

# THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF THE STRATEGIC LEADER: WHAT EFFECTIVE CEOs DO, HOW THEY DO IT AND AN EXPLORATION INTO HOW THEY THINK ABOUT IT

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to study the lived experience of the strategic leader. The research combined qualitative ethnographic methodology of direct observation of critical incidents with visual, auditory, kinaesthetic and linguistic observation tools from Neuro Linguistic Programming processes. The primary objective was to answer the question: What do CEOs do and how do they do it? A further objective was to explore how they think about what they do. The result of the research is the pure leadership spider web model and sixteen propositions for strategic leadership.

**Keywords:** Strategic leadership; ethnography; lived experience; neuro linguistic programming

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## INTRODUCTION

What do strategic leaders do as they lead successful organisations? How do they do it? How do they think about what they do? These questions were central to the research undertaken in this paper. Many people have little doubt that leadership plays a significant role in organisations and many scholars have focused their attention on the study of this phenomenon. The sheer volume of research and theory produced during the study of leadership over decades is testimony to its importance and prominence in the collective effort to understand and improve organisations (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a; 2003b). Yet, a uniform understanding of the definition of leadership has remained elusive. Numerous and diverse definitions have been proffered by researchers and there seems to be general consensus that leadership involves a process of influencing behaviour and the achievement of desired outcomes (Yukl 2010; Bush & Glover 2003). Beyond this, however, critics argue the subject remains contested (Alvesson & Sveningsson 2003a; Ladkin 2010; Storey 2005).

Another issue that is addressed by the research undertaken in this paper is the failure to clearly delineate between leadership at various levels, leadership of organisations, and leadership within organisations. This occurs, despite the fact that some theories, such as leader-member exchange and situational leadership theory, for example, were clearly suited for, say, executive leadership (Storey 2005). It has also been argued that while there had been

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a massive growth in leadership-orientated research activity, little of this had been directed at the top level with most research concentrating on the middle and junior levels (Storey 2005). The overwhelming focus on lower-level leadership and the neglect of strategic leadership in most studies has been confirmed by other researchers (Boal & Hooijberg 2001; Day & Lord 1998).

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Strategic leadership theory evolved from upper echelon theory developed by Hambrick & Mason (1984). These authors focused on the top management team and not the strategic leader. According to Storey (2005), leadership in organisations referred to team leadership, while leadership of organisations referred to the overall strategic leadership of the organisation. Thus, unlike traditional leadership theory, strategic leadership theory focuses on the strategic level of the organisation and the symbolic and strategic activities of leaders (Vera & Crossan 2004). It is at this level according to Boal & Hooijberg (2001), that meaning and purpose are created for organizations. The literature on strategic leadership is sparse, and those who do write about it describe it as a relatively understudied phenomenon (Storey 2005). Significantly, less than five percent of current leadership literature has been focused on executive leadership, or the leadership of organisations (Zaccaro & Horn 2003). Within the five percent, the usage of the terms leader, strategic leader, executive leader or chief executive officer specifically relates to the leadership of a corporate organisation. The few existing studies focus on executive leaders strategising (Samra-Fredericks 2003) or attempt to establish a link between CEO charisma and performance (e.g. Conger 1989; Tosi, Misangyi, Fanelli, Waldman & Yammarino 2004). Research can also be found on the style and skills that executives use to influence the strategic direction of their organizations (Ireland & Hitt 2005).

However, there has been little research conducted on what strategic leaders actually do in practice—that is their lived experience (Sandberg 2005). Sandberg (2005) stated that researching an individual or group's lived experience of reality was the primary focus of the interpretive research tradition. The lived experience of the strategic leader, grounded in the phenomenological idea of life-world, was the principal focus of this research. In a commentary on management research over the preceding 15 years, Mintzberg (1990) expressed his disappointment that research had not stimulated new thinking and that, in the main, it had only sought to repeat earlier research. According to him what was available had no depth, vitality nor substance and left the academic world with no more knowledge about a manager's real life experiences. Although one might say Mintzberg (1990) is speaking about managers, his seminal study (Mintzberg 1973) did attempt to specify what top managers or leaders do in organisations.

