need for the different levels of planning to be taking place simultaneously. It may be that, in the past, staff have perceived the planning process as an annual, rational cycle rather than as a continuous process operating at all levels simultaneously. They may also have assumed that change stops happening as soon as the current year's plan is written.

In this part of the paper, I reflect on some of the ways in which the College has adopted the new model and some of the responses to the process. I recognise that, as I have had personal responsibility for introducing and describing the model to my colleagues, I may give a somewhat biased view. I have tried to recognise here the views of others within the process and believe that I have presented a fair reflection of their responses as described by them through lengthy discussion and some unstructured interviews. I have also used participant observation and documentary evidence to support my conclusions. Whilst there are questions about the validity and subjectivity of these approaches I hope that the findings and conclusions are seen as adding to the important debate as to how schools, when faced with the turmoil of the next millennium, should tackle their approach to strategic planning.

Understanding the Key Elements of the New Model

The Senior Management Team (SMT) responded positively to the model, though there was some necessary discussion as to the use of the specific terms. Was, for example, a Strategic Intent, a vision statement or a goal? What was the difference between capability-building measures and strategies? Discussion of the nature of 'Intents' and their use in dealing with unpredictable issues and an acceptance that 'capability-building' was a way to facilitate successful outcomes of strategy, helped the team to come to a shared understanding of the language being used. This is a crucial aspect of using any model within an organisation. It may be that the SMT has placed a slightly altered meaning to some of the descriptors in the model. This seems inevitable when translating from a written text. What is more important, however, is that, whilst retaining the spirit of the model, all those involved in its use have a clear and shared understanding of what is meant by the terminology. This requires discussion, careful listening and feedback to ensure that as much as possible there is collective understanding. The time restraints to enable such discussion at the various stages of introduction of a new model to the College were a factor that had to be taken into account.

The team discussed at some length at which point the various stakeholder groups should be involved in the process. It was decided that it was the role of the

SMT to formulate an initial view of the future vision of the school and to consider trends that were likely to affect fundamentally the learning process and operation of schools. It was suggested that this would lead to the formulation of a small number of intents. At this stage the governing body would be brought into the process, followed by our middle managers. A constant difficulty has been the chicken and egg situation where it is necessary to gain the support of the governing body in accepting the vision and direction of the College whilst at the same time not giving staff a *fait accompli* where they perceive that all the decisions have been taken. We believe that the explanation of Futures Thinking and Strategic Intents to the Governing Body actually eased this tension, as there is little prescription as to how to achieve the Intents at this stage. Once accepted by the governors, College staff are able to work on the formulation of strategies as to how to achieve the agreed Intents and any associated targets. It should be mentioned at this stage that the difficulties experienced by members of the Governing Body in understanding the planning process and their role in it require further investigation.

Futures Thinking at the College

We decided that we would look forward 10 years to consider what impacts were likely on the function of the College. Whilst there was discussion and agreement within the team regarding certain future trends, it became clear that individuals envisaged very different futures for education, learning and schools. The agreements were on *what* would make the impact, e.g. technologies, specialist provision, human resource management, political decisions and others suggested by Davies and Ellison (1997b: 20–21). The disagreement arose through *how* the impact would be felt, e.g. students will work more at home during the day in future, because of new technologies or, alternatively, students will not work at home more than at school because of parent-power and the traditional, conservative approach to education in this country.

We felt that the key to dealing with such differing visions of the future was to accept that, where there was reasoned and logical argument to support the views, both had validity. We then decided to utilise the technique of scenario-building to encompass the differing potential futures. The team found this approach useful as it created a situation where everyone had to be analytical of scenarios with which they particularly disagreed as well as those which they were supporting. This critical analysis was seen as a creative process. As one of the team said, 'This approach was new to us and I was initially fairly sceptical of trying to predict the future. The discussions we had, however, developed into acceptable visions of the future and opened up a range of options for us to consider'.

Having developed a view of possible future national and local scenarios, we began to look much more closely at how they would affect our College in our specific context. This was a difficult and salutary experience. The future, through the scenarios we had developed, offered a fairly bleak view on initial examination. If funding is not forthcoming, if recruitment becomes more difficult, if the academic and social quality of our intake continues to fall, etc.; pretty gloomy stuff!

