



Leadership Strategies and Strategic Planning for Times of Crisis and

BEYOND

When I was appointed superintendent of schools, my primary concern was understanding what was and was not working in the schools within the conference. It wasn't any secret that K-12 schools in my conference were declining in number and enrollment. So, in a meeting with the leadership teams from all the schools, I asked: "What things do you do mostly as a team of educators at your respective campuses?"

The answers were similar to those I had heard many times. These leaders felt overwhelmed trying to accomplish everything while consistently having to react to daily crises. For example, they stated, "We are busy in meetings; managing staff; trying to balance the

budget; responding to students, parents, and stakeholders; and growing enrollment."

Then I asked my second big question: "Is it working for you?" Again, the answer was like those I had commonly heard in similar organizational settings: "Well, kind of, but not as well as we would like. It's frustrating to put in so much effort—doing so many things—with so few positive results."

My dialogue with the school leaders expanded into a sincere outpouring of frustration. The leaders spoke with sincerity, their voices describing failed efforts, misplaced emphases, misaligned support in funding, and unclear lines of authority and accountability. I concluded that the problem was focusing on *what* was done instead of *how* things were done. In many instances, institutional

leaders are *generalists*—doing many things but lacking specificity of focus. Generalists fulfill a necessary function. Managing the daily operations of an institution, especially if there is limited support staff, is essential, and many generalists find themselves problem-solving, putting out fires, and avoiding crises. However, this is not the same as strategic leadership.

Leadership Approach Needed for Educational Renewal

Educational renewal depends on moving from a generalist approach to a more strategic one. While the generalist can deal with immediate and short-term crises, he or she cannot adequately address the varying demands of the modern Adventist edu-

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educational landscape. When institutional leaders fail to adopt a strategic approach, they appear ineffective despite their dedication and strenuous efforts.

While every leader can become a strategic leader, much of the challenge in accomplishing that goal is the training leaders receive because most were educated to be generalists rather than strategic leaders.¹ To be a strategic leader, one must acknowledge that times have changed and act accordingly—and determine whether that requires giant steps or incremental actions. Strategic leaders cut through and surpass the ambiguous, clouded, and vague. They understand and communicate the institutional realities, develop focus areas, and align resources for goal accomplishment.

When objectives and priorities get muddled, usually by application of the generalist approach, those attempting to execute the institution's mission become less focused and ineffective. Unfortunately, this problem can also occur when a leader has a great vision but cannot communicate it. So, there must be more correlation between vision, communication, and key decision processes.

This article explores components associated with Adventist educational renewal through strategic thinking. It focuses on strategic leadership in Adventist learning institutions and the corresponding characteristics of this approach. Adventist education benefits significantly when a strategic leadership and thinking approach is implemented.

Educational Renewal—A Definition

Educational renewal may be defined as “providing all students with the best education to seize opportunities for success in the path they choose.”² It inspires positive working and learning environments, facilitates cooperation among educators, and increases opportunities for students, teachers, and staff to grow and learn.

Significance of Educational Renewal

One of the most critical needs of modern times is educational renewal.

Education loses its significance if the students experiencing it are not continuously learning new, transferable skills and relevant concepts. That realization must prompt educational administrators to identify multiple inter-related elements needing change.

Among the elements required for educational renewal is a focus on how people learn and how the human brain works. Learners should gain the ability to establish values, skills, and attitudes that will enhance their capabilities over time.³ Modern society has progressed into the Information Age where new technology has created new tools that enhance learning and facilitate the learning processes; however, these tools require people to acquire learning much differently than in the past. For example, they can enable learners to link with other learners virtually and access educational materials from various parts of the globe through learning-manage-

ment systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, Canvas, or one of the many other platforms. As a result, some traditional educational practices have become obsolete, and new ones have emerged.

Elements of Strategy

Most people perceive strategic leadership as a particular set of actions and decisions that are followed in institutions.⁴ However, the *strategic leadership concept* offers a reliable foundation for the four elements that develop its overall meaning.⁵ First, according to Davies, strategic leadership takes a more comprehensive view using aggregated trends and data instead of depending on disaggregated details and random data. Second, strategy strongly emphasizes long-term and medium-term operational goals instead of short-term ones. Third, it helps stakeholders to view strategy as a necessary perspective and makes



strategic reasoning the center of their focus and culture. Last, strategy is more essential to achieving vision than is commonly recognized.⁶

The Role of Strategy in Adventist Schools' Long-term Sustainability

With proper direction, appropriate strategies should address the significant challenges facing modern Adventist educational institutions—ensuring they achieve relevance while remaining faithful to the mission of Adventist education's philosophical framework, which is God-centered and Bible-based, service-oriented, and kingdom-directed. Adventist education radically differs from secular approaches because it is anchored in divinity—God's character, purposes, and the ultimate goal of redeeming humanity.⁷ In such a setting, every child is seen as created in the image of God and as a candidate for heaven.