In some respects, this study follows Mintzberg's work in its effort to examine what strategic leaders of successful organisations actually do. Its aim was to understand the phenomenon of and the lived experience of the strategic leader, the Chief Executive Officer. Thus, the intent was not to test a substantive theory of leadership but to develop deeper insight into the substantive issue by using a qualitative approach, and, in so doing, produce deep knowledge of the issue. An additional goal was to reveal the unconscious mental frames of successful leaders. Mental frames help uncover how leaders think the way they do by focusing on how they function in terms of cognitive processing, thinking, emoting, speaking and behaving. They also allow the discovery not of what people are, but how they work in a given situation

(Bodenhamer & Hall 2000). The strategic leader shares the world with other people, and through interaction with them, makes his or her own sense of it (Sandberg 2005).

Using the analogy of the process of investigating a modern jet aircraft crash to symbolize the extent of study to date of the phenomenon of leadership in general and the leadership of organisations, strategic leadership, in particular, it appears that there is abundant research on the understanding of the functions of the crashed aircraft as a whole, but almost none of what is in the black box, which contains a true and accurate data and voice record of the crash from the firsthand perspective of the captain, the chief Executive Officer, and cockpit crew. In response to this identified need, in seeking to prise open the black box, the research focused on understanding what the leader of the organisation, the strategic leader, really does, and produced propositions that set out to answer the questions at the heart of the research objective: What do effective CEOs do? How do they do it? How do they think about it?

## **METHODOLOGY**

Given the black box nature of strategic leadership, the study focused on the questions of how CEOs made sense of the world around them, their lived experience, and how they thought about what they did as CEOs. Leadership is a dynamic and multi-level phenomenon that possesses a specific symbolic component. Its characteristics and social construction make it a research topic of extreme and enduring complexity (Conger 1998; Yukl 2002) and more suitable to qualitative methods of research. Thus, the research design was an ethnographic field study, alterable and fluid in character that used multiple data collection strategies drawing upon ethno methodological analytical traditions (Denzin & Lincoln 1994). The research did not set out to confirm or test a hypothesis or a preconceived relation among assumed leadership variables; neither did it seek to test, determine or refine any pre-identified CEO characteristics or traits. It did not aim to produce a theory itself (Van Maanen 1983); rather, its objective was to generate propositions which may then lead to hypothesis formulation about the strategic leadership phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin 1998; Conger 1988).

### **Sample**

The sample for the study consisted of five CEOs of successful organisations in the automotive industry located in the Gauteng province of South Africa. We targeted leaders whose businesses had average monthly sales or the potential to achieve average monthly sales of at least 100 vehicle units and were based in the major urban metropolis of Gauteng for several reasons. Eighteen metrics were used to measure financial performance. CEO tenure had to be a minimum of five years at the time the research commenced. Finally, the potential sample was confined to the automotive industry primarily because of experience and access the main researcher had to the industry. All of the CEOs (seven) who met the sample criteria were approached to participate in the study. Participants were told about the methodology and time commitment required. One CEO declined to participate and one dropped out and was not able to continue. Each participating CEO was given a pseudo name that metaphorically captured the essence of his characteristics.

## Data Collection

An initial discussion was held with each leader about the study and its purpose. During this discussion, the leaders voluntarily shared their personal leadership philosophies. Thereafter, multiple methods of data collection were utilised to provide thick description of what strategic leaders actually do. These consisted of the following:

**(1) Identification of and observation of critical incidents.** Qualitative researchers commonly distinguish four classes of participant observers (Gold 1958; Creswell 1994; Waddington 1994); the complete participant; the participant as observer; the observer as participant; the complete observer. The strategy for observation in the present study was that of complete observer. Complete observation took place over a course of seven months lasting 755 hours of which 451 hours were spent in the complete observation and analysis of 138 discrete critical incidents, observing what was happening inside the black box of strategic leadership; 120 hours were spent in transcribing and analyzing the video tapes and 184 hours of travel time was logged. The 451 hours of complete observation took place until a thick description of raw observational data was reached and no new insights would be gained by further observations. The need to identify critical incidents for this research was driven by the fact that both the researchers and the study sample faced severe time and cost constraints in the form of time away from income-earning activities and time away from core business respectively (Samra-Fredericks 2003). At the end of each of the personal leadership philosophy discussions agreement was reached on critical incidents that would be observed in order to get a representative overview of what they did and how they did it. The following critical incidents/events were identified, and were uniform across the five participants:

- various types of management meetings
- where the leader chaired the meeting or the meeting was chaired (on a rotational basis) by one of the subordinates; these meetings included vehicle sales meetings, franchise meetings, after sales meetings, finance committee meetings, marketing meetings, staff performance meetings, financial performance review meetings, board meetings with non-executive shareholders or with non-executive directors, who were not necessarily board members.

**(2) Structured video-taped interviewing using Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) Meta-Program questions.** Researching the lived experience of the strategic leader posed observation challenges as it required having a methodology and means to effectively observe, in a natural setting, what the CEOs did how they did it and how they thought about what they did. The solution to the observation challenges was found in the pioneering use of NLP tools. NLP is a study of human subjectivity with a primary focus on strategies for modelling excellence derived from observing the lived experience of top performers in various disciplines. In this research, its core function was to help the researchers get close to human experience by using all sensory evidence available during observation. In observation, all human senses are engaged, and all human faculties are actively used to obtain impressions of the surrounding world and the phenomena being studied (Adler & Adler 1994). The words neuro, linguistic and programming provide a clue to understanding NLP's underlying technology and processes: the word neuro refers to an understanding of the brain and its functioning while linguistic relates to the communication aspects, both verbal and non-verbal, of information processing and programming refers to people's inner behavioural and thinking patterns that control their primary functioning in the outer world. NLP, therefore, provides the ethnographic researcher with several models with which to discover the how of any behaviour. The use of the NLP meta-program questionnaire provided us with a tool to understand the common thinking patterns of the five strategic leaders and in so doing

answering that part of the research question that sought to find out how strategic leaders think about what they do. Tosey, Mathison and Michelli (2005) successfully demonstrated the value of NLP as a methodology, a way of inquiry, and an analytical perspective that provided deeper insight into subjective experience, and therefore into phenomena being studied ethnographically. Tedlock (2000) argued that ethnographers could reach a better understanding of the beliefs, motivations, and behaviours of their subjects, using NLP, than they can by using any other observation method.

(3) *Analysis of documents (diaries)*. After the video-taped interview sessions the five participants were requested to share their business diaries/calendars for any consecutive three month period. All the diaries were provided although in some instances constraints were placed on what could be viewed due to confidentiality. The information obtained allowed for a satisfactory diary analysis, which revealed an interesting high level of consistency of time utilisation amongst all the leaders. The diaries captured what we called, *Leadership Engagement*, identified instances where the leaders devoted time on a regular basis, usually quarterly, to discuss business strategy and business performance with other non-competing leaders in the automotive retail industry. Another unique identification of time utilization was termed, *Face-time Leadership*, where, on a daily basis, time was dedicated to meeting with staff, customers and subordinates at their work stations leveraging face-value and the opportunity this created for instantaneous decision making and keeping in touch with the pulse of the organisation. These interactions, captured through the observations as one of the researchers walked around the business with the leaders, were seen to be both planned and, in several instances, ad hoc.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data collected from each source was coded and analyzed. The data analysis process in keeping with qualitative methodology was iterative with each episode building upon emerging insights. An analysis of the NLP observation data revealed two consistent kinaesthetic representational systems, called the computer mode, which can be described as Mr. Cool/ Mr. Calm, and the leveler mode, which describes a factual and congruent approach (Bodenhamer & Hall 2000). These two systems describe the common disposition of all the leaders, despite their diversity. In some instances some of the strategic leaders used a combination of both the computer and the leveler modes. Thematic coding and subsequent analysis of the data revealed the emergence of common themes that eventually formed what we termed the pure leadership spider-web model. The pure leadership spider-web model has eight distinct dimensions, hence the analogy to a spider with its eight legs. In this respect the questionnaire and diary reviews were more efficient at determining the large-scale structural features of the phenomenon being studied, while the complete observations were more revealing of the process and the small-scale behavioural aspects.

