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*Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies* 1996; 3; 139  
DOI: 10.1177/107179199600300113

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# Strategic Leadership and Skill Usage by Academic Presidents

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## Executive Summary

The literature has emphasized the significance of conceptual skills as strategic leaders engage in strategic planning. This paper has identified that academic presidents of large to moderate public four-year collegiate institutions rank interpersonal skills beyond conceptual skills while fulfilling their presidential duties that primarily involves the strategic management of the institution.

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The importance of strategic management is well documented especially for organizations operating in increasingly turbulent environments and how it exists as a profound part of senior management's responsibility (Andrews, 1980; Hofer & Schendel, 1978; Lorange, 1980; D'Aveni, 1994). Moreover, researchers and practitioners view the CEO as the central player in the formulation of strategy (Gabarro, 1987; Hambrick, 1987, 1989; Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Kotter, 1982). While theorists indicate that strategic leadership extends beyond one uppermost senior manager (Bantel & Jackson, 1989; Hambrick, 1989; Hurst, Rush & White, 1989; Shrivastava & Nachman, 1989; Yukl, 1994). The CEO of for-profit, public, and not-for-profit organizations clearly performs a role in both crafting and implementing the organization's vision, goals, and strategies (Gupta, 1984; Keller, 1983, 1987; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973, 1994). This pivotal role, supported by the skill(s) that the CEO employs while engaging strategic planning, impacts on the direction of the institution, the quality of the process, and the desired outcomes (Aguilar, 1982).

To date, much of the strategic leadership literature centers on private sector organizations. In recent years' researchers have shifted their focus from the private sector CEO to those that lead not-for-profit organizations. This shift appears to parallel a growth in not-for-profit organizations employing strategic planning. This study examines how academic presidents rank skills in accomplishing their duties and the implications as these skills pertain to strategic management. The term skill refers to a person's ability to perform various types of cognitive or behavior activities in an effective manner. Moreover, skills are determined jointly by learning and heredity (Gibson, Ivancevich, & Donnelly, 1994). As a result, strategic leadership requires knowledge of the strategic planning process and the effective use of conceptual abilities supported by interpersonal skills.

Most of the academic strategic management literature features a prescriptive approach. Consequently, little significant empirical research exists. This situation has occurred because of two reasons. First, collegiate strategic management appears as a recent phenomenon (Cope, 1987). Second, much of the research in this specific area has one or more methodological weaknesses as identified by Kerlinger (1986). The current study emerges from a 1992 empirically driven effort that examined presidents and strategic management in 394 American institutions of higher education (IHEs). Most of these institutions were public and possess moderate or large student populations. Each president of an institution that maintained a 1991 membership with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) and the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASLUGC) received a survey. The 1992 study produced a noteworthy response rate. Of 394 surveys sent, two hundred responses (51% of the population) were returned and 188 were usable (48% of the population) for purposes of analysis. Studies which survey business CEOs usually average a 20% response rate, moreover, in many cases the response rate exists much lower for moderate to large companies. The collective percentage of the six respondent groups, as determined by the Carnegie Commission Foundation

(1987), to the overall universe was above five percent. The 1987 Carnegie Classification of Higher Education, prepared by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, groups the nation's nearly 3,400 colleges and universities into 10 categories, based on the level of degrees they award, the fields in which the degrees are conferred, and other criteria. The classification was created in 1970, updated in 1976 and most recently in 1987.

Given the response rate, bias does not seem to exist. Although this paper briefly mentions the methodological proceedings used here, the general intent is to understand the overall nature of academic presidential leadership and its strategic implications. Admittedly, studies exist regarding the academic presidential leadership. However, these studies tend to focus upon presidential attitude's, case histories, or descriptive information (Fisher, Tack, & Wheeler, 1988; Sontz, 1991) and do not provide empirical data regarding academic strategic management. From a strategic perspective, it is hoped that our findings might provide timely and relevant insights given the dramatic environmental shifts that now confront higher education.

