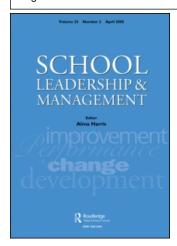
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Establishing a Planning Framework for Rhyddings School for the Year 2000 and Beyond

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ABSTRACT This paper offers a case study of Rhyddings School as it rethinks its approach to school planning. It provides a critique of existing practice before outlining and developing a new framework for planning in the school. In evaluating a new model of planning, it provides a set of 'implications for schools' as a means of reviewing key aspects of the new model.

School Context

Rhyddings is an 11–16 comprehensive school (1050 pupils) in a small former textile town in east Lancashire. It is a 'good school' according to the Office for Standards in Education (OfSTED) inspection of May 1995 and shares the same concerns as many other schools throughout the country—trying to raise pupil attainment, attempting to keep pace with developments in information communication technology, improving basic skills and working within a tightly constrained budget. One of the Key Issues identified by the inspectors was the need to 'build on the current School Development Plan (SDP) to establish a longer term view ...' a point that, at the time, I did not altogether agree with since our document contained a diagrammatic summary of the school's priorities for the next 2 years in addition to the detailed plan for 1995–96.

Our SDP document broadly followed the guidelines given in the then current literature (e.g. Davies & Ellison 1992) that it should afford an holistic view incorporating core activities (curriculum, human resources, pupil welfare and pastoral care) and support elements (physical resources, pupil roll and marketing, management structures and approaches, and financial resources). The school's OfSTED Action Plan, as required, focused on the Key Issues and included detailed plans for each of the component parts of the measures we adopted to address each broad area. In subsequent years the major areas for development have remained the same and, although the focus has shifted, reflecting progress made and reformulation of new targets within specific issues, we have chosen to concentrate on one or two as the major whole school priorities. The most important area has been raising pupil attainment, particularly at Key Stage 4. Our preferred means of communication has been through the usual meetings cycle including whole staff meetings, giving

everyone the opportunity to be actively involved, and producing documentation to summarise key points and agreed actions as necessary rather than producing a full school development plan. Other plans exist but they are largely based on maintenance or small scale developments and are not held centrally. Critics might say that we do not currently have a school development plan but I would suggest that most, if not all staff, have a better knowledge and understanding of what the key priorities for whole school development are now, and have been over the last three years, than when we had a freshly minted, full SDP document.

Critique of Existing Practice

The problem with school development plans is that they tend to become focused on a one year timescale, despite our best efforts to include medium and long-term goals. The process of putting together the SDP is time consuming and everyone reminds each other at crucial times that the 'process is more important than the product'. This means that the product very soon passes its sell-by date in terms of indicating an overall direction in which the school wishes to progress and providing information relating to whole school priorities. It is also an unwieldy document containing a plethora of detail which is useful for the purpose of accountability but actually tends to hide the major developmental issues in amongst those which, though important, are focused on maintenance rather than innovation. The school development plan, in effect, is largely a misnomer. It can fulfil a useful purpose as a means of reference for those who wish to find out what else is going on in school other than those issues in which they have a direct involvement. It provides recognition for those with specific responsibilities but soon becomes like a theatre programme for a play which has ended its run—interesting but not very useful.

The key concepts in school development planning are surely 'to plan' and 'to develop'. According to Chambers Concise Dictionary (1996) a plan means 'a figure or representation of anything projected on a plane or flat surface' whilst to develop is defined as 'to advance through successive stages to a higher, more complex, or more fully grown state'. This is at the very centre of the problem. At the heart of true development planning is change—it does not take place on a flat surface; it is complex, unpredictable and multi-dimensional. The simplification of such complex forces into successive stages of planned implementation is the traditional model of development planning and, for the purpose of accountability, it will undoubtedly continue to be used. However, such an approach focuses on minutiae and engenders a leadership culture which encourages dependency by prescription; it does not empower staff at whatever level to consider alternatives and to develop independent solutions to difficult longer-term problems. If we are to concentrate on how to reach this 'higher, more complex state', a model which regards the process as linear, highly predictable and two dimensional is inadequate.

