

# Strategy and the Practising Educational Leader

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*ABSTRACT: This paper reports on the initial stages of research into the strategic leadership of primary school principals in New South Wales. Strategic leadership, a leadership dimension present in all leadership theories and perspectives, holds the key to effectively linking the actions of today with the future. This study draws on a theoretical framework derived from a comprehensive study undertaken in the United Kingdom by the National College for School Leadership and applies that through a demographic lens to the NSW context.*

*The findings suggest that the very concept of strategy remains elusive to scholars and practitioners alike. Researchers have tended to focus on planning as the sole source of strategy and consequently practitioners have been led to believe that this is their strategic role. This paper argues that by broadening our understanding of the concept of strategy, practitioners and scholars can gain greater insight into the strategic role of the educational leader. A more holistic understanding of the strategic dimension of educational leadership will provide leadership theorists, systemic authorities, and practitioners – the ones who grapple with enormous complexities posed by strategic leadership with a knowledge and understanding of strategic leadership that may hold promise to lead more positively into the future.*

## **Introduction**

The conceptualisation of 'strategy' as a construct is far more abstract than what is typically depicted in literature and practice. Strategic actions are purposeful, deliberate and meaningful, with the desired goal of linking now with a desired future state. The word 'strategy' is now applied to almost every management activity to add misleading rhetorical weight (Beaver, 2000). This has devalued and misrepresented the concept and is damaging to both theory and practice. According to Forde, Hobby

and Lees (2000), strategy is overrated as a feature of good leadership compared to the less dramatic activity of developing capability. This criticism of the concept only highlights the present low level of understanding.

Strategy has always been considered the queen of the managerial disciplines (Boisot, 2003). Many of the misconceptions with strategy begin with its use in the corporate sector. Bush (1998) argues that schools are too different to commercial companies in the nature of their business for direct sharing of concepts. Kelly (2005) argues that business leaders develop strategy, whereas educational leaders develop people. However, recently Davies and Davies (2006) highlighted that strategic leadership is not a new categorization of leadership, but a key dimension of any leadership activity. Eacott (2007) has labelled it an educational leadership 'imperative'. From this perspective, strategic leadership is present in all theoretical perspectives of leadership irrespective of the sector. In addition, leading strategically is essential for the effective management of educational institutions.

### **The concept of strategy**

Despite being part of educational administration since the mid-1970s (El-Hout, 1994), strategy as an explicit tool for leading and managing an educational organisation is of recent origin in both theory and practice. It first appeared in the educational administration literature in the 1980s. However, there was very little prior to 1988 (Fidler, 1989), when the United Kingdom (UK) passed the *Education Reform Act*, making it mandatory for all schools to have a development plan. In a recent review of literature on strategy in education, Eacott (forthcoming) found that 90% of the literature emerged following this date and over 60% of works originated in the UK.

Unfortunately much this voluminous literature focused very narrowly on the planning process to the exclusion of other aspects of strategy. Bell (1998) argued that 'strategy' and 'planning' became synonymous. Strategy was applied to almost every management activity by practitioners, consultants and academics. Fortunately, insightful academics realised that many of the works during the formative years of strategy in education research (1988-2000) had produced insufficient knowledge. Following a special issue of *School Leadership and Management* in 2004 (24, 1), edited by Brent Davies, a conceptual shift in the understanding of strategy has begun to emerge.

Dimmock and Walker (2004) criticised contemporary strategy research for its tendency to connect strategic thinking to improvement planning; the undue attention and focus currently given to particular indicators and criteria as underpinning drivers

of strategy and strategic thinking; and the tendency for recent literature on strategy to neglect the relevance of the cultural context of each school.

Central to the shift in thinking and recent interest in strategy and schools was the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) funded project *Success and Sustainability: Developing the Strategically Focused School* (2005) co-ordinated by Davies, Davies and Ellison. Through this project and related publications (Davies, 2003; Davies & Davies, 2004; Davies, 2004; Davies & Davies, 2006; Davies, 2006) they developed a comprehensive framework for strategy in schools comprising of strategic processes, approaches and leadership. It produced a series of behavioural characteristics that effective strategic leaders display. Central to these findings was that strategic leadership is not a new theory, but an element of all educational leadership and management theories (Davies & Davies, 2006).