### **Background of Strategic Leadership**

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Some consider the role of strategic leadership as an insignificant feature of organizational competence (Lieberson & O'Connor, 1972; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). Those who support this argument propose that organizational effectiveness primarily develops from uncontrollable external sources (Aldrich, 1979; Perrow, 1970; Pfeffer, 1977b). Others, however, either through persuasive argument or empirical findings, reveal that leadership fulfills a fundamental role in conducting strategic management that eventually contributes to improved organizational effectiveness (Chandler, 1962; Cope, 1987; Gupta, 1984; Kotter, 1982; Mintzberg, 1973, 1994). Similarly, Katz and Kahn (1978) assert that leadership is a vital element in organizational existence because of:

the necessary imperfections and incompleteness of the organization as a formal, abstract design; the changing external conditions under which every organization must operate; the changing internal state of the organization produced by separate dynamics of the several substructures of the organization; and finally, the special characteristics of human beings as occupants of organizational positions and fillers of organizational roles. (p. 530)

When defining the domain of strategic leadership, Hambrick (1989) indicates that researchers have yet to fully agree on a name for this topic. Though this issue exists, Hambrick provides the field with the following. He states that, "The study of *strategic leadership*...implies substantive decision-making responsibilities, not only the interpersonal and social dimensions typically associated with the word 'leadership' alone." (p. 6) As a result, the task of strategic decision making helps in separating strategic leadership (i.e., the realm of senior management) from lower, operational levels of management.

Barnett and Wilsted (1989) assign meaning to the strategist in the following six roles. For strategy formulation, the strategic leader studies the external and internal factors influencing the organization (i.e., monitor role) and from this information the strategist makes decisions that become strategies (i.e., decision-making innovator role). During strategy implementation, the strategic manager performs four roles. To gain support from organizational personnel for the strategy, the strategist employs the roles of leader and liaison. In addition, the strategist provides specific information (information disseminator) and assigns resources (resource allocator) so that organizational units can fulfill their strategic activities. However, role performance can vary depending upon the current environmental conditions (p. 23).

In his observations concerning strategic leadership, Hambrick (1989) lists several features that differentiate senior management's responsibilities and related skills from those of middle and supervisory management. Essentially, senior management duties require that the executive use his or her ability to comprehend and integrate a multitude of factors, and then select the proper action to accomplish the chosen plan and strategy. For instance, Hambrick observes that senior management's responsibilities are different from those of middle and supervisory management in that the senior executive:

1. Possesses an unrelenting orientation toward the organization's external and internal environment.
2. Aligns the institution's structure with an applicable strategy.
3. Willingly and capably deciphers the ambiguous and complex information overload that exists at this level of management.
4. Adeptly performs while attending to the many functions typical of this position.
5. Obtains support and commitment from others, especially in difficult organizational situations. (p. 6)

When endeavoring to accomplish this last duty, the strategic leader has consistently found strategic planning a difficult task. The strategic leader must motivate lower levels of management to fulfill two vitally important responsibilities. Initially, as Aguilar (1982) states, the strategic leader needs to obtain essential, germane, and accurate information from middle and supervisory managers for the formulation of the strategic plan. To achieve the second task of strategy implementation, Tichy and Devanna (1986) notes that all levels of management must participate in varying degrees in the thorough implementation of the strategic plan. Without assistance from lower levels of management, the strategic leader often finds the strategic planning process as incomplete, naive, and even dysfunctional.

Tichy and Devanna (1986), in a study of 12 strategic leaders, establish the following seven statements of skills and characteristics that assisted CEOs in directing their organization through significant changes. Specifically, successful strategic leaders:

1. Perform as change agents
2. Take shrewd risks
3. Possess a belief in people and understand their needs
4. Communicate a set of core values
5. Maintain flexibility and open-mindedness
6. Utilize a disciplined conceptual skill
7. Employ a sense of intuition combined with vision

In an analogous study, Bennis and Nanus (1985) examine a diverse group of competent leaders (30 public sector administrators & 60 business executives) over a five year period. In their investigation, they found that the leaders share a vision with their employees. For the organization's personnel, the shared vision represents a clear mission statement supplying significant meaning for their work and decision making. In determining what comprises vision, Bennis and Nanus found that it originates from the leader's: (1) attention to new or different opinions, ideas, and viewpoints; (2) use of analytical, creative, and intuitive competencies in ascertaining a clear purpose; and (3) the ability to articulate ideas in simple and reasonable methods.

Similarly, Aguilar (1982) associates senior management's ability to conceive, ability to commit, and ability to advocate new ideas to a leader's proclivity to think strategically. However, he notes that various senior managers possess detrimental blocks to sound strategic thinking. These barriers consist of either "an unwillingness to promote as well as behave in an innovative manner" or "implement newly conceptualized strategies," or in some cases, both (p. 128).