New Framework for Planning

The new Davies and Ellison model provides a closer approximation to the realities of school life, building on the previous model but incorporating several new

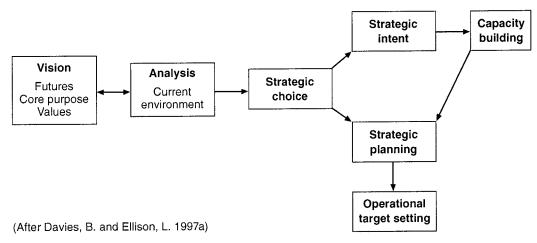


FIG. 1. A new planning framework: strategic direction.

elements; futures thinking and the concept of strategic intent are, in my opinion, the most important. The model takes account of the unpredictable nature of the environment in which we operate and provides a means of signposting the strategic direction of the school. I will now take the reader through my interpretation of the model (see Figure 1) as it has been applied at Rhyddings School.

Vision

The term vision is not new but the inclusion of futures thinking introduces a different dimension and helps push the timescale beyond the realms of a 'normal' school development plan. In the new framework vision incorporates not only futures thinking but also an amalgamation of values and expectations which together give a picture of the school we aspire to create. Traditionally, vision is ascribed to an heroic leader who by sheer power of oratory inspires staff and students alike to respond to her/his exhortations, creating a unity of purpose in pursuit of a noble cause. For the majority of us, mere mortals, the reality is somewhat different.

Vision emerges from, more than it precedes, action ... Vision comes later because the process of merging personal and shared visions takes time. (Fullan 1993: p. 28)

Effective communication is vital to the successful translation of vision into action but is it realistic to expect that everything goes according to the letter of the plan? The individual, emotional and behavioural dimensions of change come into play here. What Hargreaves et al. (1997: 11) include as the 'passion frame' in their seven change frames: 'is about feelings—understanding other people's, creating environments that generate positive feelings of your own, and knowing how to avoid and deal with negative ones'.

The planned strategies are re-cycled through the filters of our perceptions, insights and motivations before they emerge as our own and the shaping and

re-shaping of personal vision is a long and potentially difficult process. It involves formal and informal discussions at various levels within the school and, in theory at least, should lead to an increased chance of successful implementation. The success of this process cannot be overstated because: 'if the operational aspects of the organisation are not in line with strategy, then no matter how well considered the strategy is, it will not succeed (Johnson & Scholes 1997: 9).

Traditional school development planning aims for programmed implementation, tightly controlled steps towards agreed goals, despite the fact that we know that the need for such micro-management varies across the organisation and, in some cases, can actually stifle more creative thinking. What actually tends to happen is that each individual or grouping interprets the message in a slightly different way, tailoring it to suit personal preferences, strengths and micro-political affiliations and this tendency is exaggerated when the rate of change is rapid and the going gets tough.

What Berman (1980) calls 'adaptive implementation' is the way things really get done in a large secondary school but there is a danger that, under such turbulent conditions, the plan quickly becomes out-dated. Departments stagnate or develop their own direction, which may or may not align with the overall strategy. The ultimate stage in this process is 'intrapreneurship' (Pinchot 1985) where each department becomes independent of the centre and of each other so that:

... threats and opportunities emerge that have to be dealt with locally, ... with little or no understanding of how they may affect the organization as a whole, and possibly no great concern either. (Boisot 1995: 43)

The challenge is how to ensure that the overall strategic direction remains clear, no matter how turbulent the environment becomes.

