

## STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP IN AN ERA OF COMPETITION

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DOI: 10.19062/2247-3173.2024.25.11

**Abstract:** *In today's international environment, there is an increased need for quality strategic leadership in order to help organizations to develop. Strategic thinking, together with strategic leadership, are elements that individuals that lead organizations at the strategic level must have, must improve and must share with the other members of the organization. The success and efficiency of any organization depends very much on the strategy developed by the leader and on the strategic thinking he uses in making decisions.*

**Keywords:** *leadership, strategy, strategic thinking, organizations, security.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The contemporary period, in which society is subjected to multiple transformations on all fronts and, at the same time, affected by numerous challenges, requires on the one hand strong leaders who can coherently manage all these issues, and on the other hand resilience, solutions, and paradigm shifts in fields such as politics, military, social, and economic.

The current, uncertain, ambiguous, complex, and volatile security environment, impacts most of the social aspects of citizens' lives, leaving its mark on their quality of life. Security is a necessity felt from an individual level to a collective and societal level. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs places the need for security on the second level, immediately after biological needs. Therefore, individuals need safety, personal security, elements that can only be achieved in a social context marked by profound security.

The Copenhagen School highlighted the extended concept of security, based on the dimensions of security and the theory of securitization. Among the dimensions of security, societal security plays a very important role, referring to the capacity for development and preservation of a society by maintaining its identity, spiritual values, and perennial character. The concept of societal security represents "*the ability of a society to subsist in its essential characteristics, in fluctuating circumstances and in the face of possible or present threats*".[1]

Societal security is not only related to the absence of military, economic, political, or environmental dangers; threats to societal security can be diverse: migration, vertical competition, depopulation, discrimination, and subordination. Therefore, in the current period, from the national, strategic level to the tactical level, a reconsideration of the leadership methods of public or private organizations is necessary, as they are subjected to daily societal transformations.

At the strategic level, a revitalization of leadership is necessary, with strategic leadership and strategic thinking being two interlinked elements equally essential.

## 2. STRATEGY AND STRATEGIC THINKING AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

The concept of strategy has its roots in the military domain, with the Greek word "strategos" meaning military general.

"Strategy is defined as *a component of the military art, dealing with the preparation, planning, and conduct of warfare and military operations.* " [2]

"*Strategy is the science of war; it outlines plans, provides the overall vision, and determines the course of military actions; it is, to be exact, the science of general commanders.*"[3]

Although a concept that originated in the military sphere, the concept of strategy has been adopted in other fields such as economics, management, social sciences, etc.

Starting from the main mission of organizations, they develop strategies, aiming to set SMART (specific, measurable, accessible, realistic, time-bound) objectives, determine the paths to follow, the means and resources they need, as well as the concrete methods through which objectives will be achieved.

"*Arthur F. Lykke Jr. developed the strategic framework of ends, ways, and means. For Lykke, strategy is a coherent expression of a process that identifies the ends, ways, and means designed to achieve a certain goal. Mathematically, we might express this as "Strategy = Ends + Ways + Means." Ends are the objectives or desired outcomes of a given strategy. The term end-state is synonymous with ends. An end or ends comprise the goal of the strategy. Ways are actions. They are the methods and process executed to achieve the ends. More simply, they answer the question, How are you going to get to the end-state? Means are the resources required to execute the way.*"[4]

"*The difficult part involves the thinking required to develop the plan based on uncertain, ambiguous, complex, or volatile knowledge, information, and data. Strategic leadership entails making decisions across different cultures, agencies, agendas, personalities, and desires. It requires the devising of plans that are feasible, desirable, and acceptable to one's organization and partners—whether joint, interagency, or multinational.*"[5]

Considering the framework for developing organizational strategies using the aforementioned model, with the strategy consisting of the sum of objectives, paths, and means, at the level of any organization, leaders must develop strategic thinking competencies.

At the organizational level, to confront the multiple challenges existing in the security environment, strategic thinking has become an essential asset for leaders. Therefore, regardless of the field analysed, whether military, economic, political, energy, etc., leaders must develop strategic thinking. Strategic thinking is the thinking that leaders apply in the leadership process, at a strategic level.

Strategic thinking is rational, conceptual thinking, on a medium and long-term basis. It is developed on scientific, theoretical, validated foundations. "*The strategist's weapons are strategic thinking, consistency, and coherence.*"[6]

Strategic thinking is cognitive thinking, but at the same time, it is creative and innovative thinking, harmonizing intelligence with creativity, creating an intrinsic connection between the two. This type of thinking is focused on the future, prospecting the future, representing a reasoning process that has the mission of constantly identifying new solutions that can later be implemented through the development of appropriate mechanisms. Strategic thinking explores the future, evaluates the present, and learns from the past. In harmony with strategic planning, strategic thinking represents true tools that leaders use to formulate strategies, to lead efficiently, and to remain relevant in the future.

Strategic thinking calculates competitive advantages, analyzes risks and challenges that may arise in the process of implementing strategies, transforms vulnerabilities into strengths, and weaknesses into opportunities.

Also, through strategic thinking and the formulated strategies, leaders set the direction towards which the organization is heading, establish lines of effort, ensure flexibility, and eliminate preconceptions related to the leadership process.