The challenges of achieving these goals are compounded by the emergence of globalization, technology, and a pandemic that has profoundly shifted learners' thinking. These challenges accrue from instabilities relating to schools' performance, such as enrollment, financial variables, and low faculty and staff morale. The absence of strategic leadership is one of the many enablers of these challenges.

Lautoka found that strategic leadership is a significant determinant of educational renewal because of its positive impact on students' learning and faculty and staff morale,⁸ thereby improving the overall performance of schools, teachers, and students. This is encouraging when one considers the challenges of Adventist education. However, such achievements can only be reached by creating relevant, measurable short-term strategic agendas as well as long-term sustainability plans. Research shows that failure to establish long-term strategic plans reduces the sustainability of short-term effectiveness.⁹ The concept is incongruent with the usual societal assumptions, which perceive long-term effectiveness as the product of short-term plans rather than the other way around. The goal is sustainability.

Setting up and running short-term operations in an environment that needs to be prepared to operate based on long-term strategies is not ideal. Also, learning institutions may suffer unbearable hardships when attempting to establish long-term plans if the ineffectiveness of the short-term plans drives them into further crisis. Therefore, effective long-term strategies in educational sectors must complement short-term effectiveness and vice versa.

Strategic Thinking

School administrators need to create strategies that link strategic leadership and strategic thinking.¹⁰ Research shows that focusing only on strategic planning is a significantly limited way of defining the scope of any given strategy. Strategic planning works in tandem with strategic thinking. As a result, educational administrators who emphasize this type of thinking will significantly enhance the process and outcomes of educational renewal. For instance, Davies stated that strategic planning is heavily criticized as a management tool because it is reductionist, predictable, and linear.¹¹ School administrators should encourage strategic conversations about the educational program offerings and trends within the learning environment and other areas. Such conversations can help inspire thinking in a strategic way and foster support for long-term goals through the ideas generated.

Operationalizing Strategic Thinking

The above discussions review definitions of components associated with the role of strategy and strategic thinking. Although understanding these connections is essential as one reflects on the focus of this article, it should be noted that strategy must be crafted with attention to research, best practices, and moral principles; it must also translate into measurable, correlated actions. These components must be in place for strategies to be effective and maintain their significance, since studies show that achiev-

ing intended change is possible only by engaging in these processes.¹²

Strategic thinking includes integrated planning, processing, and adhering to a shared vision in the organization. Together, these actions can bring about crucial changes to current leadership paradigms within Adventist institutions. For instance, how administrative meetings at the senior governance levels are conducted should be distinctively different from how operational meetings are held. Operationalizing strategic thinking, therefore, should be manifested in deliberate efforts to achieve specific goals.

According to Pietersen, five principles are associated with strategic processes. They include *insight*, *focus*, *alignment*, *execution*, and *renewal*. Each is discussed below.¹³

- *Insight* refers to people's ability to make sense of their surroundings and comprehend their effects on their organizations and the way they envision the future.

- *Focus* addresses the need for individuals to home in on choosing the right things at the right moments and assessing the desirable and feasible courses of action needed to complete their implementations.

- *Alignment* refers to the critical job of matching the skill sets of individuals in an organization with necessary tasks to ensure the execution of the strategic plan.¹⁴

- *Execution* describes the organization's or an individual's speed and effectiveness in implementing strategic leadership procedures within the operational structure.

- Last, *renewal* aims at how organizational stakeholders (educational administrators, educators, and educational personnel) can re-envision the institution's purpose after learning through the strategic process.

Kaplan and Norton used principles like the ones listed above to define the process of translating strategies into actions.¹⁵ According to them, five stages must be addressed to accomplish this goal.