### **Strategy and schools**

Griffiths (1985) has raised concerns regarding the unquestioned adoption of terms from the corporate world into educational administration. Thomas (2006) also warns of the seduction of jargon from elsewhere in the field of educational leadership. Commonly, criticism of strategy, strategic management and strategic leadership begin with the central argument that schools are about learning and teaching not corporate management and that corporate models remove the leaders attention away from an instructional leader.

The core assumptions of this criticism are conceptually misplaced. Schools are traditionally viewed as under-led and under-managed organisations characterised by their core business of teaching and learning (Bain, 2000; Dimmock & Walker, 2004; Dimmock, 2000; Weick, 1976). The traditional view of organisations and strategy is to see the organisation as the machine that turns resources into products, and strategy as the instrument for positioning the focal organisation in the industry and marketplace (Løwendahl & Revang, 1998). Unfortunately the self-taught educational leader or even the teaching of strategic leadership to school personnel is generally from a mechanistic perspective or what Levačić and Glover (1997; 1998) term 'technicist-rational' approach. This approach presents strategy to school leaders as a mechanistic pursuit towards the production of a plan. The underlying assumption of strategy and the strategic leader of schools are viewed as 'strategic rationality' (Finkelstein & Hambrick 1996, p.337). From this perspective, the leader's task is to identify techno-economic opportunities and problems, systematically search for alternatives and make choices that maximise the performance of the organisation. This perspective forms the basis of the criteria from which school development plans

in the UK are assessed during inspection (Broadhead, Cuckle, Hodgson & Dunford, 1996; Cuckle, Hodgson & Broadhead, 1998; Cuckle & Broadhead, 2003).

This view of strategy is extremely narrow and conceptually flawed. Figure 1 shows an organisational hierarchy that highlights the location of the institution's strategic direction and strategic plan. The only aspect of the organisation higher than the strategic direction is the 'purpose'. After all, the purpose is the rationale for the creation of an educational institution. The strategic direction establishes the desired future state of the organisation. How you go about producing this strategic direction is the role of strategic management models. Conventionally, a variety of strategic management tools, such as SWOT analysis, Boston Consultancy Group Matrix, Nominal Group Technique, Surveys, Fishbone Diagrams, are employed to establish a direction. This desired future state is the core principle informing the policy framework of the institution. All policies within the organisation need to reflect the strategic direction of the organisation. This link should be explicit and deliberate. The strategic plan (3-5 years into the future) should be guided by the policy framework and clearly outline the course of action to be taken by the organisation in the pursuit of the strategic direction, although not necessarily in overt description. The strategic plan is the guiding force behind the operational plan (0-2 years into the future) which outlines the course of action for the immediate future and contains greater detail than the strategic plan. Faculty plans outline how particular sections of the organisation are working towards the achievement of the operational plan within the framework of the strategic plan. This level of the hierarchy is of considerable importance in the development of strategic capability in others. The faculty plan should provide a framework to guide the day-to-day actions of every person within the organisation. This model clearly demonstrates the role of strategy within an educational institution, from its purpose through to the daily operations.

