



Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University

A JOINT INITIATIVE OF
THE HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
AND HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL

PEL-011
JUNE 29, 2004

STACEY CHILDRESS

Note on Strategy in Public Education

What is Strategy?

Strategy is the set of actions an organization chooses to pursue in order to achieve its objectives. These deliberate actions are puzzle pieces that fit together to create a clear picture of how the people, activities, and resources of an organization can work effectively to accomplish a collective purpose. If these pieces are organized and communicated well (in other words, if they are coherent), the people doing the work understand more clearly how their efforts contribute to the overall purpose of the enterprise. Strategy is about choosing – choosing what to do, and just as importantly, choosing what *not* to do. Good ideas and worthwhile activities almost always outweigh the resources available to pursue them. By choosing a coherent set of actions that together are most likely to lead to desired results, an organization can put its scarce resources to work more effectively, and accomplish the objectives it sets out to achieve.

When an organization's strategy is either undefined or unclear to the people responsible for implementation and execution, good things might still happen, but the full potential to accomplish important goals and objectives goes unrealized. People are very busy – in fact, they have more to do than they could possibly get done; projects are launched one after the other, often moving on related, yet disconnected tracks; programs are launched with fanfare and enthusiasm, and layered on top of existing programs that are not particularly effective and should have been stopped long ago. In the midst of this busyness, people ask themselves and each other, "What are we trying to do here, anyway?" Strategy helps people answer this question by providing a sense of purpose, direction, and clarity to their work, and by connecting it directly to the inspiring mission of the organization. When well defined and communicated, strategy serves as a bridge between aspiration and implementation.

Strategy across Sectors

In a for-profit company, the primary objective is usually profitability, and strategy is how the organization aims to achieve this objective consistently over time. For example, Southwest Airlines has consistently been the only profitable company in the U.S. airline industry for many years. They relentlessly pursue a low cost, no frills strategy in targeted customer segments and geographic

Stacey Childress, Executive Director of the Social Enterprise Initiative at Harvard Business School, prepared this note as the basis for class discussion. This note may be used in conjunction with "Note on the PELP Coherence Framework", PELP 04-010.

Copyright © 2004 Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University. To request permission to reproduce materials, call 617-495-6421, or write to PELP, 34 Loeb House, Harvard Business School, Boston, MA, 02163. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, used in a spreadsheet, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the permission of the Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University.

markets. The people at Southwest understand the strategy, evaluate all of the company's activities based on their fit with it, and execute superbly.

In public school districts, the objectives can be less clear. Districts face competing priorities and demands from multiple stakeholders at the local, state, and federal level; and, as designated producers of a public good in a particular geographic area, districts cannot choose to serve some customers and not others. Increasingly though, within these constraints, school district leadership teams are developing mission statements that target increased performance for *all* students as their primary objective. In such school systems, strategy is the broad set of coherent actions the people in the district will take to meet the objective of raising student performance. Although some differences exist, effective strategy has a number of characteristics in organizations across the business, nonprofit, and education sectors. Evaluating an existing or emerging strategy based on these characteristics can be a useful exercise. A well-crafted strategy:

- **Connects to purpose** – people responsible for executing the actions chosen by the organization can readily see a link to the mission and objectives in their work
- **Provides focus** – people at all levels understand who their “customers” are, what service they are providing to them, and why
- **Guides choices** – people throughout the organization can make better choices between possible activities, projects, and programs by assessing their fit with the strategy
- **Illuminates relationships** – people understand how their actions are related to the actions of others in the organization, and are able to recognize and take advantage of linkages and interdependencies to accomplish objectives
- **Defines measurement parameters** – people can work together to identify measures that are focused on the organizational learning necessary for continuous improvement of activities related to the strategy, and create and track indicators of performance relevant to successful execution of the strategy
- **Addresses the external environment** – people are focused on the work of the organization, but understand how it links to the external context and the expectations of stakeholders
- **Allows for adaptation**– leaders in the organization are able to adapt the strategy as the organization learns about the effectiveness of activities through implementation and monitoring, and/or in response to changes in the external environment

Theory of Action: Connecting Strategy to Mission

Articulating an explicit theory of action to link strategy to mission can be a useful first step in strategy formulation.¹ In this context, a theory of action represents the organization's collective belief about the causal relationships between certain actions and desired outcomes. Some find it useful to think of a theory of action as an “if...then...” statement, or a series of such statements.

¹ The term “theory of action” in this note is adapted from the work of Professor Chris Argyris of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is similar to the concept of “theory of change” currently popular in nonprofit strategy and management.