Analysing and comparing the data from all methods fulfilled the logic of triangulation, which is to check the findings of one type of study with another. Where two or more methods are used, the process of triangulation was adopted to verify the validity of the data collected. Triangulation has been highly encouraged, but it should not be seen as a complete strategy for validation -it is an alternative process that adds rigor, breadth, and depth to the study (Denzin 1989; Blaxter, Hughes & Tight 2001; Silverman 1993).

## RESEARCH RESULTS

Given the thickness of the data collected and the necessity to make clear the process of the fieldwork we arranged the results into logical sequential order as follows: First Level Order: the personal leadership philosophy discussions; Second Level Order: the different discrete critical events observed; and Third Level Order: the videotaped meta-program questionnaire interview sessions (and the post-interview sessions which incidentally occurred immediately after the video sessions). Each level of analysis was necessary to provide a deep level of understanding of what strategic leaders do and how they think about.

### First Level Order: The personal leadership philosophy

The term “personal leadership philosophy” was developed as a phrase to encapsulate the findings that emerged over the course of a few weeks of reviewing the notes from the one-on-one meetings with the five leaders. It became clear, as the reviews and analysis continued, that what each leader had shared, during those preliminary discussions around the proposed research, was probably the same thing they would have shared if we had asked them a three part question: “what do you understand about strategic leadership; about being a strategic leader and how would you describe your own leadership your philosophy)?” In reality, no such direct question was asked. Instead the “personal leadership philosophies” emerged unprompted and unsolicited. Although, there was a lot of divergence and uniqueness evident within the leaders there was also a deep level of convergence into eleven themes, or pillars, that were common among them.

***Pillar 1: Choosing to stay the course or longevity in the industry.*** The time spent in one industry seemed to be a key factor in determining current success. Their years of experience developed an instinct for doing what was right for the moment. The number of years in the industry ranged from 20 to 34 years. The entrance into the industry was in all the cases, but one, not a conscious choice, but rather a result of prevailing circumstances. Only one CEO had consciously investigated the highest performing and paying industries at the time and decided to seek a job in the automotive sector. Irrespective of the reason for the entrance a conscious decision was made to stay the course and experience was gathered along the way.

***Pillar 2: Day-by-day intuitive, gut-feel leadership.*** Closely linked, and probably a result of longevity in the industry, all the CEOs constantly referred to what they did as mostly by gut-feel in describing particularly their innate ability to respond dynamically to the changing environment. One referred to his predominant function as crystal ball gazing and another as having a close reliance on the sponge of knowledge accumulated over years and years of experience. In all cases they stated that the job was dynamic and for more than half the time was not structured on a day-by-day basis. One said that “any CEO able to say exactly what he did on a day-by-day basis was a liar as it is not possible to structure the role so easily because of its very dynamic nature.”

***Pillar 3: Personal involvement in the operational side of the business.*** Irrespective of the scale of operations managed, from being the head of an independent dealership to being the head of a franchise within a large corporate group directly responsible for 18 dealerships a hands-on strategic leadership approach was the norm among all the CEOs. The two strategic leaders who were in charge of large corporate groups actually had to request

their boards to allow them to retain a direct hands-on leadership of one or two business units while carrying on their new and higher group director functions with responsibility over seven and 18 dealerships. The key driver in all these cases was a sincere passion and love for the industry, the business operations and the continuous interaction with staff and customers resulting in a close watch on, and involvement in, the direct management of the business.