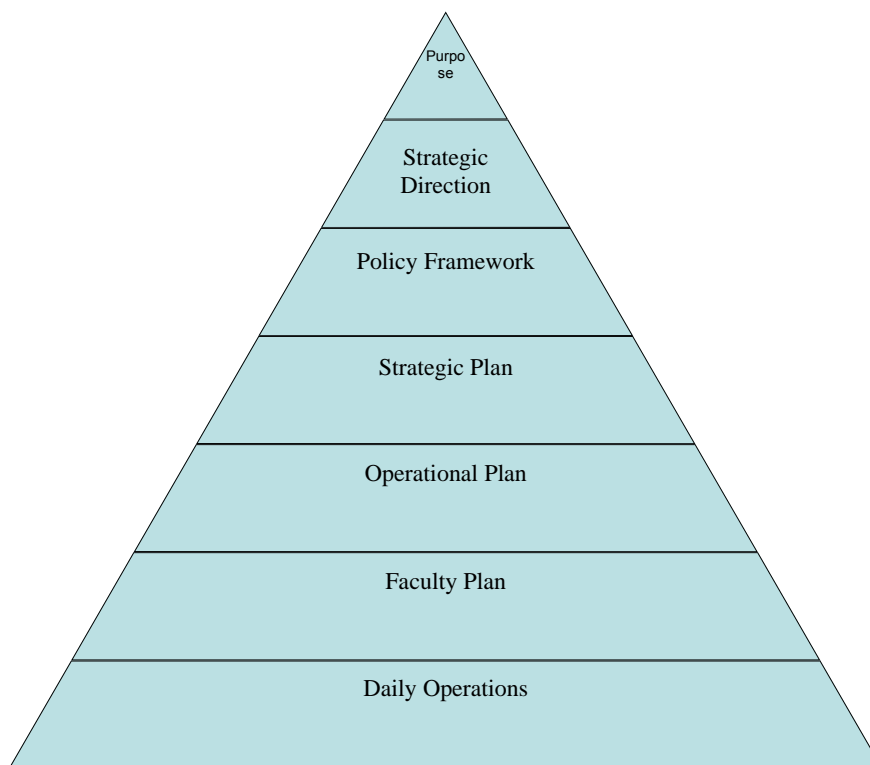


Figure 1: The location of strategy within an organisational hierarchy.

### **Strategy and Catholic Education**

Before exploring a framework for strategic leadership in schools, it is important to establish the unique role of strategy in Catholic education. Catholic schools have been a major part of Australian education for over 175 years (<http://www.cecnsw.catholic.edu.au/>). They continue to respond to, and to serve, the needs of the parents who seek a Catholic education for their children. The Catholic Education Commission cites that Catholic schools are distinctive because they:

- Promote a particular view of the person, the community, the nation and the world, centred on the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.
- Challenge students to find, through God, meaning and value in their lives.
- Form an integral part of a church community in which all generations live, worship and grow together.
- Critique our culture, and challenging community values, as an integral part of their Gospel mission.
- Aim to be welcoming and reflective communities whose most distinctive sign is the discernment of God's presence and their spiritual life.

- Espouse values which unite Australia by promoting a citizenship infused by a commitment to social justice.
- Encourage students to develop an international perspective on their own country and how their country can identify and respond justly to its international obligations.
- Develop a sense of historical perspective by reflecting on the development of societies and cultures over time, a story of human frailty but of continual efforts to live the Gospel message.
- Give priority to educating the spiritually and financially poor and being their advocates.

However one of the greatest challenges is the preservation and strengthening of the Catholic identity in schools and that the individual school's Catholic identity and spiritual capital is evident and transmits the Catholic culture to the entire school community (Belmonte, 2007). English (2005) cites identity formation for parents and school communities as a key to success in non-government schools. It is unquestioned that the strategic role of the principal (Cranston, 2006) is pivotal to successfully achieving identity creation. The school leader's task is to see that the entire school community does not lose sight of the need to develop all aspects of the school's purpose (Boyd, MacNeill & Silcox, 2006). This position is highlighted the increasing number of lay principals in Catholic schools. Table 1 shows the changing number of principals in New South Wales Catholic schools.

Table 1: NSW Catholic School Principals Religious / Lay

<b>Category</b>	<b>1988</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2005</b>
Male Religious Principals	70	68	47	35	25
Female Religious Principals	177	165	78	48	23
Total Religious Principals	247	235	125	83	48
Male Lay Principals	190	178	236	264	266
Female Lay Principals	163	180	230	242	271
Total Lay Principals	353	359	466	506	537
<b>TOTAL PRINCIPALS</b>	<b>600</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>591</b>	<b>589</b>	<b>585</b>

To overcome these challenges, the educational leader needs to build the Catholic faith community identity amongst the entire school community; work in partnership with parents, the parish and the wider community; foster an environment built on student-centred learning and the professional development of staff. To be successful in overcoming these challenges the educational leader must initiate purposeful, deliberate and meaningful actions with the goal of linking the daily operations of the school with the moral purpose of the organization.

## **A framework for strategic leadership**

Davies and Davies (2006, 2004) using data collected in the NCSL study (2005) were able to establish a list of significant characteristics that successful strategic leaders possessed. These were:

- A dissatisfaction or restlessness with the present;
- The ability to prioritise their own strategic thinking and learning;
- The ability to create mental models to frame their own understanding and practice; and
- Powerful personal and professional networks.