Admittedly, strategic leaders need a variety of skills to fulfill their leadership role. However, for these managers to function effectively their major role requirement involves developing and implementing strategic decisions. The literature supports this notion with a widely accepted three-skill taxonomy associated with conventional management (Yukl, 1994):

1. **Technical Skills.** Knowledge about methods, processes, procedures, and techniques for conducting a specialized activity, and the ability to use tools and operates equipment related to that activity.
2. **Interpersonal Skills.** Knowledge about human behavior and interpersonal processes, ability to understand the feelings, attitudes, and motives of others from what they say and do (empathy, social sensitivity), ability to communicate clearly and effectively (speech fluency, persuasiveness), and ability to establish effective and cooperative relationships (tact, diplomacy, knowledge about acceptable social behavior).
3. **Conceptual Skills.** General analytical ability, logical thinking, proficiency in concept formation and conceptualization of complex and ambiguous relationships, creativity in idea generation and problem solving, ability to analyze events and perceive trends, anticipate changes, and recognize opportunities and potential problems (inductive and deductive reasoning). (p. 253)

Stated simply, research regarding effective, primary role requirements associate supervisory management with technical skills (i.e., 'doing things'), middle management with interpersonal skills (i.e., 'working with people'), and senior management with conceptual skills (i.e., 'forming strategies'). As a result, the literature argues that the strategic leader's use of conceptual skills emerges as most important for their position and as a significant influence upon the quality of strategic planning (Aguilar, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Mintzberg, 1973, 1994; Yukl, 1994).

This paper considers academic presidents and their ranking of the conceptual, interpersonal, and technical factors that comprise the three-skill taxonomy (Yukl, 1994) according to the relative frequency of their use in accomplishing duties and its strategic implications. Kerlinger (1986) indicates that the forced-choice method reduces respondent bias, so presidents were asked to force rank the three skills in the following manner: 1 equaled the most frequently used; 2 signified the next most frequently used; and 3 meant the least frequently used (Item 11 in Appendix A). A panel of experts as well as the respondents did not indicate any need in defining the terms of: (1) conceptual, (2) interpersonal, and technical. Moreover, other questions within the instrument helped in clarifying the meaning of these three skills. The researchers also examined the level and commitment to the institution's strategic plan (Wood & LaForge, 1979, 1981), mission statement, environmental perceptions, measurements of organizational performance, and other strategic management issues. However, this discussion ponders academic presidential leadership and its strategic implications.

### **Ranking of Presidential Skill Usage**

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For the study as a whole, 187 presidents provide data regarding their ranking of the three-skill taxonomy. Of this, 66.3% rank interpersonal skills as most frequently used; 30.5% rank conceptual skills as the next frequently used; and 4.3% rank technical skills as the least frequently used (Table 1). Table 2 displays information regarding six categories (ranging from Research I to Comprehensive II IHEs) of 169 presidential responses as determined by the Carnegie Commission Foundation (1987). While presidents who manage Research I & II IHEs rank interpersonal skills as most frequently used, they did so to a lesser degree than presidents in other categories. Likewise, presidents of more narrowly defined institutions (i.e., Comprehensive I & II) relative to other categories appear to put more emphasis on interpersonal skills in contrast to conceptual skills.

From Table 2, it is possible to observe a number of patterns when proceeding through the continuum of IHE types. First, presidents of research-driven IHEs place less emphasis on the interpersonal and more emphasis on the conceptual in contrast to the presidents of less research-driven IHEs. Second, while the interpersonal dominates across all university types, it does so to a lesser degree with presidents of Research I and II IHEs. This observation suggests that presidents of Research I and II IHEs engage in a more sophisticated level of strategic orientation.

To explore this possibility further the survey incorporated Wood and LaForge's strategic planning instrument (1979, 1981). While the results suggest that presidents usually formulate comprehensive strategic plans, it also appears that presidents have not entirely implemented their strategic plans. This paper implicitly accepts the notion that conceptual skill can be associated with formulation of the strategic plan while interpersonal skill match up with strategy implementation.

## **Discussion**

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The literature has indicated that the CEO's major responsibility constitutes strategic decision making, hence, to function effectively, executives might be expected to employ conceptual skills (Aguilar, 1982; Hambrick, 1989; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kotter, 1982). Overall, this study's findings show that respondents rank interpersonal skills as most important in accomplishing their presidential duties. As a result, the findings suggest that academic presidents fail to strategically function as perhaps they need to become. However, the interpersonal skill emphasis is perhaps more functional for strategic implementation.