Futures Thinking

Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation.... Within a few short decades society rearranges itself ... its world view; its basic values; its social and political structures.... We are currently living through such a transformation. (Drucker 1993: 1)

We need to have an awareness of the external environment—economic megatrends, social trends and government proposals—and search for strategic fit between the school and the environment in which it operates. It is difficult to predict exactly what sort of educational experience learners will have over the next 10 to 15 years. However, some of the sign posts are in place: the White Paper including plans for a National Grid for Learning, the notion of learning for life and the introduction of Education Development Plans for LEAs by 1999 give us an indication of the government's thinking and it seems clear that our priorities for development must reside within a wider strategic framework. We need to take account of these trends and others when we start to build the vision of our school in the twenty first century based not just on competence in information communication technology but on shared values to counter-balance the emphasis on economic functionalism.

In order to make changes which will have a significant impact, we need to adopt radically different approaches to considering the future. How can we do things differently? Most considerations of change begin from where we are now, an approach which is sensible in the short-term, foreseeable future but one which encourages incremental creep rather than transformational change. However, there is a dilemma in trying to predict what the future will be like for the pupils in our school; looking ahead 5-15 years rather than 1-3 years increases the uncertainty and could encourage a return to safe incrementalism. An alternative is to build scenarios of what the school might look like in the twenty first century; to project a future desired state, to dream dreams unfettered by the constraints of current realities. What could be dismissed as unrealistic now could easily become achievable over a fifteen year timescale. However, we cannot plan in any detail over 10-15 years; the only certainty is that things will continue to change rapidly through what Boisot (1995) calls 'turbulence', which makes planning problematic at best.

Strategic Analysis

The traditional approach is to attempt to plan everything in detail, starting from 'where are we now, where do we want to go to, how will we get there?' The new framework has similar components but asks us once again to look ahead even when considering the present reality.

Together consideration of the environment, strategic capability, expectations and purposes within the cultural and political framework of the organisation provides a basis for strategic analysis. Such an understanding must take the future into account. (Johnson & Scholes, 1997: 20)

To enable us to make sense of the complexity of activities, a range of analytical tools can be employed, e.g. SWOT analysis, questionnaire surveys, Kawasaki matrix, Force Field Analysis (see Davies & Ellison 1997b). These have a significant role to play in that they take account of the views of the participants including the major stakeholders—pupils, staff, employers, governors and the community—and therefore they are more likely to be supportive and active in the change process. However, there are drawbacks; the need to be sensitive to the way in which criticism, whether explicit or implied may be received, an awareness of the potential to bruise personal feelings and the need to secure future compliance can lead to a soft focus and the avoidance of the really difficult issues. Traditionally, as a result of these factors, situational analysis often tends to be concentrated on whole school issues rather than at the departmental level of curriculum delivery. We need to do both. For the purposes of consultation with a view to securing future commitment to change, a questionnaire survey is very useful whilst a harder-edged, more tightly focused analysis can be carried out using the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) Matrix (see Davies & Ellison 1997b).

The questionnaire survey has the advantage that it can be used with all staff and other stakeholders. It can be highly structured, identifying aspects of the school which are in need of review and eliciting a personal opinion as to whether each aspect could be classified as a strength, satisfactory performer or a weakness. The opportunity to be more specific is usually provided on the reverse of the questionnaire sheet with respondents being given a free choice of issues to choose their key priorities over the short- medium- and long-term plus the space to explain the problem in more detail and suggest ways forward within the timescale. This type of questionnaire does not put the spotlight on individual subject areas. The underlying idea is to give a sense of ownership to the process of identifying whole school priorities to which others can then be added from SMT, other stakeholders and external sources to produce a summary of the major areas for development. Subject developments should nest within these priorities, answering the question 'what is your faculty/subject doing to contribute to these whole school issues?'