In order to achieve their mission of increasing educational outcomes for all students, leaders in public schools districts are increasingly developing theories of action focused on improving the instructional core. The instructional core is the relationship between teachers and students in the presence of content. In focusing on this relationship as the basis of increased student achievement, school districts target their improvement efforts on providing capacity and support to the activities in the instructional core.² For example, a number of districts that are heavily focused on professional development for teachers articulate their theory of action as: *“The most direct way to increase student learning is to improve teachers’ instructional practice. Therefore, if all teachers improve their instructional practice, then we will accomplish high levels of achievement for all students.”*

This theory of action can focus strategy development by narrowing the range of choices to those actions that people in the district believe have the highest likelihood of increasing achievement levels for all students; namely, decisions that focus resources (people, financial and non-financial) on those activities aimed at improving the individual practice of all teachers throughout the district. A strategy statement based on the above theory of action might be, *“In order to achieve high levels of performance for all students, we will improve teacher practice through targeted professional development, improved supervision, increased support for instruction, and district-wide accountability for results. While this focus will be district-wide, we will provide additional resources and support in this area to our lowest performing schools.”*

Using this approach, a more precise definition of strategy is the broad set of actions a district takes to provide capacity and support to the instructional core with the objective of raising student performance. Although concise, the example strategy statement above exhibits a number of the characteristics of effective strategy mentioned earlier in this note. The strategy references the district’s educational mission and objective; outlines a related set of specific, yet broad actions focused on providing support and capacity to the instructional core; and specifies particular areas of focus (teacher practice and low performing schools). This example represents but one approach to improving student achievement; a district’s theory of action and strategy could be quite different from the examples above and still be effective in raising educational outcomes.

Conclusion

A leadership team’s role is to explore the effectiveness of different approaches to strengthening the instructional core, adopt a theory of action that matches their own district’s mission, context, and beliefs, and develop a strategy that is consistent with that theory. Then, the challenge is to communicate the strategy clearly and provide people in the organization with the knowledge, skills, resources, and organizational support they need to deliver on the mission and objectives. By putting these pieces together the district begins to create an environment in which people are better able to execute at high levels in their efforts to increase the educational outcomes of all students.

² This conceptualization of the “instructional core” is articulated by Professor Richard F. Elmore of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and is based on the work of education scholar David Hawkins.

Bibliography

- Argyris, C. and Schön, D. 1974. *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bradach, Jeffrey 2004. "Moving from Theory to Practice in Nonprofit Organizations." (January 21, 2004 presentation at Harvard Business School).
- Campbell, Andrew, and Alexander, Marcus. 1997. "What's Wrong with Strategy?" *Harvard Business Review* (November-December), pp. 2-8.
- Chandler, Alfred D. Jr. 1990. *Strategy and Structure: Chapters in the History of the American Industrial Enterprise*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Christensen, Clayton M. 1997. "Making Strategy: Learning by Doing." *Harvard Business Review* (November-December), pp. 3-12.
- Collins, James C., and Porras, Jerry I. 1996. "Building Your Company's Vision." *Harvard Business Review* (September-October), pp. 65-77.
- Eisenhardt, Kathleen M. and Sull, Donald N. 2001. "Strategy as Simple Rules." *Harvard Business Review* (January) pp. 106-116.
- Elmore, Richard F. 2000. "Building a New Structure for School Leadership", *American Educator*, (Winter), pp. 6-13 and 42-44.
- Gadiesh, Orit, and Gilbert, James. 2001. "Transforming Corner-Office Strategy into Frontline Action." *Harvard Business Review* (May), pp. 72-80.
- Hawkins, David. 1974. "I, Thou, and It," *The Informed Vision: Essays on Learning and Human Nature* New York: Agathon Press.
- Jensen, Michael. 1998. *Foundations of Organizational Strategy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kaplan, Robert, and Norton, David P. 2000. "Having Trouble with Your Strategy? Then Map It." *Harvard Business Review* (September-October), pp. 3-11.
- Letts, Christine W., Ryan, William P., and Grossman, Allen. 1999. *High Performance Nonprofit Organizations: Managing Upstream for Greater Impact*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Podolny, Joel. "Thinking Strategically for Not-for-Profit Organizations." (July 10, 2003 presentation at Harvard Business School).
- Porter, Michael. 1996. "What is Strategy?" *Harvard Business Review* (November-December), pp. 61-78.

Rangan, V. Katsuri. 2004. "Lofty Missions, Down-to-Earth Plans". *Harvard Business Review* (March), Reprint R043J.

Sawhill, J. and D. Williamson. 2001. "Mission Impossible: Measuring Success In Nonprofit Organizations." *Nonprofit Management & Leadership*, No. 11 (Spring).

Saloner, Garth, Shephard, Andrea, and Podolny, Joel. 2001. *Strategic Management*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Simons, Robert, Davila, Antonio, and Kaplan, Robert. 2000. *Performance Measurement & Control Systems for Implementing Strategy*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Tushman, Michael L. and O'Reilly, Charles A. III. 2002. *Winning through Innovation: A Practical Guide to Leading Organizational Change and Renewal*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.