## **Roles Performed by Academic Presidents**

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Managers perform many roles while fulfilling their responsibilities. For example, Mintzberg (1973) reveals in his descriptive study of managers that their work exists as varied, fragmented, reactive, disorderly, and political. To perform their strategic leadership role, top management needs to clearly designate time for any reflective analysis and planning.

As indicated earlier, several writers (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Hambrick, 1989; Hurst, Rush & White, 1989; Shrivastava & Nachman, 1989; Tichy & Devanna, 1986) argue that strategic leadership is more than simply relying on conceptual skills. Motivational and persuasive competencies are also required. As a result, the strategic leader is often characterized as one who manages group dynamics so as to form a team for the purpose of organizational vision and strategic development. Perhaps academic presidents initially mobilize the strategic plan, then focus on the human relationships that furnish essential knowledge and support for the process. For example, Katz (1955) proposes that management should use human relations skills in effectively establishing alliances with subordinates, peers, and outsiders when executing a task. Meanwhile, other strategic team members can be essential in the strategic management process.

Similarly, Aguilar (1982) notes how strategic planning involves different levels of managers because, "insight is typically sought at the 'middle levels' of management, where knowledge and responsibility for specific operations reside" (p. 128). Academic presidents might actually be driven to pursue a collaborative approach so subordinate managers not only participate in the formulation process, but also sustain the implementation of the chosen strategy. Conceivably, academic presidents use interpersonal skills so that a cooperative



approach can convert others in the organization into becoming strategic stakeholder groups, thus increasing their commitment and accountability in relation to the overall strategic vision.

### **Environmental and Organizational Factors**

Research by Tichy and Devanna (1986) suggests another explanation for why academic presidents rank interpersonal skills beyond conceptual competencies. They find that strategic leaders can transform, revitalize, and plan their organizations through slow, but growing, social, cultural, competitive (domestic and/or international), and technological change. Analysis about this transformation process indicates that strategic leaders stabilize several paradoxical condition's employees face by using a number of interpersonal approaches. Particularly important at every phase of the organizational change, senior management communicates its vision and for needed change. Management, then, constructs a balance between the personnel's desire for stability and the preferred reorganization. Senior management does this by establishing a sincere concern for subordinates that requires the use of interpersonal skills. Essentially, the strategic leader and team introduce the employees to a new organizational vision through a participative process. As a result, success at each stage of this metamorphosis depends chiefly upon the transformational leader's attitude, values, and interpersonal skills.

From an internal perspective, Mintzberg's (1983) discussion of professional bureaucracy and its structure in conjunction with related politics helps to explain why academic presidents use interpersonal skills. He describes professional bureaucracy as encompassing highly trained professionals at the operating core who facilitate efficiencies from standardization. However, considerable decentralization is still required. Since professionals need autonomy to do their jobs effectively, the professional bureaucracy requires senior management to give up a substantial degree of authority. Though this organizational structure has its strengths, one of its weaknesses involves the potential political conflicts that can develop among subunits. Often, various professional subunits will seek to pursue their own narrow objectives, thus sublimating the interests of other parties and the organization. Consequently, academic presidents may use their interpersonal skills to restore organizational harmony.

An organization's structure exists to assist management in achieving its objectives. Moreover, because an organization's overall strategy helps to define its objectives, it is possible to infer a close relationship between strategy and structure. In this manner, Chandler (1962) develops his strategy-structure thesis. Chandler research also indicates that as organizations grow, their strategies become more ambitious and elaborate. By following this logic, institutions possessing broader missions (i.e., Research I & II) can induce academic presidents to engage in a higher level of conceptual skill usage than institutions sustaining a more limited reach.

## **Strategic Management Experience/Training**

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Presidents of large to moderate IHEs could perceive themselves as competent strategic managers employing strategic planning to accomplish the missions of their organizations. However, when examining academic presidents about their strategic management experience and training, the literature has not furnished any empirically driven demographic information until this present study. The findings here show that presidents possess limited strategic management experience and training. While nearly 90% of respondents state they have experience in formal strategic planning, 82% observe that they accumulated it through "self knowledge" (possibly through their current administrative position). This study also finds that approximately 63% of the presidents have attended one or more seminars regarding strategic planning. We find that nearly 64% of the presidents have engaged in institutional strategic planning for five years or less. Consequently, this suggests limited knowledge through experience that supports Cope's (1987) assertions.