The first step involves the translation of a strategy into operational

terms. It also addresses the ability of the organization/individual to implement the desired strategies. Second is aligning the organization to fit the strategy. This is one of the most challenging areas in the process because it involves changing the stakeholders' mindsets from focusing on what happened in the past to embracing an adjusted strategic direction. The third step is making the strategy the aim and guide of everyone's job and corresponding performance indicators. This ensures that the strategy has been incorporated both operationally and strategically and that the environment is prepared for the kind of dialogue needed to shape future behaviors. The fourth step is making strategy a continuous process, ensuring it is revisited and reinforced through frequent development plans and reviews. The final step is the strategic mobilization of change by the educational leaders, educators, and everyone impacted by the plans. This stage helps keep administrators in the education sector "on their toes," alert to the threats and opportunities that affect the implementation of the strategy and ensuring that they demonstrate commitment to the strategy, its implementation, and those who are served by it.

The above discussion shows that turning strategies into actions is a detailed process subject to multiple factors. Because strategic leadership capabilities are central to determining the success of educational renewal, the institution's senior leaders must possess the skills to ensure success at each stage of the implementation process. The importance of having the necessary leadership capabilities is discussed in the next section, with an analysis of leadership styles in general, emphasizing the benefits of strategic leadership.

Characteristics of a Strategic Leader

One of the significant challenges associated with leadership is identifying the differences between strategic leaders and other good leaders (see the

Characteristics of Strategic Leaders

The literature on leadership shows that both *operational (generalist)* and *strategic* leadership approaches are essential for successful organizations. Operational leaders manage the day-to-day needs of an institution. They set and implement goals and objectives, implement policy, monitor procedures, and possess knowledge of what an organization offers in terms of products and services.*

Strategic leaders possess the same abilities but are skilled at long-term visioning for the organization, articulating a clear mission, and framing goals and objectives within broad knowledge of the competitive landscape. They do so in a way that motivates others to buy in and own the strategic vision.†

Unfortunately, preferring one type of leader over the other can be detrimental to an organization's ability to pivot during times of change or fully achieve long-term goals. Educational renewal in Adventist education requires more emphasis on training and developing strategic leaders and nurturing strategic thinking. Below are the characteristics of strategic leaders:‡

- Anticipate** changes;
- Challenge** the status quo;
- Interpret** data to make decisions;
- Align** vision, mission, and goals with needs within the marketplace;
- Learn** about themselves, others, and their organization through data collection and continuous assessment;
- Communicate** and listen with empathy;
- Collaborate** with honesty, humility, and diplomacy;
- Innovate** with passion and commitment.

* Hidayat Rizvi, "Organizational Leadership Versus Strategic Leadership: Which Is Better for Business?" (2022): <https://hidayatrizvi.com/operational-leadership-vs-strategic-leadership/>.

† Ibid.

‡ Marisa Sailus, "Strategic Leadership: 10 Characteristics of a Good Leader" (2023): <https://www.clearpointstrategy.com/blog/strategic-leadership-characteristics>; Paul J. H. Schoemaker, Steve Krupp, and Samantha Howland, "Strategic Leadership: The Essential Skills," *Harvard Business Review* (2013): <https://hbr.org/2013/01/strategic-leadership-the-essential-skills>.

Characteristics of Strategic Leaders insert on this page). Strategic leaders use long-term planning to cast a vision for an organization's sustainability and growth, and they have the skills to engage others in crafting and innovating processes to meet those goals. These individuals are often seen as transformational, transformative, and charismatic leaders.¹⁶ Other types of leadership styles have their place (i.e., generalist or operational leaders who excel at managing, monitoring, and executing day-to-day operations),¹⁷ especially in larger schools where responsi-

bilities may require compartmentalization. However, strategic leadership is more often required in modern society, where the types of learning activities required in schools and those in high demand in the workplace are at a crossroads and daily redefined. Educational renewal in Adventist education calls for strategic leaders who can clearly assess the current status of their schools and define solutions to the following questions:

1. What are the issues within the

current educational landscape as they relate to the scope and mission of Adventist education? How is the school fulfilling its responsibility to integrate faith with learning?

2. What new types of course offerings should Adventist educators provide to enhance future learning processes?

3. What are the individual and organization/institutional-level requirements (licensure and certification) needed to facilitate the learning outcomes required for future learning and employability?

4. How should Adventist administrators reorganize their organizational culture, climate, and characteristics to adapt to new research on best practices and trends in student learning?