The BCG Matrix can also be used for whole school aspects but in my view is best employed at the level of individual subject areas. Just by looking at the quadrant labels (cash cows, stars, problem child and dogs) the potential for divisiveness and significant upset are apparent if it were to be used in the wrong way or with the wrong people. For those reasons alone it might be tempting to reject its applicability to an educational context, particularly for an 11–16 school. However, once 'translated' from its original business jargon, it stimulates thinking in a new, hard-edged way including consideration of financial indicators. For example the link between examination results and the cost of curriculum provision in individual subjects and the cost of investment in new courses can be compared to the output as measured by student numbers and equivalent funding. The use of such a technique and the information it generates is a matter requiring tact and diplomacy so its use outside the confines of the senior management team is one best left to the individual school; after all they know their governors and staff best.

Resource availability is one of the most important factors in determining whether plans remain 'wishful thinking' or proceed towards implementation. The stricture to operate 'within the budget' and the development over the last few years of a 'bid culture' both exacerbate the tendency towards short-term and disjointed development. Yes, we must stay within budget limits but we need to develop not short-term strategic fit (in the sense of only matching opportunities with resources when they are available) but the ability to plan longer-term, to envisage a scenario when such resources will become available and make it happen. This is a fundamental difference in approach; the first concentrates on 'trimming ambitions to match available resources' while, in the second, the emphasis is on 'leveraging resources to reach seemingly unattainable goals' (Hamel & Prahalad 1989: 65).

The use of such a variety of techniques enables us to explore the situation anew, so that we build up: 'the richest possible picture of the situation rather than begin by focusing on the possible solutions' (Garrett 1997: 106).

The techniques also provide a means of addressing our most difficult problems and increase our chances of developing more creative solutions. The extent of the mismatch between the present reality and the desired future is the size of the strategic problem. Assessing the magnitude of the changes required and the ability of the school to affect them is an important part of strategic analysis. Crucial questions need to be asked. Is the current strategy capable of dealing with the changes taking place in the school's environment? Will it deliver the results expected by influential stakeholders? If so, how? If not, why not?

Strategic Choice

Once our rich tapestry provided by our strategic analysis is woven, it presents us with a number of options. Having ascertained which options are going to be pursued it is possible to divide the issues into two broad categories, ones which we know about and can therefore proceed to plan and others about which the present situation is not clear. The former issues would follow the strategic planning route akin to the traditional school development plan. The latter focus on matters where no definable strategy is immediately discernible, about which we currently lack sufficient knowledge, expertise or finance to make them achievable in the immediate future and therefore need to build capability. What is needed in this context is the establishment of a strategic intent.

Strategic Intent

Strategic intent describes a process of coping with turbulence through a direct, intuitive understanding, emanating from the top of a firm and guiding its efforts. (Boisot 1995: 44)

In the past these longer-term developments have tended to reside in mission statements or in the informal planning backwaters of the Headteacher's mind rather than in the mainstream consciousness of the majority of staff and other stakeholders. Through the mechanism of the 'strategic intent', the new framework provides a means to communicate these ideas and ideals in a more explicit format. The timescale covers the medium-term, looking ahead perhaps 3–5 years, within which part of the time schools will operate in a predictable environment, part of the time not. Reflecting this situation schools should be working to develop a small number of strategic intents which should be more concrete and more tightly focused than the mission statement. These are the areas which we currently cannot deliver; the ones in which the school needs to develop its knowledge and expertise or accumulate sufficient resources—what Davies and Ellison (1997a) call 'building capability'.

The further ahead we look the more uncertain the predictions become—and yet there are 'beacons' which we can all identify and to which we are attracted no matter what the circumstances. For example: to make our school the first choice for students in our area; to develop our school as a learning community; to develop a success culture within our school; to improve the quality of the learning environment—are all statements of intent, things we aspire to achieve and which would, I hope, attract substantial support from staff, parents, students and governors. What exactly such 'intents' mean will differ from one school to another and the development of a list of bullet points to identify component parts is a task requiring

consultation and negotiation. Should the resources become available or the level of expertise become sufficiently developed within this timescale we can then go on to the strategic planning stage, to add detail to the bullet points; if not we would need to reformulate the strategic intent. At this stage, how we are going to get there is not clear but the strategic intent provides clarity about the direction. This is not about tightly controlled planning rather, making a virtue of necessity, 'top management is specific about the ends ... but less prescriptive about the means' (Hamel & Prahalad 1989: 67).

