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Leadership of Schools: Chief Executives in Education

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This records and analyses observations of the daily lives of the Directors of Education in English Local Education Authorities to reveal what life was like for these chief officers just as local power began to decline and control of education moved to central government. This period of change is covered in this longitudinal study which observed five Directors in 1986-7 and four in the early 1990s. It provides a unique and detailed observation of strategic management in action highlighting issues of leadership common to all sectors of management and valid for any period of major change. In writing this, Angela took the middle-ground between statistical analysis and real-life narrative and constructs to present a gripping study of the reality of educational leadership at a senior level. Unusually, the Directors studied have their own voice in the book; they were asked to comment on it in draft and these comments have their own reflective chapter. There is also an excursion into the past with a chapter about the history of education Directors. It is vigorous treatment with some international comparisons and a future vision which can now be compared with reality. This file contains the contents list and extracts from Chapter One.

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Extract of first chapter

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CHAPTER ONE THE LIFE IN THE DAYS

“I’ll walk you back to your car”, offered the Chief Education Officer to my profound relief. The inner city, 2300 hrs, in November 1986 was not my usual beat. Not so unusual though for the CEO of the education department of an English local education authority (l.e.a.), attending a late night community protest meeting about the neglect of the interests of one racial group at the expense of another. Being the executive’s shadow, I followed whither he went, noting the surroundings, the events, the people and his role in it all. I was in the first months of non-participant observation research on strategic leadership. One CEO had been observed. The second observation was in progress. Still to come in this investigation were nine years and seven more CEOs. Five of these were observed between 1986 and 1988 and four between 1994 and 1995.

The chief education executives observed for this study were all at the same level of seniority. Their position was equal to that of chief executives of businesses or of other public or private services. All those observed were the leaders of education services (Chief Education Officers) in which their role makes them the equivalents of N. American school board superintendents or chief education officers, of Australian sub-state area leaders, or of sub-systems leaders in countries in which central governments delegate to agencies or to regional or local governments.

This chapter introduces the investigation, continuing first, with the report of the meeting which opened this chapter, a typical event for CEO. This typicality is then set within the study as a whole, its objectives, methods and processes. This provides a brief introduction to the research methods. The book’s Appendix provides a more detailed review of these.

A FIRST CONCEPT

On that dark, November evening at the community protest meeting, tempers were fraught. The CEO began by operating what I later found to be a CEO's central role, that of a listener. A chief education executive does not necessarily have to DO anything but does have to BE present. To cope with the range of issues raised by the many contacts, these CEOs appeared constantly in what one might term, listening mode. The body was always on the incline, the head was at an angle to deflect any impression of confrontation and the eyes swivelled both to enable the speaker not to feel daunted by continuous eye contact and to ensure that any one hovering outside the immediate conversation was both noticed and reassured of the senior executive's later attention. The look was of concentration and interest with the body slightly diagonal to the contact producing an impression of readiness to move off quickly in order to do something about the speaker's needs. Doing something meant that these CEOs moved into transmission mode, passing on the information gleaned as quickly as possible, to whomever it was most relevant.

At this late night community centre event, the listening revealed that, in addition to the racial concerns, there were objections to the community centre becoming too much of a further education centre and a specific complaint about the need to support a steel band. The CEO neatly wove the points into last minute alterations to the pre-planned speech. The CEO's subordinates back at the office had anticipated some, though not all, of the supplementary questions heard that night.

The CEO passed from listening into mode two of operation, as a speech maker representing the public face of an l.e.a. Lunge, parry, defend, deflect, salute, respect the rules and show preparedness to face challenges from unexpected directions - the CEO's speech offered the group all these.