Moreover, in certain studies, strategic thinking is presented as having the following attributes:

- *"Analytical - about technological, economic, market, political, legislative impacts, ethical and social trends;*
- *Numerical - when conducting an audit of strategic capacity;*
- *Reflexive - when analysing problems and opportunities;*
- *Predictive - when predicting the future;*
- *Imaginative - when drafting a mission statement;*
- *Visionary - when approaching ways to accomplish the mission;*
- *Creative - when analysing how to eliminate and avoid obstacles;*
- *Critical - when analysing the efficiency, effectiveness, feasibility, and risks of available options;*
- *Empathetic - when analysing the consequences on individuals;*
- *Ethical - when analysing social and environmental implications;*
- *Pragmatic - when drafting a plan, it must lead to changes;*
- *Political - when aiming to implement a technical plan and having the support of decision-makers, political factors."*[7]

The previously stated attributes of strategic thinking are important both in the elaboration of strategies and especially in the decision-making process. Decision-making, as the leader's main responsibility, is a comprehensive process based on their ability to think strategically, to evaluate all risks and opportunities thoroughly, to weigh the variety of alternatives with all available tools, and to identify the most efficient among them.

Identifying and obtaining strategic options are essential within strategic thinking; however, making the decision regarding the most favourable option requires a high capacity for strategic thinking.

### 3. STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

*"Strategic leadership has many facets, and it encompasses managing via others, and works as a helper for organizations to adjust with the changing world that appears as happening substantially as ever with the pace of time in today's global business matrix. Strategic leadership demands the capability to incorporate and include both of the business environment of the organizations, which are internal and external. It is also responsible for managing and encompassing critical information processes"*. [8]

Organizational strategies largely depend on the quality of leadership promoted by leaders. Leadership is the imaginary line that ensures the organization's connection with its strategy. Every organization depends on how the leader makes decisions and implements strategies. If strategy development depends on leaders' capacity for strategic thinking, the rigorous implementation of these strategies largely depends on their ability to be good leaders. The implementation of any strategy depends on how leaders organize their responsibilities, assign tasks, coordinate, and monitor activities. The way strategies are implemented determines their success or failure. Leaders chart the organizational direction in general and determine the course of strategy performance in particular.

They provide the organization's vision, develop plans, coordinate functional activities, and at the same time stimulate the group's energy and boost employee morale.

As mentioned earlier, three extremely important pillars for organizational performance are strategy, vision, and leadership. The three aspects are in a biunivocal relationship, influencing each other.

The international security and business environment is in continuous flux; the fluctuations in these environments demand flexible and adaptable strategies that allow for continuous process development to steer organizations toward change.

An interesting connection between the essential elements of leadership is made by the great author Warren Bennis that point out "*The means of expression are the steps to leadership*:"

1. **Reflection** leading to **resolution**.
2. **Resolution** leading to **perspective**.
3. **Perspective** leading to **point of view**.
4. **Point of view** leading to **tests and measures**.
5. **Tests and measures** leading to **desire**.
6. **Desire** leading to **mastery**.
7. **Mastery** leading to **strategic thinking**.
8. **Strategic thinking** leading to **full self-expression**.
9. **The synthesis of full self-expression = leadership**. "[9]"

The leader is the one who manages the decision-making process, which is essentially the core of strategic leadership. Strategy implementation depends entirely on effective decision-making. In fact, leadership primarily influences vision, secondly strategies, and ultimately values. These three components together create organizational culture. The organization's vision is shaped by the leader who also has the role of conveying this vision to all employees so that they know the desired future state.

In the context of strategic leadership, the strategic leader plays several roles, the most important of which are: strategist, change agent, motivator, communicator, manager. All these roles intertwine and enhance each other so that leadership is efficient, of quality, objectives can be achieved, and the organization's mission fulfilled. On the other hand, the strategic leader performs a series of functions, such as setting direction, adopting strategic decisions, establishing human resource policies, developing and implementing strategies, adopting and implementing change, strategic communication, developing and maintaining a coherent and efficient organizational culture. In order to fulfil all these functions and to play the mentioned roles, the leader must self-develop, be self-taught, self-train in management, and strategic leadership. It is not easy to lead an organization, let alone to lead at a strategic level. In addition to those mentioned above, the leader must be open-minded, have foresight, be decisive, have the ability to take risks, be resilient, and possess a high level of emotional and social intelligence. All these aspects allow leaders to develop the organization, achieve organizational objectives, create a pleasant working atmosphere, maintain harmonious relationships with subordinates.

#### **4. CONCLUSIONS**

As demonstrated throughout this paper, strategy, strategic thinking, and strategic leadership are three essential elements for the evolution of any organization, whether it is public or private. The international environment is complex and sufficiently uncertain to require substantial efforts from those who lead organizations. In the current stage, to withstand in this environment, multiple competencies and increased resilience are needed.

The diverse components of the strategic leadership environment can create challenges even for the most experienced leaders. The process of making strategic decisions, as well as the effects and consequences that decisions produce throughout the entire organization, require exceptional competencies in shaping individuals who perform the leadership role. They must be sufficiently prepared to cope with the unpredictable nature of the international strategic environment while also having the experience and intelligence necessary to make future predictions. It is a difficult but challenging process.

To draw an analogy between becoming a strategic leader and the structure of a strategy, becoming represents the goal, leadership represents the paths to follow, and development represents the means. To succeed in implementing strategic leadership, one must develop on multiple levels. By far, the most important level is that of strategic thinking. Developing this type of thinking requires a lot of effort from leaders, self-discipline, and the ability to be self-taught. Furthermore, all the effort of leaders must be based on a set of values that underlie the functioning of the organization, as well as the formation and development of specific leadership competencies.

Strategic leadership can also be seen as the capacity of an experienced leader who has the skills and vision necessary to develop plans and strategies, make decisions, and take risks in an environment characterized by complexity, volatility, uncertainty, and ambiguity. By its essence, decision-making in strategic leadership determines certain consequences. Every decision is followed by a series of consequences, but in a strategic context, decisions have a major impact on organizational elements and most frequently on people. Moreover, since it involves long-term planning, strategic decisions can generate profound, costly consequences with a major impact on the organization. For this reason, strategic leaders must be motivated to adopt the most effective decisions for the organization and the people they lead.

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