Explicitly and implicitly, many in the strategic management field (Aguilar, 1982; Hambrick, 1987; 1989; Hofer & Schendel, 1978; Mintzberg, 1994) argue that this complex managerial process (i.e., developing sound strategic thinking, then onto effective strategic planning) requires significant time to understand and implement. In their study of private sector managers, Bobbitt and Ford (1980) find that each manager's level of strategic training and education varies dramatically. As a result, they indicate that this state contributes to a diverging quality of individual and collective strategic decision making.

However in 1989, Harcharik produces a study that establishes another perspective regarding the typical executive development/strategic management program. Her analysis uncovers little evidence that links executive development programs to effective strategic management. However, other researchers (Kerr & Jackofsky, 1989; Hurst, Rush & White, 1989) counter Harcharik's findings by concluding that strategic management development programs do enhance decision making.

Considering the above-mentioned, researchers (Aguilar, 1982; Fulmer & Rue, 1974; Khandwalla, 1977; Mintzberg, 1994) generally conclude that strategic thinking, training, and experience play a critical part in improved organizational performance. As a result, the above-mentioned factors appear to underlie strategic leadership.

## **Concluding Observations/Implications**

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Considering that self-reporting executives can provide spurious information, this study did not attempt to confirm reported results with data from independent sources and/or survey other senior managers within each IHE. However, Hambrick (1989) states that to explain the organization's behavior one should examine the strategic leader.

Discovering that many academic presidents rank interpersonal skills "most frequently used" does not tell us whether this is problematic concerning effective strategic leadership. Still, the following concern remains. Will presidential skills' usage have a negative, neutral, or positive impact upon the strategic direction of the organization? Clearly, unprecedented changes affecting IHEs will make strategic leadership increasingly important. These transformations include growing competitive/economic pressures, diversity of the workforce, greater technological complexity, escalating political/legal concerns, changing social-cultural values, and possibly the emergence of new forms of academic organizations. To cope with these changes, the president will likely need to employ his or her conceptual skills to alter basic assumptions and ways of thinking in response to a changing world. Moreover, transformational leadership research consistently finds that it is essential to articulate a clear and appealing vision and a strategy for attaining it. A strategic vision helps to identify the purpose of the organization and its priorities. Consequently, while organizations reconfigure themselves they will need to focus on their strategic objectives to ensure their long-term success.

Regardless of whether interpersonal or conceptual skills are preferred by academic presidents, both appear to be connected to the strategic management process. Still, it would be more reassuring if those academic presidents place more premium on their conceptual skills, because, as Hambrick states, "Ultimately, they [strategic leaders] account for what happens to the organization....As a result, if we want to explain why organizations do the things they do, or, in turn, why people perform the way they do, we must examine the people at the top." (1989, p. 6)

**Table 1**

**Presidents' Forced Ranking of Their Skill Usage**

Skill	N = 187			
	<u>1st</u>	<u>2nd</u>	<u>3rd</u>	<u>Total</u>
<u>Interpersonal</u>	66.3%	29.4%	4.3%	100.0%
<u>Conceptual</u>	30.5%	58.8%	10.7%	100.1%
<u>Technical</u>	4.3%	11.8%	84.0%	100.0%
<u>Total</u>	101.1%	100.0%	99.0%	

**Table 2****Presidents' Forced Ranking of Their Skill Usage by Six IHE Classifications**

Skill	N = 169					
	<u>ResI</u>	<u>ResII</u>	<u>DocI</u>	<u>DocII</u>	<u>Compl</u>	<u>ComplI</u>
	n=16	n=12	n=14	n=15	n=97	n=15
<u>Interpersonal</u>						
1st	50%	50%	57%	67%	71%	73%
<u>Conceptual</u>						
2nd	44%	42%	43%	33%	23%	20%
<u>Technical</u>						
3rd	6%	8%	0%	0%	5%	7%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	99%	100%

**Note.** For Tables 1 & 2 respondents were asked to force-rank the three skills based upon their relative use regarding their presidential duties: 1 = most frequently used, 2 = next most frequently used, and 3 = least frequently used. Because of rounding, the computed total percentages did not always equal exactly 100%.

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