

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Article written by Diane Newell, MD OCM Discovery

THE LEADER

I wanna be the leader
I wanna be the leader
Can I be the leader?
Can I? I can?
Promise? Promise?
Yippee I'm the leader
I'm the leader

OK what shall we do?

by Roger Mcgough

Despite the amusing last line in the great Mcgough's poem, it is not the Strategic Leader's job to know 'what to do'. Being a Strategic leader isn't about having 'all the answers'. It's about asking the right questions.

WHERE ARE WE GOING? AND WHY?

All too often Strategy is discussed as though we lived in a predictable, plannable world where we can set destinations, map paths to achieve goals and marshal our teams to follow the routes we have set out. The role of today's Strategic Leader in most organisations is much more like shepherding a flotilla of small boats in unknown seas towards a desired destination than mapping a road route to success. It is vital for the success of the expedition that Strategic Leaders set and communicate accurately the compass heading; having and sharing a clear sense of purpose.

You need to ask yourself some key questions: Where are you leading to, and why? What is the difference that you are seeking to make for your organisation, your team, your community and customers? And why do you care? If you don't express your direction with clarity and have authentic conviction, how can you inspire commitment in each of those little craft to come on the voyage with you?

WHERE ARE WE?

The strategic tides, currents, and winds you encounter will be variable and unpredictable. Your job as a Strategic Leader is to make sure that each navigator has good, timely information and that learning is shared. If someone is stuck on a sandbar not only do you want to use the flotilla's shared knowledge, insight and resources to help them get free, and you want to make sure everyone else knows where it is. And if there's a really helpful current out there lets all get in it!

Above all you need to make sure that you are asking for and allowing truth to be told. You must be prepared to give clear feedback to help people navigate, and you must always be prepared to listen openly to where they really are. Of course everyone will have a different perspective and you might find it frustrating to hear the difficulties they are encountering, or the fears people have about the changes you are championing.

