

# Tools for the Strategic Leader

## Reflection, Reframing, and Systems Thinking

by Billie Young

with support from Pam Boulton, Terry Liddell, and members of the Exchange Leadership Initiative

To view additional responses to the survey, visit: [www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com/issue)

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In 1998, Seattle elected a new mayor and for the first time in my career, my colleagues and I were stumped about how to engage the city's leader in advocacy for human services. This mayor didn't seem to be interested or want to read our briefing papers. Our director hired a strategic communications consultant who led us through two days of intensive reflection. What had we been trying that didn't work? What was our new mayor's learning style? He was an architect (visual) and urban planner (systems focused). The consultant challenged our assumptions and helped us reframe our thinking. Perhaps the mayor wasn't disinterested — maybe *we* needed to communicate with him differently. We

decided to use more visuals, PowerPoint and big picture, systemic approaches that could excite him with their potential to leverage change. These ideas worked and taught me the power of reflection, reframing, and systems thinking.

Strategic Leadership is a trending topic with lots of theories about the necessary skills, mindsets, and tools for success. John Pisapia, as part of his Strategic Leadership Network, suggests that to define strategic leaders “think purpose, priorities, strategies, and the tactics you use to achieve your purpose.” Pisapia defines the key to a strategic mindset as reflecting, reframing, and systems thinking.

I queried members of the Exchange Leadership Initiative (ELI) about how they used these tools in their own leadership development. Their stories illustrate the power of pausing to take time to reflect, reframe, and use systems thinking.

### Reflection: Contemplation in Search of Truth

Reflective practice — as a leader or a teacher — requires pausing long enough to think deeply to fuel new understanding and innovation. Reflection offers the opportunity to learn from the

past and improve approaches to similar situations in the future. Reflective leaders know the value of examining assumptions and that good answers start with good questions.

Pausing for reflection allows the space to separate logic and emotions; it allows us to understand all of the contributing factors and dynamics and to separate the personal from the systemic. Amy Fain, Tulsa, Oklahoma, uses reflection at staff meetings. “We challenge each other to see all sides of concerns and conflicts; to step back and take on others' points of view. We often discover hotspots and blindspots we did not know were present in our work.”

Many ELI leaders have established a regular practice of reflection, individually or in a group setting. Monica Brinkerhoff, Tucson, Arizona, has a “Circle of Support,” using ‘lunch with intention’ to explore systems thinking tools with colleagues, to map their leadership development, and coach each other. Norma Honeycutt, China Grove, North Carolina, found that her 18-year ‘journey of reflection’ became a way of life, as she developed her leadership skills and made the transition from teacher of children to a teacher of teachers. Glory Ressler, Toronto, Canada, describes her journey:



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"I remember at the beginning of my career wanting to move as fast as possible to produce and stay ahead and how this approach resulted in mistakes that not only affected me, but others around me. It took some time to give myself the opportunity to reflect on the impact of my decisions."

Gladys Montes, Miami, Florida, discovered that protecting time for reflection with staff "sends the message of how much we value the reflective process and how important they are as human beings."

How might you build time to pause and *reflect* and engage your colleagues in regular discussions focused on understanding *the whats*: what happened (or what **didn't** happen) and *so what* (what does it mean)? What do I/we want to have happen?

### Reframing: New Perspectives, New Possibilities

Reframing is looking at things from multiple perspectives, considering assumptions and suspending judgments. When we reframe a challenge, we are free to play with different models and paradigms in order to develop new insights and options for action. It means being able to step back and even flip things upside down. Reframing encourages us to approach problems with curiosity and openness, to ask lots of questions, and to see issues through multiple lenses.

The classic reframing response to a challenge is to consider it an opportunity. As Monica Brinkerhoff discovered, this shift in language supports her to move from "Oh, no, this is bad" to "What next steps can we take?" She and her staff consider "One way to look at this is \_\_\_\_\_; and another is \_\_\_\_\_."

Glory Ressler explains, "Reframing is a form of adult play-based learning that

helps me to move from being overly or rigidly responsible to becoming more response-able. Can I step into the shoes of others (especially those that annoy me!) and truly appreciate their perspective? Do I dare ask provocative questions of people with whom I know I don't agree? Do I care enough to actually allow myself to be influenced by these different points of view and ideas? When I answer 'yes' to the above, I notice that I move from an 'either/or' to a 'yes/and' stance and my ability to think and respond opens up!"

Terry Liddell, a retired consultant who facilitated the Washington Leadership Institute for three years, told me that of the three strategic skills, reframing was the most difficult to master for participants, especially under stress. She explained, "Perhaps we have been conditioned by our education to seek the 'right' answer and lock onto it, rather than to continue to play with the questions by looking for alternative perspectives. It is a high-level cognitive skill to entertain several and sometimes conflicting perspectives. So often we see institutions and states use reorganizing as the answer — no matter what the question is. We see new executives view issues in the structural frame without ever asking about the political frame or the cultural frame that may be contributing to the situation. A year or two later, after reorganizing, they can't understand why nothing has changed (except the structure)."