***Pillar 4: A determined expression of the self.*** This was observed as the expression of the authentic self in the business. It was in reflecting on the initial series of discussions eventually labeled the personal leadership philosophy discussions that the term authentic self expression began to emerge and make sense as a descriptor of what had been observed. Without fail, every CEO referred to a steadfast adherence to personal values as a true measure of personal success and gratification. Whatever the CEOs did said or expressed seemed a reflection of values-driven authentic expressions underlying a strong understanding of the self, strong sense of self-worth and high levels of self-motivation. One CEO described himself as “a pop psychologist” and another said: “I am a salesman to my top management team. I sell enthusiasm and motivation.” Another CEO who seemed to be introverted and quiet described himself as “quietly enthusiastic”.

***Pillar 5: A responsible empowering of direct reports.*** All CEOs believed very strongly and understood that without people empowered to make decisions, they would not achieve the same level of success that they did. “I would spend all my time chasing after people and looking over their shoulders” was a constant refrain in explaining why it was necessary to empower not just subordinates, but everyone across the organisation. Empowerment was not irresponsible but was encouraged within given guidelines. “My managers are all MDs of their businesses”, was a common statement capturing the essence of empowerment whether the recipient was a business unit manager or a cleaner. “I only hold the veto in all meetings” meant that another CEO allowed his people to make final decisions unless he really believed that the intended course of action would be detrimental for the business.

***Pillar 6: A passion for people and developing a deep understanding of people.*** One of the common personal values that quickly became apparent within each CEO was a strong passion for staff well being and a love for working with people and seeing them grow as they responded to challenges laid down before them. The CEOs exhibited a high drive to do the actions and things that would earn them the staff’s respect, and at the same time build and foster trust among staff. They made time to understand people and what motivated or demotivated them. They were always aware of the family dynamics, from divorces to marriages and from births to deaths, of all the members of staff and they went out of their way to provide assistance where they could and to put the comforting hand on the shoulder when nothing much could be done at a corporate level.

***Pillar 7: Implementing performance-driven management and remuneration systems.*** In all cases the passion for people was underlined by a performance based and performance management culture. However, it was interesting to note that it was not customary to dismiss staff purely for non-performance; there was always an introspection process that questioned whether the person had been adequately trained or whether they were in the right place or position in the first place followed by a retraining, repositioning or rebuilding process.

**Pillar 8: A thoroughly detailed focus on business processes, measurements, and metrics to aid in business management.** All CEOs revealed a penchant for very strong, thorough and detailed focus on processes and metric measurements for all business activities. In all instances, whether they had an accounting background or not, in fact three had marketing backgrounds, all demonstrated an ability to make what they called ‘numbers talk’ as well as the ability to talk to different staff levels about the financial performance of the business. This obvious obsession with metrics and measurement enabled them to keep a continual finger on the pulse of the business.

**Pillar 9: The need for high energy levels.** All CEOs exhibited a strong practical belief in leading by example and in living this out at every available opportunity, “I would never expect of my staff what I can’t or what I am unwilling to do.” All spoke about the need to be highly visible throughout the organization; later observation demonstrated that this visibility quest was supported by high levels of personal energy that sustained the physical effort of constantly walking around the business. Another discipline that was observed was the effort made to be regularly first to work and last to leave whenever possible with all the CEOs talking of leading by example.

**Pillar 10: Strong beliefs in relentless, formal and informal, communication across the board.** The declared need for each CEO to keep a finger on the pulse of the business was embedded in the business through communication structures that were designed to ensure that formal and informal communication lines cascaded relevant information throughout the organisation quickly, effectively and continuously. Staff at lower levels in the organisation were kept aware and abreast of events via the involvement of workers representatives on key work committees.