This moment coincided with our running out of time at this particular meeting prior to a parents' evening (how many good ideas have failed to see the light of day through such practical circumstances?) so we left agreeing that all individuals would provide five written Strategic Intents that could be collated and distributed before the next meeting. A member of the team remarked as we left the room that perhaps looking for another job would be a more appropriate use of our time. It was a depressing moment. In hindsight we should probably have realised that the use of scenarios would create some unpalatable views of the future, but the response of the team showed that the process had clearly focused our minds. It was at this point that the strength of the model became particularly apparent. It offered us a means to look to the future as something we could affect if we gave ourselves enough warning of what may lie ahead. To follow Charles Handy's advice:

The future is not inevitable. We can influence it, if we know what we want it to be... . We can and should be in charge of our own destinies in a time of change. (1989: vii)

Strategic Intents for the College

The team met again, having read each member's Strategic Intents which had been circulated. It would be an exaggeration to say that all members of the team were in agreement with our new approach. One particular individual was fairly resistant as he stated, 'In the time we have taken to get this far, we could have written the whole plan for next year'. I believe that the other members of the team recognised that the discussions to this point were not only necessary but had been far more creative and valuable in pointing out the necessary changes we needed to make. For example, the 'Intents' put forward independently by the team were not identical, but they were surprisingly similar. After a short meeting, we agreed the following five Strategic Intents for the College. I offer brief explanation as to their meaning to us as an organisation.

Strategic Intents

- (1) To be in control of our destiny as an organisation.

A strong desire, not only to survive, but to retain as much control as possible. We know our children better than others and can provide more appropriately for their needs. We will need to find new sources of funding.

- (2) To provide an appropriate curriculum for our students.

By appropriate we mean that, for some of our students, our curriculum must become more relevant, radical in approach, taught in different time slots, in new ways and effectively utilising new technologies.

- (3) For our students to achieve levels of literacy, numerary and IT fluency equal to their potential.

With the number of students with poor levels in these areas, this will require us to take further radical whole-college approaches to raising standards in these areas.

- (4) To raise student levels of maturation and social maturity.

We need to develop more positive behaviour strategies, student responsibilities and individual and group support programmes. Much work will need to be done on an inter-agency basis.

- (5) To create an organisation that constantly works to develop the capabilities of all staff and students.

Schools are about people and their qualities. We need to recruit, retain and train our staff and recognise the skills and attributes our students have and help them to develop them.

Capability-building Measures

Once we had agreed the Strategic Intentions for the College, it proved difficult to envisage how we would make some of them happen. An example would be our desire 'to be in control of our destiny as an organisation'. What should we actually do to make this happen?

We believe that control is closely associated to resources. What can we do to facilitate our having greater control of our resources. We could, for example, pursue a range of ways to raise funds. More money = more control. Alternatively, we decided that we would also need to reduce our revenue expenditure, leaving us with more accessible resources to utilise on specific projects. To this end the College has gone through a restructure of staffing, reducing the shadow structure to an absolute minimum in terms of statutory points. This was a capability-building measure to facilitate our maintaining greater control of our resources and hence our destiny.

This approach creates a new mind-set that means that those responsible for the operational effectiveness of strategy are aware that it is possible to take interim and short-term actions that can help produce a climate that enables longer-term achievement of goals.

Introduction to our Middle Managers

This process was more difficult, as it is easy to forget that, having discussed concepts and language over a period of time, one has become familiar with the material and there is a need to allow others to build the same familiarity and understanding. The model and the role of the middle manager in the planning process was dealt with in one half of a meeting. It is testament to our middle managers and to the model that curricular areas have been able to move the process forward and we have received the first drafts of their views and ideas on whole-college and area strategies. It is, however, too soon to say how the staff feel about the process or to measure the effectiveness of the finalised planning strategies.

Conclusions

The Headteacher has been specific about the benefits of the model:

This model of Strategic Planning has given the College the flexible yet robust approach to planning that we were missing. Whilst we have yet to see the outcomes of the process, we have moved forward in our particular wish to be more proactive and to open the thinking of staff to new and exciting strategies.

In responses from members of the SMT, there is general agreement that the model is the best we have used to date and we reached the following conclusions:

- (1) The Futures Thinking perspective offers a clearer view of the options open to the school and enables planning decisions to be taken that can provide some control, or at least the hope of such, over future events.
- (2) The use of Strategic Intents provides some degree of clarity. They can offer visions of the future which are unaffected by turbulence.
- (3) Within the SMT we have developed our understanding of strategic planning and increased the repertoire of strategic responses available to us.
- (4) There is a need to ensure a shared understanding of the terms used by everyone in the institution.
- (5) We believe, through our discussions with staff about future scenarios and intents, that the model requires all participants to think in different ways about how and why we do things. This can bring greater creativity to the planning process.
- (6) The processes utilised when adopting any model are extremely important and affect the outcome of any strategic approach.
- (7) Schools should be aware that longer term planning may involve painful processes.
- (8) The model offers value to self-managing schools in other contexts because of the flexibility and breadth of approach.

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