Perhaps the most important reason for developing strategic intents is to provide reference points for the school's medium- and long-term strategic direction. Boisot (1995: 37) believes that strategic intents can be used in an organisation to: 'keep the behaviour of its employees aligned with a common purpose when it decentralises in response to turbulence'.

For our school, the simplicity of strategic intent 'headlines' would ensure that the key areas of focus and the overall strategic direction are clear to all staff so that the formulation of departmental plans at implementation level would always 'nest' within the corporate strategy of the whole school. The longer the timescale or the more unpredictable the environment, the greater the need to simplify the message so that the school builds a few strategic intents' based on the values, aims and ambitions of the school which all staff can articulate and to which they can align themselves' (Davies & Ellison 1997a: 14).

This makes perfect sense, acknowledging the reality of adaptive implementation whilst avoiding the degeneration into intrapreneurship.

Operational Target-setting

We are less knowledgeable about school targets than those for individual pupils. However, from April 1999 whole school target-setting will become mandatory for all schools. If the early indicators, e.g. in the recently distributed PANDA (Performance and Assessment Data) documents are a true reflection of the scope of these targets then the focus will be solely on pupil attainment at the end of each Key Stage. In the quest to raise standards it is surely correct that the main focus should be on measurable pupil outcomes but it is equally important that a single indicator does not become the only criterion by which a school is judged.

The government's targets are reductionist, equating quality with performance in tests and seemingly ignoring any other performance indicators—for us simply to follow this lead is to ignore many of the values upon which the school is built and upon which the future well-being of our society depends. In order to ensure that schools do not simply become producers of data to allow international comparison of educational and economic indicators, targets should also be set for the intangibles. The task for each school is to develop sophisticated performance indicators against each point of its mission statement or strategic intents as conditions allow more detailed planning to take place. For example, being a 'caring community' leads on to consideration of the key components of what we mean by this statement and to setting targets for improvement in such areas as bullying, attendance and parental

involvement. The new model encourages a wider review including setting targets related to teaching quality, budget setting, teaching & learning styles and planning, not just pupil achievement. This will necessitate developing a target-setting culture, focused on outcomes, which includes effective monitoring and review as an integral and essential element in the overall process. In effect, this level of strategy replicates the traditional development plan—it is detailed, step-by-step (at least in terms of the mandatory targets), and fulfils the requirement for accountability.

The timescale for targets is short-term, 1 to 3 years, and there appears to be a potential tension between conflicting forces in the environment. On the one hand, the focus on pupil attainment as the only measure of how good a school is will surely lead to a perpetuation of a narrow, incremental, departmentalised view. On the other, there is a need for us to look beyond the present, to establish some means of constructing:

... a coherent sense of purpose that neither rests on the fruitless pursuit of whole-school vision or identity, nor reverts to traditionally balkanised patterns of departmental conflict or indifference. (Hargreaves 1994: 236)

The Davies and Ellison model allows these apparently opposing forces to co-exist within a coherent framework which provides a clear sense of direction, not only at the temporal extremes (through annual targets or through the mission statement) but also in the medium-term by building strategic intents.

Implications for Schools

There are numerous implications for us, and for other schools, in implementing the Davies and Ellison model. We need to:

- incorporate futures thinking to inform our long-term aspirations to counter the pressure to meet annual pupil performance targets and budget limits which constrain our vision and encourage incremental change;
- build a small number of strategic intents to provide clear indications of overall direction in the medium-term so that all staff are aware of the major priorities towards which the school is working;
- develop a target-setting culture which includes consideration of the intangibles, not just pupil attainment;
- change the way that strategic problems are considered to develop an integrated approach. Some Heads of Faculty will face a major shift from their traditional role of subject champion to being able to work as part of a team capable of taking on a whole school perspective to generate imaginative solutions. This may entail re-structuring; and
- acknowledge and understand the individual and personal dimensions of change and the complexity of the process.