**Pillar 11: A persistently relentless and prioritised focus on customers, both internal and external.** Just as the passion for understanding and motivating people was a driver among the CEOs, so too was the passion for delivering superior service to customers. All activities were ultimately structured to ensure the seamless delivery of excellent service to customers. These CEOs talked about it, preached it, did it and built systems to make customer service happen and they made it happen. When service delivery broke down they made sure they had the systems to inform them about it and they took immediate responsibility and accountability for ensuring that corrective measures were taken.

## Second Level Order: The complete observations

While the preliminary discussions with the CEOs gave insights into their personal leadership philosophy, the direct observations added the richness and thick description required to really probe into the black box of strategic leadership. There were 138 discrete events that were observed. Table 1 contains the five different emotional states displayed by the leaders.

**TABLE 1: Emotional States Displayed by Strategic Leaders**

State	Descriptor
Emotional State Displayed in Any Situation	Strategic leaders seek to always bring to any situation humour, logic, envisioning, detailing, calmness, persuasiveness, empathy, and self-expression through strong personal values
Kinaesthetic Patterns practised in face-to-face encounters	Strategic leaders always maintain a cool and calm posture (computer mode) and seek to be always

	factual and congruent (leveller mode).
Control and influence meeting dynamics	Strategic leaders exhibit high intense and focused levels of personal energy, and the ability to create a warm corporate family ‘temperature’ in the workplace.
Emotional States Displayed When Walking Around the Business	When walking around the business strategic leaders bring to bear humour, logic, talking the vision, detailing, calmness, persuasiveness and determined will to succeed, empathy, a focus on each individual, customer- focused orientation, encouragement and uplifting of staff.
Emotional States Manifested When Engaging Other business leaders.	When engaging with other strategic leaders they bring to bear humour, inquisitiveness, expanding their vision, detailing, calmness, rising to meet the challenge to improve their own business, humility, respect for differing points of view, and deep ability to listen.

### **Third Level Order: The video taped meta-program questionnaire**

The video-taped interview sessions provided unique insight into how the strategic leaders think and therefore, by both deduction and observation, how they behave. The sessions were of the utmost importance in validating what leaders do and how they do it but, more importantly, in determining how they think about what they do. Indeed, NLP began as a model for understanding the how of subjective experience and it continues to do the same. Meta-Programs, as unconscious mental filters, are critical to the understanding of subjectivity. As we speak, we filter our outgoing information through these filters. Meta-Programs answer such questions as: How does this person think-and-emote? How does this person talk, act, behave, and relate? What processes and patterns describe this person's style for sorting (paying attention to information)? What mental operational system does this person use in remembering? What human software (ideas, beliefs) does this person use to think? How effectively does this way of thinking work? How well do I like this way of emoting/somatising my ideas? How desirable do I find this way of talking and **language**? How resourceful does this way of sorting behaving actually work?

The Meta-Program questions were 51 in total and out of the responses the five leaders had common responses in only 18 of them. An independent analysis of the video-taped data as well as the notes from the preliminary discussions was performed by an expert in NLP, Bob Bodenhamer, who concurred with the themes that were emerging from the data. The data suggest a strategic leader’s common thinking patterns include boldness, being harmonious and integrated, being pro-active and stable, an aggressive response to ‘stressors’; active thinking, perceptual thinking, optimising, possibility orientation, a toward motivational strategy, ability to access memories randomly, a best case scenario/ optimistic and empowered approach to life, an ability to self-reflect , intuition-driven on need, seeing things on a continuum as opposed to black and white absolutes, a process non static orientation to life, and a congruent alignment to own personal values.

### **The Spider Web and Magic Language Metaphors**

One of the challenges of qualitative research is finding a means to share core findings of complex data. Qualitative researchers often find metaphors helpful in describing research results. Harris & Barnes (2005) state that stories are tools of leadership, stories, allegories and

metaphors are powerful tools for communicating complex concepts in unforgettable ways. Samra-Fredericks (2003) commenting on the use of metaphors, as a linguistic resource, argued that they (metaphors) enable the researcher to explain complex, deep, and integrated forms of knowledge and belief systems in ways that facilitate interpersonal dialogue and debate. Two metaphors helped us make sense of all the data collected.