Liddell shares some ideas about how to jar people's thinking: "Sometimes I ask people to think about a strategy opposite to the one they have generated and test feasibility. What would doing the opposite look like? Conversation with colleagues from different fields can help leaders reframe issues. A really diverse board can remind executives to think outside their comfort zone." She adds, "Reframing is a habit of thinking that can be cultivated when we catch

ourselves falling into our default modes of thinking. We know when we are stuck and need a new perspective to jar our thinking, but we aren't always aware of other frames of thinking to try on."

How can you use the tool of *reframing* to inspire yourself and colleagues, gain new perspective, and generate alternative solutions?

### Systems Thinking: Patterns, Connections, and Webs of Inter-relationships

Systems thinkers look at the big picture, think holistically, and consider how one element is part of a bigger whole. They see the connections, focus on patterns, inter-relationships, ripple effects, and the dynamics of systems that provide options for actions and opportunities for leveraging change and solving complex problems. The Waters Foundation explains that system thinking helps us to see events "in the larger context of a pattern that is unfolding over time."

How can you become a systems thinker? Here is some advice from Luis Hernandez, Miami, Florida: "A basic tenant of systems thinking is to be curious about how this fits with that, how can this and that come together... ask lots of questions, especially 'stupid' ones!"

Sometimes leaders in our field work on a macro level across sectors and systems, such as health, education, social services, local and federal governments. "I am engaged in systems thinking as I endeavor to expand our ECE Workforce Registry across systems and align with QRIS and professional development systems. This systems work could lead to greater efficiencies, better data and reporting, and increased opportunities for ECE providers and teachers to both access and document their profes-

sional growth,” said Fiona Stewart, Los Angeles, California.

As a profession, we seek to focus on the ‘whole’ child, yet each child is also part of larger, intersecting systems. Glory Ressler put it this way:

“Maybe that parent who seems uncaring or unattached is caught in an economic and social system forcing her to work long hours. The seemingly authoritarian licenser may be caught in a system of rules and requirements. I find that when I am sensitive to the larger landscape and the dynamics that the various players are facing, I am more aware of the sort of ripples I create — and am therefore more intentional in my responses.”

Both Elmida Baghdaserians, Los Angeles, California, and Pam Boulton, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, warn us to think of both the big picture and the specifics simultaneously. Baghdaserians reminds us, “Part of being a good leader is knowing how to see the big picture and the small pictures in the big picture.” Boulton concurs that, “Systems thinking is not only about *big* systems, it is also about the small pieces that interact in our daily lives.” She illustrates this point with a story about complaints she was receiving from parents concerning a specific teacher and the morning greeting time. She reviewed the classroom arrangement, daily schedule, sign-in procedure, and the door that the families used to enter the classroom (all small pieces that interact) and came up with a solution that improved the teacher’s capacity to greet the parents who arrive a bit later without disrupting the whole group time. Her systems approach worked — parents were satisfied.

How might *systems thinking* help you see interconnections and ripple effects and to find answers to, “Now what?”

## Strategic Leadership: Three Tools for Success

Each of these tools is powerful when used with intention and regularity, and their potential for problem solving and opening up new ways of thinking is enhanced when used together. Francis Wardle, Lakewood, Colorado, illustrates how these three skills can be bundled by a strategic leader. He used *reflection* to isolate three key issues and related goals; then he *re-framed* challenges and saw opportunities to leverage changes in *systems* (organizational structure and the budget) to meet his goals:

“When I was a Head Start director I was looking at several challenges at the same time: 1) my staff was not part of the county’s health insurance and retirement program, 2) I wanted to increase the salaries of all my staff, and, 3) too many levels of administration in my program were causing bureaucratic dysfunction. I began to tackle these one at a time. I convinced the county not to take administrative money from my federal grant. This money I then transferred to pay for the insurance and retirement fund. The retirement of several administrators gave me the idea to eliminate an entire level of administration, thus freeing funds for salary increases and reducing dysfunction. I kept the focus on finding ways to improve the condition of my staff, which was essential to the improvement of my entire program.”

Strategic leaders have both vision and the ability to mobilize others to achieve it. They are adept at using reflection, reframing, and systems thinking and are purposeful about developing and using these strategic skills every day. Stories from ELI’s emerging and master leaders are a reminder that great leaders aren’t born; they work hard and with intentionality to build the skills and habits of mind necessary for success.

## Resources

Waters Foundation, Systems Thinking in Education:  
<http://watersfoundation.org/>

John Pisapia’s The Strategic Leader Network: <http://thestrategicleader.org/>