(Davies & Davies, 2006, p.131)

The dissatisfaction and restlessness was born out of the organisational reality of schools and the need for capacity and capability building prior to changing the current situation. Many school leaders in the NCSL study stressed the importance of new knowledge to effectively promote the strategic direction of their respective educational institutions. This knowledge led to the construction of mental models and frameworks that school leaders use to guide their own practice and understanding. Finally, scanning the environment (locally, regionally and internationally) for new developments was seen as a characteristic of effective strategic leaders. Whilst the NCSL study is only one piece of research, using a relatively small sample (23 principals in the UK), it represents a considerable shift in strategic leadership research as it focuses on the behaviour and characteristics of the leader and not merely the planning process.

As with strategic leadership characteristics, the NCSL study (2005), Davies (2006) and Davies and Davies (2006, 2004) were able to create a list of five key activities that strategic leaders involve themselves in. They are:

- Direction setting;
- Translating strategy into action;
- Enabling the staff to develop and deliver the strategy;
- Determining effective intervention points; and
- Developing strategic capabilities.

(Davies & Davies, 2006, p.123)

Taking the work of the NCSL project and Davies and Davies, table 2 is a synthesised list of what strategic leaders do, to produce a conceptual perspective that can be used to study strategic leaders.



Table 2: Conceptual characteristics of strategic leaders

Conceptualising Strategy	Engaging Others	Articulating Strategy	Implementing Strategy	Monitoring and Evaluating
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflection</li> <li>• Strategic thinking</li> <li>• Mental models</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic conversations</li> <li>• Participation</li> <li>• Motivation</li> <li>• Capability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oral</li> <li>• Written</li> <li>• Structural</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Translating strategy into action</li> <li>• Alignment</li> <li>• Sequential / parallel implementation</li> <li>• Strategic timing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic</li> <li>• Adjustments</li> <li>• Judgement</li> <li>• Effectiveness</li> </ul>

This framework combines the lists into a workable model for analysing and studying the strategic leadership of educational leaders in a manner that closely aligns to strategic management perspectives. New to the list, and missing from Davies and Davies' work is the role of monitoring and evaluation. This is an essential element of strategic leadership in order to keep the community on track and focused on the strategic imperative of the institution. Influential behaviours and actions relating to monitoring and evaluation include:

- Developing a systematic method of collecting information about the implementation of the school's strategic direction;
- Continuously assessing 'how are we going with the school's strategic direction?';
- Making adjustments (both small and large) during the implementation process to maximise effectiveness;
- Establishing periodic in-depth, thoughtful and considered evaluation of the effectiveness of strategic activities;
- Providing a forum for the school community to evaluate the effectiveness of the school's strategic direction;
- Applying value judgements on the effectiveness of strategic activities through reflection; and
- Taking account of changes and their effects on the school progress.

### **Strategic operations**

The previous sections outlined the role of strategy in schools. This section deals with the function of strategic operations. Rather than drawing on a particular model of strategic management, it proposes four inter-related levels within an educational organisation that must be considering during the strategic management process. The relationships are portrayed as a flowchart in figure 2.

The school's strategy remains the guide for action at all levels. In addition to providing guidance relating to actions undertaken, it also provides the guiding principles for establishing a set of expectations for practice and conduct. In essence, the flowchart becomes a strategic management tool for the school as an organisation to clearly articulate its expectations. Using the case study school from Eacott (2004, 2006) as an example, the links will become much clearer. The school wanted to be widely recognised and acknowledged for:

- Excellence of its programs to develop the entire student;
- Commitment of staff to professional growth, improvement and quality; and
- The pride exhibited by students, teachers and community.

(Eacott, 2006, p.26)

Using the flowchart, the educational leader, through the effective use of strategic management tools and a committee, can establish a set of behaviours at each level that reflect the three strategic direction statements. For each statement, a list of behaviours as demonstrated at the organization level, by staff, by students and by community members. This list would be a working document that can be refined at any time. It would need to be distributed to current staff, students and community members. In addition, it would serve as the primary document for the induction of new staff and the orientation of any students and community members. Through the integration of the organisation's strategic direction into operational aspects and expectations assists in building a focused culture at all levels of the organisation.