The above questions suggest a reliable starting point to shaping educational renewal because the management of the learning processes must be both strategically driven and future-oriented. According to Kapur, strategic leaders must have the ability to guide their groups or organizations through a significant change process.¹⁸ More specifically, leaders in educational institutions are responsible for directing their teams and stakeholders using strategically appropriate approaches. For example, leaders, in collaboration with other educational stakeholders—conference and union leaders, school boards, school staff, parents, and students—focus on implementing their tasks, designing solutions for the prevailing problems, providing input, making effective decisions, and other achievements needed for collaboration in creating a productive learning environment and a wholistic experience. The discussion below includes the specific characteristics that should define a strategic leader.

Strategic leaders are able to contextualize and assess their current environments and, based on these actions, challenge the status quo when planning for the future. First, however, they must understand the contextual settings of their institutions to have a more complete understanding of the present while at the same time looking toward the future.¹⁹

The second characteristic of strategic leaders is dissatisfaction with conditions when things are not going well. They sense the need for improvement within their institutions and eagerly seek sustainable change. Strategic leaders constantly seek to transform their organizations to a different status by advocating strategic thinking and approaches because they are dissatisfied with the current conditions.

The third characteristic of such leaders is the ability to map their organizations' future growth and standing. Strategic leaders should develop a

Based on the literature already referred to in this article, strategic focus, intent, and implementation are not optional leadership capabilities—they are vital in the progress from strategies to actions.

conceptual understanding of the desired future for their institutions by creating a relatively concise but comprehensive structure to guide organizational actions as they pursue these goals. Additionally, they should have the necessary capabilities to determine the critical periods for strategic transformations within their scope of service.²⁰ Although the discussion in the earlier parts of this article showed that change and translation of strategies to actions are continuous processes, certain objectives are time-bound, and will be significant predictors of the success of the overall

processes. Such objectives are referred to as *strategic inflection points*.²¹ During these critical moments, strategic leaders engage in meaningful actions like moving in new directions, creating new strategies, and developing new or expanding goals.

The fifth element used to define these leaders is the ability to translate strategies into actions through planned processes. Planned processes should include three primary factors—strategic focus, intent, and implementation.²² Based on the literature already referred to in this article, strategic focus, intent, and implementation are not optional leadership capabilities—they are vital in the progress from strategies to actions.

To illustrate this section, when I was appointed as superintendent of schools, my first approach with my administrative team was to make sense of the reality in which we operated. Schools were failing, and workers were frustrated with their efforts. Acknowledging everyone's frustration with the current situation, we collaboratively identified a preferred future, listed priority areas, and aligned resources to accomplish goals. As a result, within a couple of months, we were able to reverse a five-year trend of declining enrollment, improve staff and faculty morale, and position the conference for a positive future.

Finally, leadership is strategic if the individuals can create meaning for their constituents. Leaders portray this characteristic by upholding dialogue and strategic conversations with all stakeholders.²³

Recommendations

The following recommendations, which are not exhaustive, outline some recommended avenues for Adventist leaders of educational institutions to explore that will inspire educational renewal through strategic change.

1. Strategic Leadership Education: Leaders in Adventist educational institutions take responsibility for engaging stakeholder groups in strategic

leadership education. Senior leadership in these groups include education leaders at the various administrative levels and institutional boards that commit to providing an ongoing education “campaign” at multiple levels to engage stakeholders in strategic thinking. This campaign, although time-consuming, is worth the investment. It may include but is not limited to infomercials (short videos that can be used to share bullet points of the strategic vision), focus-group sessions, strategic professional seminars, online courses, and department-specific training with strong, direct strategic emphases.

2. Strategic Personnel: Adventist leaders should be perceptive in selecting and appointing personnel who possess strategic mindsets and skills to serve the institution. Actively identifying, recruiting, training, and mentoring such individuals will help support the whole process, including buy-in by those who may be resistant to change due to prior experiences. Buy-in is essential to succession planning. These individuals—leaders and stakeholders—must be helped to understand the strategic, contextual settings, after which they can create clearly articulated comprehensive checkpoints on the journey to strategic educational renewal.

3. Strategic Conversation Centers: Leaders in Adventist educational environments should engage in dialogue and conversations about strategic planning with their stakeholders at all levels. Consideration could be given to creating “conversation centers” where discussions about strategy in general, as well as specific, strategic approaches, take place as part of the journey. Conversation centers are akin to “think tanks” because they help to guide the alignment of knowledge and policies to achieve desired other desired outcomes for students, teachers, building-wide plans for the school’s physical plant, or plans for the future. However, unlike think tanks, conversation centers engage all stakeholders.