Throughout out the data collection and analysis there remained a lingering sense that there was yet something else still missing from the description of what strategic leaders actually do and the effect they have on their organisations. This something had to do with the way an almost magical spell was spun and cast around organisations by strategic leaders as they engage with others and lead organizations; throughout the fieldwork the magical spell was observed and experienced directly when in the presence of the strategic leaders. The magic is experienced when one is in the presence of the strategic leaders and is understood when one listens carefully to how they deliberately use words to achieve desired ends. The missing ingredient to the lived experience of leadership was the skilful use of language to create an environment that enabled the achievement of desired results. It was here that the metaphor, Magic Language Box, was birthed. It became a label for the language processes that strategic leaders utilized in their daily experience. The Magic Language Box captured the essence of how strategic leaders used language to create the experience of “magic” in their organisations; this “magic” was experienced when one listened and observed carefully how strategic leaders deliberately used words, tonality and body language to consciously create an environment that enabled them to achieve desired results. The Magic Language Box described the use of language to create a powerful constructive and productive environment within organizations.

Finally, we used a second metaphor to bring all of the data together. In totality, what the strategic leaders we studied were doing was similar to cocooning their organisations in an invisible web structured around their personal philosophy. Using the idea that spiders have eight legs, we synthesised and summarised all of our findings into eight distinct dimensions. These dimensions consisted of the pillars that make up their personal leadership philosophy, the five emotional and kinaesthetic states, the common thinking patterns revealing how leaders think, and finally the skilful use of language. We also discovered that there were close parallels between the sixteen steps of spider-web construction and what CEOs actually do in leading their organisations (Zschokke 1993). We translated these sixteen steps into propositions about strategic leadership. The metaphor was not only graphic but relevant and provided a way to encapsulate the patterns and themes emerging out of the raw data into a coherent whole.

### **The Pure Leadership Spider-Web Model**

In sum, we found effective CEOs, being authentic, true to who they are, masterfully utilised language in all its forms and structure to skilfully and magically spin a web around their organisations that enabled them to achieve the results they wanted with and through the people within and outside the organisation. In doing this they displayed a positive mastery over their mental and emotional states and continually brought to bear the same on all experiences, interactions and engagements. In so doing, they created magic, a sense of possibility in their organisations. This is the essence of the pure leadership spider-web model, which breaks down the what, how and thinking of the lived experience of being a strategic leader into eight key themes or dimensions to answer the core question of the research “What

is the lived experience of the strategic leader?” The answer, therefore, was that the lived experience of the strategic leaders was about authentic self-expression by mastery of and through the dimensions of the pure leadership spider-web model. The word pure has its source in that what forms the pure leadership spider-web model are only those patterns that consistently emerged as common among all the leaders, which by definition allows for uniqueness and individuality in the role of been an effective strategic leader. Based on the data in this study, what strategic leaders do can be captured in sixteen propositions:

**Proposition 1:** Strategic leaders consciously build or envelope their organisation with their leadership philosophy.

**Proposition 2:** The extending of the personal philosophy across the organisation is a process that demands conscious self-pacing from the strategic leader.

**Proposition 3:** Irrespective of how complex, varied and difficult a person’s background, anyone can develop to be an effective strategic leader.

**Proposition 4:** Everything the strategic leader builds into the organisation has a referent point to a central core of predetermined values.

**Proposition 5:** Whatever the central core of values is, over time it becomes the core organising principle for the business, out of which everything flows.

**Proposition 6:** The strategic leader first develops internal personal strength and then utilising the top down approach cascades the principles throughout the organisation.

**Proposition 7:** The strategic leader always makes consistent reference to the core organising values of the organisation in every new sphere of operation.

**Proposition 8:** Once the core organising values are determined consistency and alignment to the same becomes the modus operandi of all organisational activities.