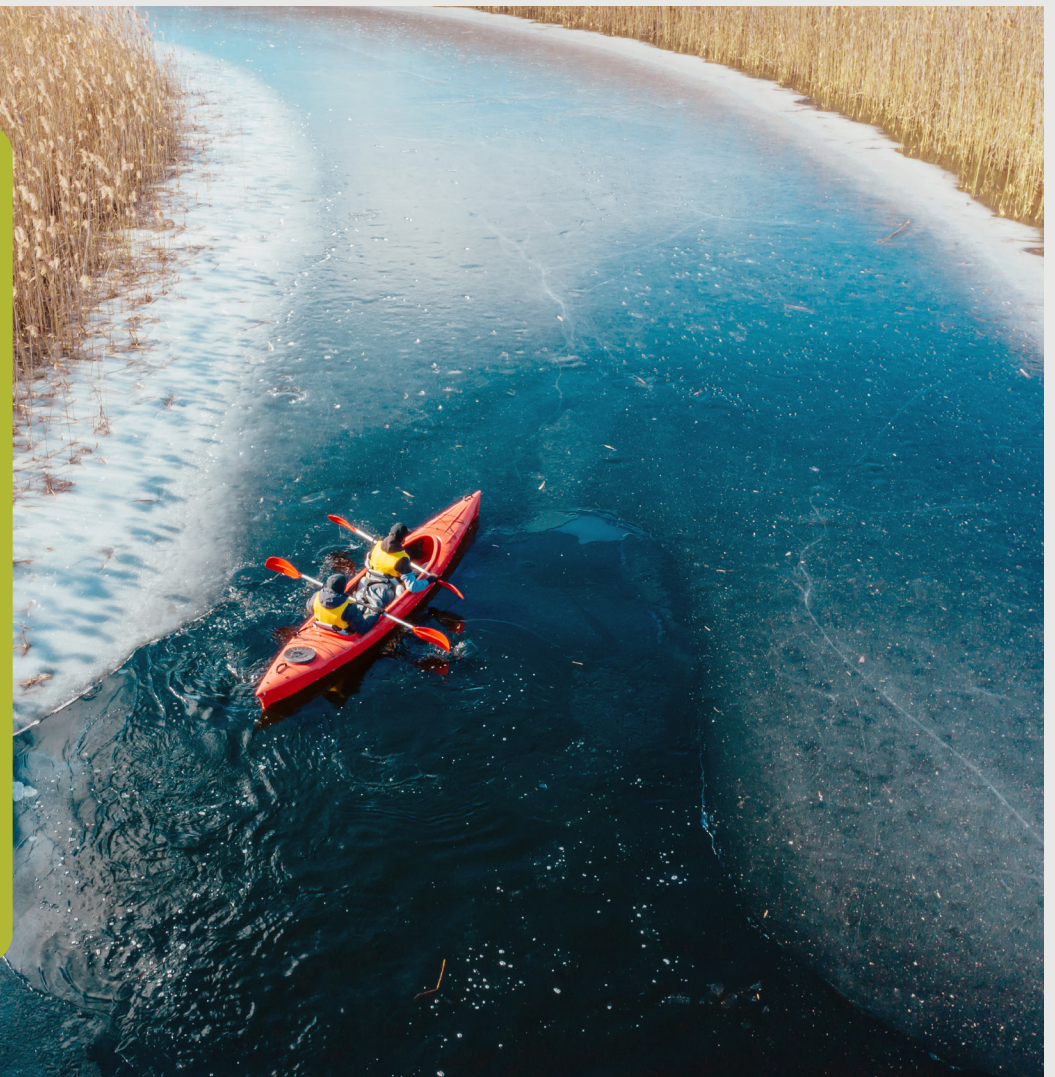


But if you don't listen openly and engage how can you help people overcome blocks and address their fears? Or re-set and renavigate if to fulfil your purpose you need to change course? The biggest strategic failures come when Strategic Leaders become dislocated from what is really happening on the ground (or in the water in this analogy) because truth telling is punished.

WHAT'S THE BEST NEXT STEP AND HOW CAN I HELP?

As Strategic Leader you may not have direct control of all the resources and teams you are trying to shepherd. But even if you do, as well as motivating and persuading your captains and navigators to bring their boats on your voyage you will need to keep checking in to ask how you are of most help - asking when to get out of their way, and how to offer coaching, challenge and support to help them take their best next step. Not everyone will have the resources, capacity or commitment to travel at the same speed, and some Strategic Leaders are tempted to micromanage the laggards to get them to catch up. In the very short term and in an emergency that might be a good option – but if sustained it will mean that you aren't able to give your attention to the whole flotilla. Your role is to focus on purpose, information and learning, keeping an eye on compass heading and navigation, encouraging the front runners to share insights that helps the rest of the fleet to follow.

You are needed to offer clear feedback that helps people to navigate and support that catalyses progress. Sometimes a Strategic Leader will need to be 'kindly ruthless'. You may not reach your destination with all the same captains and navigators that you set off with – some will find the voyage too hard, or realise they need to head in a different direction. It's always painful to lose shipmates but if people see that you are allowing the need to keep people on board to endanger the success of the expedition they will be disheartened. On the other hand they do want to see people treated fairly, helped to find safe harbour not left to founder (or made to walk the plank if that's not stretching a narrative too far!), or they will feel unsafe themselves.



Being a true Strategic Leader is leadership with purpose, to a destination. To be a successful Strategic Leader you need to ask the right questions and listen openly to create insight and learning, motivating, supporting and catalysing progress. True Strategic Leaders are clear about and consistent with their own values and sense of purpose, but their focus isn't on how they feel about what they are doing, its on the impact that they have on and for others now and into the future. What's the impact that you will have?

Contact Diane Newell to find out how OCM works with leaders and teams to develop purposeful strategies on [01869 338989](tel:01869338989) or email diane.newell@theo cm.co.uk