

# Thoughts on Strategic Leadership

by Sally Vanson

In 2004 there must be more models and writings about leadership than any other business topic. For me leadership is about authenticity. It's about taking my whole self – mind and body to any situation in which I am required to lead and this can include being a company director, a business partner, a mother and a friend. In my work throughout Europe, the USA and the Arab World, nothing has happened to change this perception, in fact all my learning has endorsed my belief that great leaders are those who engage unconscious processes and are able to fully engage in any situation.

Having studied Success Factor Modelling™ with Robert Dilts, and learned how to model successful leaders at work, and to communicate these models to provide meaning for others, I offer the following thoughts about Strategic Leadership to prompt your own exploration.

Firstly leaders need to be able to manage themselves, their relationships, their goal and objectives all within a complex system of existence.

Again from Robert Dilts I offer the following definitions;

**Self skills** have to do with how an individual conducts himself or herself in a particular situation. Self skills allow a person to choose or engineer the most appropriate state, attitude, focus, etc., with which to enter a situation. In a way, self skills are the processes by which a person leads himself or herself.

**Relational skills** have to do with the ability to understand, motivate and communicate with other people. They result in the ability to enter another person's model of the world or perceptual space, establish rapport and guide that person to recognise problems and objectives. Since managers and leaders must reach their visions and accomplish their missions through their influence upon others, relational skills are one of the most essential aspects of business and team building.

**Strategic thinking skills** are necessary in order to define and achieve specific goals and objectives. Strategic thinking involves the ability to identify a relevant desired state, assess the starting state, and then establish and navigate the appropriate path of transition states required to reach the desired state. A key element of effective strategic thinking is determining which operators and operations will most efficiently and effectively influence and move the present state in the direction of the desired state.

**Systemic thinking skills** are used by an individual to identify and comprehend the problem space in which that person, his or her collaborators and the organisation are operating. Systemic thinking is at the root of effective problem solving and the ability to create functional teams. The ability to think systemically in a practical and concrete way is probably the most definitive sign of maturity in a manager or leader.

In his book *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), Peter Senge adds to this thinking by defining personal mastery as one of the cornerstones of the 'learning organisation', claiming, "An organisation's commitment and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members." According to Senge, "*Personal mastery* is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. Personal mastery goes beyond competence and skills, though it is grounded in competence and skills. It goes beyond spiritual unfolding or opening, although it requires spiritual growth. It means approaching one's life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to a reactive viewpoint."

The science of Neuro Linguistic Programming has a great deal to contribute to what Senge is referring to as "personal mastery." NLP provides specific techniques by which one can work toward the outcomes that Senge suggests as the guidelines for developing personal mastery. NLP processes all contribute to what Senge defines as 'personal mastery'. NLP's emphasis on personal development—in addition to its study of patterns of effective group communication and interaction—makes it one of the most effective technologies and

methodologies for developing personal mastery currently in existence.

Successful leaders know and accept themselves and are able to be present in someone else's world without judgement. They are people who see linkages and trends in situations, trust themselves, are able to think multi-dimensionally, being focused and expansive at the same time. They can manage ambiguity; they can enter a situation at any point, easily cope with future requirements, have a 'can do' attitude and apply the longest levers to assimilate the greatest change. They believe in reflective learning as a meaningful extension of their lives. In short, they practice 'personal mastery'.

Increasing one's "personal power" is often identified by people who feel the desire and need to increase their personal power to be safer and more effective in the world. The term *power* (from the word *poeir*, "to be able") literally means "the ability to act or produce an effect." Thus, increasing one's personal power means increasing one's ability to act or to produce effects in the world around oneself (it is not about dominating, manipulating or controlling others). Personal power is a function of the degree of choice and flexibility a person has with respect to his or her various life situations. Increasing personal power is essentially about increasing one's skills and capabilities in many different areas of life. It comes from having clear values and establishing empowering beliefs that provide a person with the motivation and permission to reach his or her potential as fully as possible. Ultimately, personal power involves recognising one's vision and mission, and pursuing them with passion and commitment.

This definition relates to the Law of Requisite Variety, which states that, in order to survive and succeed, a person needs a certain amount of flexibility and the notion that the more choices a person perceives within his or her model of the world, the more able that person is able to achieve his or her desired goals.

The life of people in a company, and indeed, the life of the company itself, can be described and understood on a number of different levels. At one level, there is the *environment* in which the organisation and its members act and interact—i.e., *when* and *where* the operations and relationships within an organisation take place. Environmental factors determine the context and constraints under which people operate. An organisation's environment is made up of such things as the geographical locations of its operations, the buildings and facilities which define the "work place," office and factory design, etc. In addition to the influence these environmental factors may have on people within the organisation, one can also examine the influence and impact that people within an organisation have upon their environment, and what products or creations they bring to the environment.

At another level, we can examine the specific *behaviours* and actions of an organisation or individual—i.e., *what* the person or organisation does within the environment. What are the particular patterns of work, interaction or communication? On an organisational level, behaviours may be defined in terms of general procedures. On the individual level, behaviours take the form of specific work routines, working habits or job related activities.

Another level of process involves the strategies, skills and *capabilities* by which the organisation or individual selects and directs actions within their environment—i.e., *how* they generate and guide their behaviours within a particular context. For an individual, capabilities include cognitive strategies and skills such as learning, memory, decision making and creativity, which facilitate the performance of a particular behaviour or task. On an organisational level, capabilities relate to the infrastructures available to support communication, innovation, planning and decision making between members of the organisation.

These other levels of process are shaped by *values and beliefs*, which provide the motivation and guidelines behind the strategies and capabilities used to accomplish behavioural outcomes in the environment—i.e., *why* people do things the way they do them in a particular time and place. Our values and beliefs provide the reinforcement (*motivation* and *permission*) that supports or inhibits particular capabilities and behaviours. Values and beliefs determine how events are given meaning, and are at the core of judgment and culture.

Values and beliefs support the individual's or organisation's sense of *identity*—i.e., the *who* behind the why, how, what, where and when. Identity level processes involve people's sense of role and mission with respect to their vision and the larger systems of which they are a member.

To finish by quoting Alan Chambers M.B.E (the first British man to walk unsupported to the North Pole)

- The impossible is possible
- Greatness is being a consistent model
- Everyone is important
- Feedback must be regular, honest and open
- Rehearse all possible scenarios
- Morale comes from planning
- Plan with flexibility and apply that flexibility in execution
- Go inside and trust your instincts
- Exploit uncertainty and challenge the normal.

So in the words of Walt Disney "if you can dream it, you can do it!"

©Sally Vanson. *Sally Vanson is a Leadership and Organisation Development Consultant, an NLP Trainer, Executive Coach and Director of The Performance Solution™. She can be contacted at [sally@theperformancesolution.com](mailto:sally@theperformancesolution.com).*