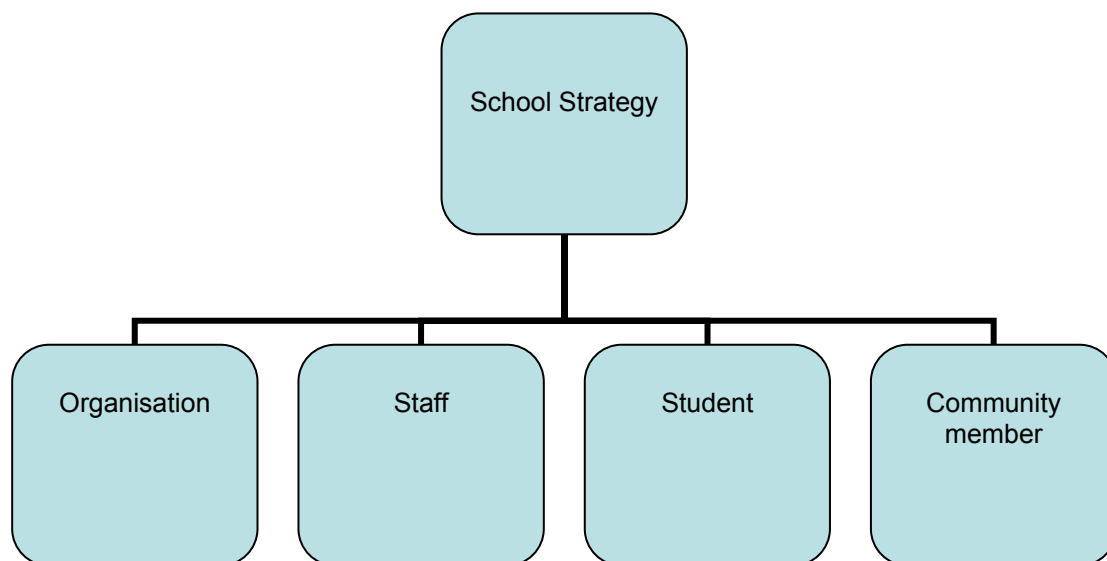


Figure 2: Inter-related levels of operation within a school

### **Strategically leading your school**

Central to the success of the strategy and strategic operations is the implementation of strategic leadership. Pivotal to this implementation is the perception of causation by the leader. Whilst the majority of the materials discuss strategic leadership within the domain of the 'leader', the leader and that leadership role is not restricted to the head of the organisation. Any individual within an organisation can act as a strategic leader and the leadership can shift individual through the course of time. Causation and causal model of strategy have primary focused on the dependence of strategy on the environment or organisational form and conduct (Eacott, forthcoming). However, if the educational leader shifts their perception to a model where strategy is both dependent and independent at the same time, essentially enacting an interdependent model, strategic leadership is at its most effective. Figure 3 depicts the direction of causation within the model. Weick (1995) explains that strategists act, and in doing so they create the constraints and opportunities they encounter. Pondy and Mitroff (1979, p.17) define strategic leadership as an 'enacted phenomenon'. One where the strategist plays a major role in producing the market they face. With this conceptualisation of causation, the strategic leader can effectively shape their environment which will then guide future strategy development. Through purposeful and deliberate actions, the strategic leader can affect the school design, by structuring the organisation in a manner that is consistent with the strategic direction. Similarly, the school design shapes the development of strategy. The environment, whilst initially acting as the stimulus for strategy development, can then be purposefully influenced through effective strategic leadership. School performance is similar to the environment. Whilst it is a basis for initial strategy development, effective leadership, particularly through school design and environmental influence can have positive affect on school performance and vice versa.