There was first the promise of a new beginning for a policy for the centre. There was deft praise of the local political representative (present in the audience). There was an outline of the local policy on community education and of the need for equitable provision in all areas of education. Blame was firmly placed on central government's failure to support the local requests to provide courses for adults without traditional qualifications. The senior executive stoutly defended his subordinates in what appeared to be a speech unlikely to reach the hearts of the audience and to pass somewhat over their heads in esoteric language and in references to equity for others. Further observation of the meeting revealed the need for such a bland defence. Tempers were running high. My notes that evening recall, 'Wow - this is a political minefield!'

The senior executive did not need to tread on mines. They exploded spontaneously. One participant offered to kick in the CEO's door in order to make him listen. Accusations were made of local officials obtaining 'perks' in the form of investigative visits to Bangladesh (organised so that the officials might better understand the cultures of large minorities within the authority). There were demands for fee remissions for facilities and courses and for the rapid purchase of a mini-bus. Pointedly strong remarks noted the area's insufficiency of primary school places. A calm CEO sat centre left. 'Let me hear your ideas', he was able to interject above the hub-bub. 'You are misinformed about what to do', he insisted. 'Partnership is what we want to achieve', was the senior executive's hopeful conclusion.

Partnership concluded the evening. The crowds left. The community centre committee and staff chatted at a post-meeting reception with the CEO. He returned to listening mode, clearly attempting to assess the extent of the meeting's representativeness. The verbal flow drifted into snatches - the

neglect of Afro-Caribbean groups, the impossibility of satisfying all, the 'what can we do?' and the 'we're pushed into a corner'. Eventually, we all pushed off home.

QUESTIONING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

That evening encompassed many of the responsibilities of those at high levels of strategic leadership. That evening, they had included planning for the whole area, finding and managing resources (human and financial), minority protection, educating adults and school-age students, accountabilities to local and central politicians, curriculum development and estate management. The superficial treatment of the many elements and the late finish to the day, encapsulated the multitude of issues that had to be covered briefly in these CEOs' days, at a rapid pace, through long hours. The audience represented all the groups to whom CEOs have to be responsive, the service providers (teachers, local education authority subordinates, support staff) the community stakeholders, (parents, unions, students, governors, community groups and business groups) and the politicians (local and central). All these aspects became the framework for the research and for this book.

Through the swirling word clouds of that evening, arising from those myriad responsibilities, emerged my first concept of a strategic leader as the hub of a wheel. The hub is the strong part. Its place reflects the setting of the plan of the vehicle, derived from the engine. Information about how the plan is working at the rim is transmitted from various spokes to the hub. The hub then re-transmits the vibrations along other spokes back to alternative parts of the rim which makes use of the information while some of the transmissions go to the engine. This analogy leads to a central question of

this book. Are senior executives, like wheels, essential to the operation of the vehicle?

Management pyramids in all organisations are being flattened as the middle layers are reduced in numbers. What then will happen to the senior levels? Strategic planning is now regarded as a team game, not one for the solo, visionary leader model of the 1980s. What then should senior executives be doing? In sympathy with these trends, English and Scottish local education authorities are no longer obliged to appoint a Chief Education Officer though all of them seem to be continuing to do so (Dobie,1996:10). Will the role eventually disappear and if so, will it have to be re-invented if the style of strategic leadership which it embodies remains necessary? If CEOs are re-invented, will they be in a new form? These are the central questions on which this book focuses.

REVEALING STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

A wheel analogy is not particularly academic terminology nor are 'swirling word clouds', 'spontaneous explosions' and 'political minefields' used above in the report on the late night meeting. They essay to be expressive phrases but are they suitable for an academic text about strategic leadership? The central question for me was how to convey the fascination and allow readers to feel part of the action, as I had been myself, while producing a text that had academic validity.