For the senior management team it means:

Developing faith in the organisation's ability to deliver on tough goals, motivating it to do so, focusing its attention long enough to internalise new

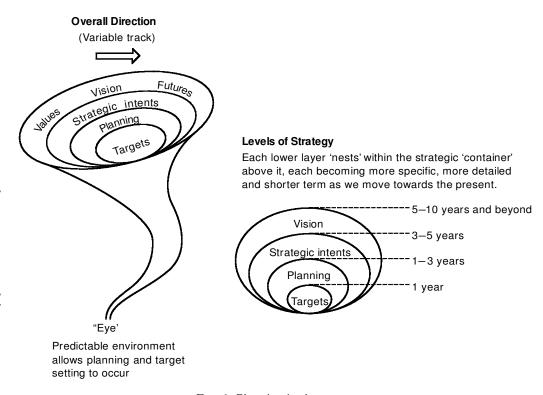


FIG. 2. Planning in the vortex.

capabilities—this is the real challenge for top management. (Hamel & Prahalad 1989: 76).

Conclusion

In a rapidly changing world the new framework provides a means of navigating through the turbulence by developing strategic intent 'beacons' giving both direction and common purpose to our endeavours. If I were to re-model the paradigm, there are two major aspects to which I would give more emphasis: Boisot's concept of turbulence; and the concept of 'nesting' with regard to the levels of strategy and their relationship to one another (Figure 2).

Following Boisot's representation of rapid change as turbulence, I feel that the analogy can be stretched to include vortices, atmospheric systems varying in intensity from depressions through to hurricanes. At their centre is an area of low pressure, in the case of the hurricane an eye, where conditions are calm—a predictable environment and therefore amenable to planning—surrounded by a rotating system of winds accompanied by weather fronts, heavy rain and atmospheric turbulence. This environment is more complex than mere turbulence but the possibilities for comparison with experiences of change, particularly at the individual, personal level seem clear—with even the possibility of using the Beaufort Scale as an indicator of the magnitude of change. All these weather systems follow broad

tracks, e.g. depressions affecting the British Isles originate in the Atlantic and generally move from west to east across the country, but are subject to individual variations in direction, especially in the case of hurricanes, and have the capacity for smaller scale vortices to 'break off' from the main system. If we imagine our own position, whether as an organisation or an individual, as somewhere within this change vortex we can describe the conditions affecting us and our capacity to cope with them.

- If the eye at the centre represents the calm, predictable environment then this is the time when we can plan and set targets—1 to 3 years maximum.
- As we move outwards the level of disturbance becomes greater (higher wind speeds, increasing cloud cover, heavier rainfall and the greater risk of associated weather phenomena such as hail, thunder and lightning), covering not only the horizontal dimension but also large scale vertical exchanges. In our change vortex this complexity can be reflected in the impact of external, imposed or even desired changes affecting us within the workplace and as an individual person with a life outside the organisation. From the organisation's point of view the unpredictability of this environment needs the 'beacons' of a small number of strategic intents to indicate the overall direction and to secure the alignment of the majority of the workforce, looking ahead perhaps 5 years.
- Beyond this, 5 to 10 years on and beyond, we enter into the realms of vision, values and futures thinking, the distant shore or utopia about which we may dream but have a hazy knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important that each level of strategy nests within the strategic 'container' above it, like Russian dolls, so that the dreams become more concrete, more specific and more detailed as we move from vision towards target-setting, from longer to shorter timescale.

The difference may be that in atmospheric systems the vortex passes over us, we are static observers, but in the change vortex as time passes we move with the vortex so that although we have moved along our variable track towards our distant vision we are still surrounded by uncertainty and an unpredictable environment.

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