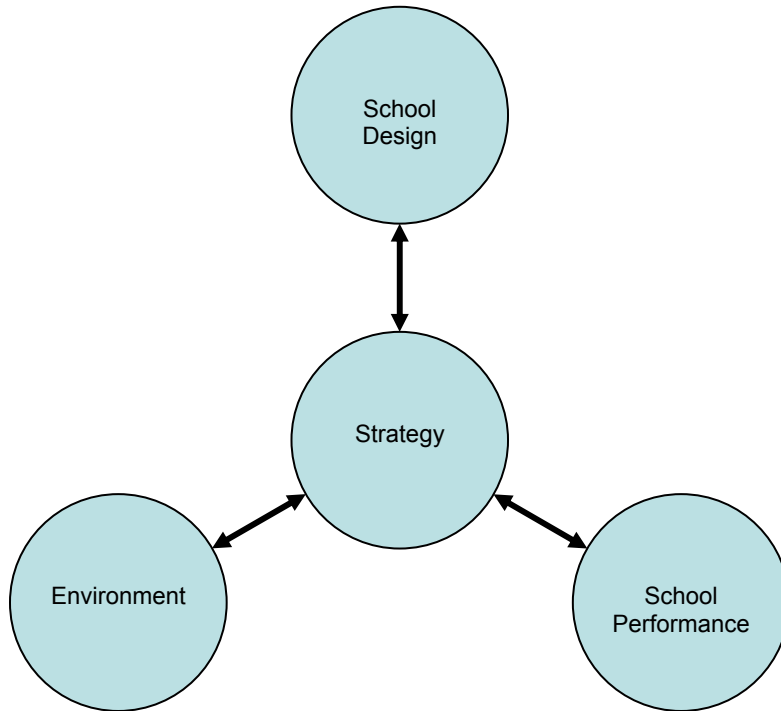


Figure 3: Causation model of strategy and school context

### **Strategic meetings**

Meetings are an organisation necessity in many educational organisations and can be a highly productive means of information sharing, and decision-making. However, in many schools, the organisational inertia of holding a number of weekly meetings can lead to unproductive meetings and substantial time wasting. The goal of this section is to outline a means of making meeting agenda and allocation of time more focused on the school's strategy. Gamage and Pang (2003) provide a comprehensive overview of other meeting relating matters. They discuss how the agenda is the blueprint for action in a meeting and the importance of ordering the agenda items.

In order to make meetings more strategic, primacy should be given to how the school is currently progressing in relation to its strategic direction. Using a large primary school as an example, the initial period of time during an executive meeting, should be allocated to discussion, decision-making, monitoring and evaluation of strategic matters. Approximately a quarter to a third of meeting time should be allocated to strategic implementation, monitoring and evaluation matters. At the

faculty or sectional level a similar approach should be taken. This promotes the strategic focus of all staff in working towards the school's strategic direction. At the school council level, a similar approach should be used. Professional learning opportunities offered to staff at whole school meetings should have an explicit connection with the school's strategic direction. This model of meetings focuses the greatest number of participants in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the school's strategic actions.

### **Sustainable strategic focus**

In order to establish the strategically focused educational institution it is essential to build it around sustainability. To create this sustainability the leader must integrate the organisational strategy as the central principle for organisational decisions and actions and this must cover the entire organisation and not just executive. It is only then that the strategy becomes a shared responsibility. Through the development of strategic responsibility in others, the leader is building the capability of the entire organisation. This reflects a proactive approach to strategy implementation, monitoring and evaluation. By consistently reflecting on progress and re-evaluating the school's strategy, the leadership is actively shaping the strategic journey rather than merely being a passenger. Truly sustainable leadership in the area of strategy requires a continual focus on the task at hand and a commitment to and protection of the integrity of the strategy.

Hargreaves and Fink (2005, p.13) state that most leaders want 'to accomplish goals that matter, inspire others to join them in working toward those goals, and leave a legacy after they have gone'. All of this can be achieved through strategic leadership and a sustained focus on strategic priorities. However, only by utilising appropriate strategic management model, strategic management tools, meetings and operational management can this be achieved by the leader and leadership team. It is not a job for the half-hearted and can take time to really effect organisational wide change and focus. But if we want to make the changes that matter, for those to spread throughout the organisation, and for them to last beyond the immediate, then strategic leadership is an imperative aspects of the educational leader's repertoire.

### **Conclusion**

This topic considered the concept of strategy, its role in schools and developed a model of strategic leadership built around operations, meetings and sustainability. Participants are reminded that leading an organisation is a complex and ever changing role that requires considerable focus, time and commitment. What is of

important is to develop the knowledge, skills and understandings required to meaningfully energise and motivate others towards the achievement of organisational goals. Time spent thinking about and developing a style of leadership and management to do this can prevent time and resource wastage. Giving appropriate attention to the model of management, conduct of meetings and organisational systems and structures should receive careful attention from leadership. Importantly, leaders are reminded of the importance of continual monitoring and evaluation in the constant quest for organisational improvement.

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