**Proposition 9:** Hierarchical order is a key determinant of all organisational structures and processes that the strategic leader develops.

**Proposition 10:** The strategic leader is always fully aware of the dynamics of the organisation, playing a key balancing role in diffusing tension, encouraging the down-hearted and consciously seeking to maintain a well balanced team.

**Proposition 11:** The strategic leader deliberately seeks to build a robust organisation, ‘circling the hub’ looking for gaps and weak areas that need fixing and closing up.

**Proposition 12:** The strategic leader’s personal philosophy permeates the core of the whole organisation and becomes the guiding principle of the activities therein.

**Proposition 13:** Strategic leaders consistently invest time in building strong interfaces between the internal organisation and the external environment, strengthening and saturating the organisational boundaries with their personal philosophy and core values.

**Proposition 14:** Strategic leaders operate from a position of rest and create time for self-reflection and introspection, while the organisation performs its functions around them.

**Proposition 15:** The strategic leader continues to refine her or himself as well as refresh his or her leadership philosophy on a regular basis thus ensuring that the organisation's culture never stagnates or fragments from lack of renewal.

**Proposition 16:** Self-drive, goal-orientation, ambition are key determinants of success as a strategic leader.

## CONCLUSION

While the research did not seek to generate a theory nor test a hypothesis sixteen specific propositions were offered from the pure leadership spider-web model. The research sought to illuminate the lived experience of strategic leaders, how they do what they do and also how they think about it. The eight dimensions of the pure leadership spider-web model unlock the black box of strategic leadership. The metaphorical analogy to the sixteen steps of spider-web construction demonstrates how to apply the spider-web model in an organisation. An analysis of this model reveals that what the strategic leaders essentially do is, while being true to themselves or authentic, consciously use the eight dimensions of the pure leadership spider-web model to spin a magical web around their organisation creating an environment where everything is possible to conceive, do and achieve. It was identified that the starting point of success was in formulating a personal leadership philosophy and that mastery of and use of language in all its forms, content, composition or structure, the communication style, including the emotional aspects thereof, physiology and voice tonality were all a key part of the model. It has been argued that leaders can use language to create and facilitate relationships that can change their organisations and that leaders, by thinking differently about language, can align change efforts with words that do inspire change (Denning 2007). This argument captures to a great extent the philosophy behind what the metaphor the Magic Language Box stands for: the ability to impact organisations using language. The model also reveals the fact that effective strategic leaders have common ways of thinking about what they do. Yet, each strategic leader was unique and always true to his authentic self.

One of the practical implications of the research is that an aspiring strategic leader, therefore, has to be authentic, develop and live by a clearly defined personal leadership philosophy, learn to be the master of his or her emotional states of mind, develop the ability to bring any emotional state of mind to bear on any situation, understand and master the physiological forms of language and be able to use this at will, control meeting dynamics with staff and peers using emotional states of mind and the physiological forms of language, become a master at setting and using frames of mind to govern day-to-day experiences, master one's thinking patterns, and above all learn to create magic using language in all its forms.

No study is without its limitations. One might argue the sample is rather small given the conclusion reached. However, the goal was thick description that resulted in depth data from multiple sources in respect to what CEOs do and how they think about it. It should be noted that Mintzberg (1973) also had a similar sample size for his observation of top managers to determine what managers do in organisations. The sheer number of hours of meetings, observations, video-taped interviews gives some support to the trustworthiness of the data and its interpretation. According to Yin (2004), one of the ways of establishing validity is

through multiple sources of evidence. Another strength of the study is its control of industry effects. Selecting CEOs from different industries would have made the interpretation of the data extremely complex because industry factors would have to be adjusted for. Selecting CEOs from one industry controls this key variable. However, there is a limitation placed on generalizability of the findings to other industries. Future research can further test the proposition offered in this study to shed further light on understanding the phenomenon of strategic leadership.

While the research did not seek to generate a theory nor test a hypothesis sixteen specific propositions were offered from the pure leadership spider-web model.

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