My objective was to add descriptive and analytical material to the few studies of the powerful in education management not only because of intrinsic interest but in order to understand how to influence policy making processes and how to further characterise leadership, the nature of which 'continues to be enigmatic' (Walford,1994:3). Amongst leadership studies, the

roles of chief education officers are of current interest; their resignation rate has increased during the last decade; studies have begun, in Canada, linking c.e.os to outcomes (Musella, 1994) and in England in 1995, Chris Woodhead, the director of OFSTED¹, announced that differential outcomes of local education authorities were to be investigated. Any differential outcomes might be traced back to the effects of different senior executives. One can draw an analogy between senior education executives and managers of football teams, a profession with rapid turnover as managers face dismissal if their teams fail. From that analogy arises a question central to this investigation: 'Players play, coaches coach, chairmen chair, so what's left for the manager to do? ...the dwindling role of the motor mouth on the bench' (Novick, 1995:76). Though written as a description of football managers, with a slight adaptation of language one could have the same discussion about the role of the CEOs studied here. Teachers teach, central government directs, councillors chair - so what's left for the motor mouth in the office?

First, though, I had to locate the motor mouths willing to be closely observed. Five were found between 1986 and 1988 and four in 1994-5. The senior executives were at different career stages; one was just appointed at the time of the observation; one had been two years in post; two were on the verge of retiring after many years' service. The others were well established but had differing lengths of service at the time of the observations. Only one was in post during both periods of research. Others retired before the second shadowing and I found replacements.

Each of these senior executives was a Chief Education Officer in an local authority with educational responsibilities (local education authority) and was thus, the most senior manager in the education service. Their role was

to manage the locally maintained sector of educational provision². For comparisons with executives in other businesses and public sector services, the size of these managers' responsibilities would encompass a minimum of one hundred sites and a maximum of five hundred. Personnel employed as teachers would be around 10,000 in the largest local education authorities and in addition there would be around 3000 school support staff, advisers, inspectors, administrators and central services staff, such as educational psychologists, drivers, welfare officers, grounds maintenance workers, peripatetic music teachers and school crossing patrol wardens. In 1986-88, these executives also had responsibility for further and higher education colleges. All these responsibilities, in both of the periods of the observations, were spread over extensive geographic areas. Buildings had to be hatched, matched and despatched. Supply chains to schools had to be organised with children, books and equipment to be delivered on time. Marketing had to be led to demonstrate the success of the organisation. The research had to find a way to convey all these responsibilities and their similarities to those of executives anywhere.

This research was:

- **qualitative**, observing and recording all the details of this group of senior executives' activities. Semi-structured observation by a non-participant researcher (myself) was used. I was at virtually all events during a total of thirty-six days, divided between the two periods, for each cohort, 1986-88 and 1994-5. The detailed recording was to illustrate subtleties of strategic leadership not amenable to demonstration from questionnaires, interviews or documentary evidence. A senior manager must, for example, 'learn...to introduce ideas slowly and informally during conversations...use the 'planted question' in committee, he must be 'politician himself' (Hornsby,1984:110).

- **quantitative**, collating and analysing some of the elements of the senior executives' activities in order to clarify the myriad complexities of this level of strategic leadership (Konnert and Augenstein,1990:11) and to develop some comparisons.
- **set in the executives' real work environment** uncontrolled by the researcher. The observations were in the situations in which these executives spent most of their time and with which they were most familiar.
- **partial**, emerging from the researcher's view of the people observed.
- **focused on executives' tasks** and the time and processes involved in accomplishing these in order to ascertain contributions to strategic leadership.
- **exploratory**, avoiding conceptual structuring at the field work stage and allowing categories for analysis to emerge from the data.
- **generalised**, providing a portrait of strategic leadership rather than of individual leaders. It abstracts the behaviour of these leaders from their singular, local contexts and sets the whole within the common context of 1980s and 1990s systems changes.

Like N. American superintendents, with their responsibilities to elected school boards, these English senior managers have an additional responsibility. They are answerable to an elected, political council. The responsibility itself is not dissimilar to that of a chief executive to a board of directors but the local politicians have a loyalty to a party line and to their voters in addition to their accountability for the financial health of the

organisation and to satisfying the companies' customers. The political affiliations of the local education authorities within which the executives in this research worked, covered the spectrum. One had a secure Tory majority and two had secure Labour majorities. Two had marginal Tory majorities and two had marginal Labour majorities. Two were 'hung' with a balance amongst the Tories, Labour and Liberal Democratic parties or a balance between Tory and Labour with the Liberal Democrats or Independents therefore able to determine the vote³. All the local education authorities were in middle England; four were large shire counties, one was a large city and one a large town.

