

# A Strategy: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Strategic Leader Profile

**S****Linda Ellington***Southern New Hampshire University, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

The structure for this chapter was developed through a limited literature search as well as the author's in-depth knowledge and lived experiences in teaching leadership in corporate and academic settings, and facilitating strategic planning and goal setting processes in business and educational context. In addition, this chapter draws from the writer's ability to capture the essence of a strategic leader. Readers of this chapter may be asking why explore a 21<sup>st</sup> C strategic leader; why not maintain what appears to be working. The answer is not simple, but rather important if leaders are to move their organizations forward through ambiguity and fog, which is what currently the landscape is portraying.

The objective of this chapter was to discover whether Pisapia's research on global strategic leadership, O'Connell's findings on leadership development and Hazy and Uhl-Bien's writings on complex leadership could yield a 21<sup>st</sup> C profile in which one could lead in today's organizational realities. This premise was to then seize an opportunity to develop one framework from several, which may be easier to translate into not only leading but into the development of strategic leaders.

There are many scholars who research and write about the topic of leadership, literally thousands of written work has been and continues to be published; however, I am fascinated with the four scholars selected for this chapter; the author's rationale being my curiosity about their specific research into strategic leadership and their style of writing.

Traditional forms of leadership, based in what Bennis (2007) termed the tripod form (leaders, followers, and a common goal they want to achieve) and more recent theories such as transformational and authentic leadership, will need to "advocate fuller and more integrative focus that is multilevel, multi-component, and interdisciplinary and that recognizes that strategic leadership is a function of the leader, the led, and the complexity of the context" (Avolio, 2007, p. 31, as cited in O'Connell, 2014, p. 184). The strategic landscape is strewn with strategic discontinuity, disequilibrium, blurring of boundaries, shifting competition, and the need for reinvention, innovation and knowledge sharing. Thus, the need for strategic leadership has become more complex as organizations, our workplaces, and our global challenges become more interrelated and unpredictable (Drath, 2008; Martin, 2007; Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007, as cited in O'Connell, 2014). In an article written in *The Leadership Quarterly*, the authors posit that leadership models that have been products of top-down bureaucratic paradigm are eminently effective for an economy focused on physical production but are not well suited for a more knowledge oriented economy (as cited in Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Currently and into the future, the overarching framework is knowledge and the conceptual profile or knowledge leading needs not to be complex.

Heifetz (1998) outlines the fact that not all leadership needs to be complex. However, according to Freedman (2006) the landscape has become increasingly complex and leaders re faced with continuous new information to evaluate and re-evaluate with no final analysis (as cited in O'Connell, 2014). Palus

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and Horth, stated, “Creative leadership makes shared sense of complexity and chaos” (2002, p. 127). In addition, they posit that leaders who lead in the complex and chaotic organization need to be agile of mind light on their feet, and have a sense of humor, because surely, complexity is coming to play with you as the leader (2002).

The chapter is divided into four themes: Complexity and Strategic Thinking; Web of Beliefs; Tactics for Strategic Leaders in a Globalizing World, and Chief Story Teller. A basic assumption from the writer’s view is that there are common threads that run through this narrowly focused literature review and the question asked is there an opportunity to identify a more simplistic and clearer sketch in which to develop and lead that has not previously been proposed? A critical factor in an organization’s strategy that Gladwell’s mentions is the nature of embarking on an adventure of exploring the alternatives (2000). I want to use this chapter as the tipping point in identifying an alternative to complex strategic leadership.

## COMPLEXITY AND STRATEGIC THINKING

The quest to explain 21<sup>st</sup> century strategic leadership as a concept and a practice may spark a debate among scholars regarding the most appropriate definitions and the most effective approaches to learning about and engaging in strategic leadership (O’Connell, 2014). Bennis called it a cliché’ of the leadership literature that a single definition of leadership is lacking (Bennis, 2007, as cited in O’Connell, 2014). The term complexity captures the levels of uncertainty, ambiguity, interdependencies and interrelatedness that characterizes complex organizations. Rapid social, economic and technological shifts that are taking place are producing grater complexity, resulting in the increasing dynamics of instability (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007 as cited in Clarke, 2013). Coffee and Jones (2006) claimed it futile to create a definitive list of leadership attributes (as cited in O’Connell, 2014). To further this challenge there is an understanding that the learning and practice of leadership is contextual and temporal and the capacity to strategically lead evolves over the long course of a career and a lifetime (Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002; Porter & McLaughlin, 2006; Anderson, 1993; Day, 2012; Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2010; Lord & Hall, 2005 as cited in O’Connell, 2014). The emerging notions of chaos, complexity and ambiguity alert strategic leaders to the need to change the way they practice leadership, and yet many of today’s leaders remain committed to the old leadership habits (Pisapia, 2009). However, a major flaw in this thinking, is that it does not allow for the increasing pace of change (2009, p. 48). Leaders thus face a dilemma of how to provoke change without undermining the need for the change itself.

According to Hazy and Uhl-Bien (2013) complexity inspired leadership research has led to new insights about the mechanisms that enable an organization to perform and adapt. In complex systems, if innovations are to emerge then there needs to be a change in the way leaders think and act (Termeer, 2007 as cited in Nooteboom & Termeer, 2013). Therefore, a need for leading using a strategic mindset creates specific leadership challenges (Nooteboom & Termeer, 2013). Do those challenges lead to new insights about the strategic leader set of characteristics, style and skills necessary for the performance and adaptation of their organization; i.e., their leadership profile? Hazy and Uhl-Bien posit that strategic leaders, defined holistically, might activate complexity mechanisms to perform five essential organizing functions (2013). According to Pisapia (2009), strategic leaders employ a holistic individual, team, and organizational learning process and to do this they need to use six tactics for developing consensus on direction; building the capacity of the organization to accomplish the direction; and, connecting it to power sources in their internal and external environments.

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