Definition of Key Terms

Strategic leadership: The acts of setting priorities, aligning resources, and executing plans for student-centered outcomes based on institutional needs, realities, and goals.

Strategic thinking: Consistent, deliberate, and systematic ways institutional administrators see and understand where the institution needs to go, how to get there, and how to use opportunities and challenges to create institutional value.

Educational renewal: A process by which institutional administrators and stakeholders deliberately and consistently align strengths and opportunities to build something better.

In my conference, for example, we have set up professional learning communities (PLC) where teachers of similar grades or grade ranges can talk together and learn from one another about what is relevant and applicable to learning in the age range to guide strategic implementation.

4. Spiritual Strategic Leadership: Plans for educational renewal and strategic leadership must not ignore or exclude spiritual matters. Our Chief Leader and Master Teacher advocated educational renewal and spiritually sound, strategic leadership through the principles included in His parables and teachings. Matthew 7:24 to 27, although not the only illustration, probably is Jesus’ most direct reference to strategic thinking. These verses anchor, frame, and provide guidance for implementing a strategic leadership approach. Jesus’ teaching was strategic and purposeful. He was a strategic leader who made sense of reality and set priorities for His disciples, teaching them, with a specific vision in mind, to seek and save the lost (Luke 19:10). His visionary, strategic thinking led Him to invite the disciples,

“Come, follow me, . . . and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19, NIV).²⁴ The Chief Leader and Master Teacher used insight, focus, alignment, execution, and renewal to carry His message.

5. Strategic Assessment: Leaders at all levels of the Adventist educational sphere should be bold enough to engage in meaningful and strategic assessment, which may be qualitative and/or quantitative. This would include strategically assessing whether the philosophy of Adventist education is sufficiently embraced by the board of trustees, administrative teams, and key stakeholders, who are already strategically positioned. These assessments might be peer-to-peer reviews, appreciative inquiries (a data-collection model²⁵), and/or top-down, bottom-up assessments, with the results used in transparent and sound decision-making.

Conclusion

Implementing strategic leadership is the most reliable way to ensure educational renewal and effectiveness in contemporary Adventist education. Leaders should possess the ability and also commitment to create the values, skills, and attitudes that will harness the elements of strategy and, together with their teams, achieve optimum outcomes. Additionally, to deal with the challenges of modernization and the Information Age, leaders must be prepared to pivot and adapt in order to achieve Adventist educational renewal.

In recent years, some traditional educational practices have become obsolete, and alternative approaches have emerged or are emerging. Change is inevitable in such times. Thus, strategic leadership capabilities are essential to ensure that leaders and personnel engage in strategic thinking in order to achieve success and renewal so that we will truly be perceived as “the head, not the tail” (Deuteronomy 28:13) and lead the way in education. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Recommended citation:

Greg Baldeo, “Leadership Strategies and Strategic Planning for Times of Crisis and Beyond,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 85:1 (2023): 15-21. <https://doi.org/10.55668/jae0031>.

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6. Ibid., 295.

7. We can gather from the story of God’s interaction with the children of Israel that the aim of true education was, and continues to be, an understanding of God’s character and purposes. In the book *Education*, Ellen White wrote, “A knowledge of God, fellowship with Him in study and in labor, likeness to Him in character, were to be the source, the means, and the aim of Israel’s education—the education imparted by God to the parents, and by them to be given to their children” ([Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1903], 44). The same applies today.

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21. In the 1990s, the term “strategic inflection point” was made popular by Andy Grove, then CEO of Intel. The idea behind the term is that there are times in an institution’s history when changes in technology, the economy, the ecology of the planet, and the competitive marketplace will stir up either panic or the need for strategic change. A strategic leader will be able to gauge what is needed based on the available data and make the appropriate correction. See the transcript of Grove’s presentation at the Annual Meeting of the Academy of Management (1998): <https://www.intel.com/pressroom/archive/speeches/ag080998.htm>. See also Stanley K. Ridgley, *Strategic Thinking Skills* (Chantilly, Va.: Great Courses Teaching Company, 2012).

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25. Appreciative Inquiry is an organizational model. Leaders in organizations and communities use this approach, which consists of questions and dialogue to help stakeholders engage in conversations about strengths, opportunities, and assets that can be used to the benefit of the organization or group. See “Appreciative Inquiry” (n.d.): <https://organizingengagement.org/models/appreciative-inquiry/#:~:text=Appreciative%20Inquiry%20is%20an%20asset,their%20communities%2C%20organizations%2C%20or%20teams>.