The aim of this book was to look for the routines of strategic leadership rather than the new and the special. Seeking those routines from non-participant observation produced extensive data. Reducing these to quantitative tables could destroy the fascination of the detail. Reproducing them as qualitative narrative could overwhelm with the busywork of ethnography(Theobald,1990). My objective was to locate the middle ground between detail and outline and between academic and novelistic language.

The choice between the academic and the novelistic is illustrated by comparing these two extracts. The first is from a novel about a retired CEO. The second is from a report of a research project on superintendents in the USA.

'Aspirate-dropping politicians, educational psychologists, parents hot under the collar, lunatic school teachers had all added to the tally of ludicrous error but then so had he. His whole career was shot through with misjudgement, mismanagement, support of

wrong causes, failure to assist decent men and women, and yet he was still praised as one of the most successful directors of education in the whole country since the war. He could not see why he had made such a name, except that favourable publicity or circumstances had helped him and his pleasant but utterly serious committed manner and approach had led people, political masters or paid subordinates alike to act more sensibly'

(Middleton,1986:70-1).

'The superintendent moves between the nomothetic to idiographic dimensions to transactionally and transformationally interact with board members, principals, parents...to persuade these individuals to accept the goals of the organisations as defined and visualised by the superintendent. The superintendent acts to persuade these individuals to participate in the formulation of...goals additional to his own'(Griffin and Chance,1994:81).

The first approach, characterised by Atkinson as 'naturalistic'(1990:38), would be difficult to sustain throughout a book without also adding to it the story elements of a novel, as does David Lodge in *Nice Work* (1989), for example (a novel about a senior business executive shadowed by a university researcher). This I have not done. I have, however, used sparingly the novelist's descriptive techniques to add interest and readability to the items like that of the second extract, 'more suited conventionally to realistic and factual texts'(Atkinson,1990:38).

In seeking answers to questions about strategic leadership, non-participant observation can describe those parts of the roles of strategic leaders which other approaches to researching the powerful have not reached. Amongst the

many studies of leadership in education management (estimated as 10,000 by 1991; Walker, 1994:3), few have been conducted by non-participant observation. Those that have used this method have been virtually all of school principals, both in England and elsewhere. Only one study of Canadian superintendents by non-participant observation has been located (Duigan, 1980) and one of Australian regional directors of education (Macpherson, 1985a). Of the few studies of English CEOs, none used observation. The seminal and substantial Kogan trilogy studying CEOs used interviews and questionnaires (Kogan and van der Eyken, 1972; Bush and Kogan, 1982; Bush, Kogan and Lenney, 1988). Other studies have used documentary sources primarily (Hornsby, 1984), brief commentary by or about CEOs (Binns, 1957; Brighouse, 1986; Wood-Allum, 1987) or are biographies of famous, individualistic CEOs (Fisher, 1965; Jones, 1988; Ree, 1973; Seaborne, 1968). The latter style 'may even do a disservice, these fun books with their tales of heroes and myths of the mighty by suggesting that leadership is only for the new and the special' (Handy in Armson, 1994:206).

Rather than looking at the special, this book describes, and comments on, chief education executives realistically at work in their daily contexts. Before returning readers to that real work from Chapter Three onwards, the following chapter provides the conventional academic introduction to the contexts of CEOs' activities.

1 Office for Standards in Education, the central government agency charged with organising inspection of schools.

- ² In 1995, of the 24,000 publicly funded schools, approximately 23,000 were locally maintained

- ³ The parties are roughly designated: Tory, right wing; Labour, left wing; Liberal Democrats centre.