Strategic planning and leadership

Malcolm Payne

Payne, M. (2009) 'Strategic planning and leadership'. in Adams, R., Dominelli, L., and Payne, M. (eds) *Practising Social Work in a Complex World*, London, Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 183-184.

What is leadership?

Leadership and developing leadership skills have been part of human civilisation from ancient times (Avery, 2004). Many people have a concept of leadership, such as the football team manager, who has an understanding of the opposition and how to organise the players on the field to win, even though he is not playing himself. Alternatively, we can think of a film director, with an idea of the overall result, directing actors and technical staff in using their special skills, which the director may not have. General ideas about leadership, therefore, involve a strong personality, an ability to have an overall conception of objectives, and to achieve compliance with their direction from people with a wide range of skills that the leader does not necessarily share. You can see, then, how leadership is linked to strategy, because an important component of leadership is the capacity to imagine and consistently pursue an overall aim.

Disentangling these ideas, writers on leadership have identified a number of facets of leadership, which are closely connected with the capacity to achieve strategic thinking and management. This account is based on the analyses of Avery (2004) and Northouse (2007).

The traditional approach has been to focus on the characteristics of the leader. These include traits or characteristics, skills deriving from these characteristics, the style of management that emerges from traits and skills, and the ability to shift that style according to the situation the leader faces. Five sets of traits are most important:

- neuroticism, a tendency to be vulnerable and hostile
- extraversion, a tendency to be sociable, assertive and energetic
- openness, a tendency to be creative, insightful and curious
- agreeable, accepting, trusting and nurturing
- conscientious, thorough, organised, decisive and dependable.

Skills, deriving from these traits, connect up knowledge about the situation, derived from training or analysis of the situation that the leader is facing, with generic skills in problem-solving and social judgement. Leadership style balances concern for people with concern for the tasks to be achieved. Situational and contingency ideas focus on how leaders change their approach between delegating, supporting, coaching and directing others. They shift their behaviour to define goals, clarify the path to the goals, and remove obstacles.

Transactional approaches to leadership focus on the interaction between leaders and followers, suggesting that the characteristics and situation of both are important. The aim is to develop a partnership between leaders and followers, defining roles, influencing each other's judgements by constant interaction and identifying people with an interest in aims and building relationships with them.

Visionary or transformational leadership involves setting a strong role model of competence in the technical tasks, articulating goals and influencing others to follow them, clear communication about expectations and a strong demand for achievement.

This enables followers to depend on and accept the objectives expressed in the modelling of the leader.

Organic views of leadership are a more recent development, and they recognise that within small-scale and expert organisations or teams, it may be more important for people working together to explore and seek to make sense of the complex environments in which they work. Leadership may change for different tasks, or may emerge from the working process, rather than coming from formal appointment. The process of leadership is about establishing shared values and agreeing appropriate processes to achieve the agreed goals.

One of the important issues for leaders is the authority and power they exercise, where it comes from and how it fits with the work being undertaken. In organic situations, for example, leadership will often come from expertise in the issue a team or organisation is dealing with. In a continuing public service, complying with legal and regulatory requirements, formal authority in a line management system and the confidence of senior managers may be more important than specific expertise in the work being done.

Leaders may focus on internal management or the staff and services they are responsible for or seek also to extend their involvement into the wider organisation or community and policy networks. Middleton (2007), an experienced voluntary sector manager, argues in her book – based on interviews with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector managers – that it is easy and feels safe for managers to limit themselves to the areas within the organisation where they have authority. However, to achieve leadership in change, managers need to extend their activities into the wider organisation or community, where they have less authority, but may be able to achieve relationships that will make wider change possible. This analysis suggests that wider involvements and consultations are important in achieving change and development in a creative and forward-looking way. Also, a focus on the present staff and activities may not be a good preparation for strategic management in a situation where change and development is required.

Continuity and change

Much strategic thinking focuses on change and development in organisations, but it is equally possible to be strategic about managing continuity. However, focusing a strategy on continuity is potentially easier than change because you can see and analyse the present situation, while change requires a more conceptual grasp of something you cannot see and so contains more uncertainties. In any case, choosing between change and continuity is often not a possibility; instead you may be able to retain some aspects of an organisation or a practice, and will have to change others. A focus on continuity would emphasise a quality management agenda, doing the job better every day, achieving quality targets and constant steps in improvement, rather than restructuring the organisation or identifying and planning for different aims.