

Authors' copy - for citation, please use the original: Sotarauta, M. 1999. In Search of Strategic Consciousness and Using Plans as Mirrors: The Case of Raisio Town. *Sociedade e Território*. 29, 16-35.

Markku Sotarauta

In Search of Strategic Consciousness and Using Strategic Plans as Mirrors: Some Reflections from Raisio Town

Abstract

In Finland strategic planning has become a popular means to seek a more comprehensive view on development and futures, but if policy-makers are locked in the too instrumental view, their view on strategic planning remain rather narrow, and hence it easily turns out to be a technical exercise in which strategic planning document is the most important outcome. In this paper it is argued that one of the most important ways of managing strategically is to generate strategic consciousness in a never-ending strategy process. It is argued that strategic consciousness is a crucial precondition in a continuous process of strategy. This paper focuses on strategy process in which managers, planners and leading politicians generate shared view on the essence of the municipal organisation and communities. There may be many different ideas and arguments, but in this paper it is argued that strategic consciousness by the aid of mirroring leads to dialogue about conflicting ideas and single measures towards strategic in long run. The role and emergence of a shared strategic consciousness is highlighted using empirical evidence from the strategic management of the Town of Raisio, Finland.

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, among Finnish municipalities there was a move towards concentrating on assessing the opportunities, prioritisation of services, identifying strategic issues and adjusting activities to fit the revenue base of the municipality (and not vice versa). New approaches were sought in corporate strategic planning for the management and planning of municipalities. As notions permeated mainly from the USA, strategic planning began to arouse interest.

The strategic position of the municipalities, however, did not in the 1980s leave much room for strategic planning in the real sense of the term, and it was initially applied in shaping the outlines in promotion of local economic development policies and in various development projects. Methods were many and varied and in many cases strategic planning was an operation isolated from the rest of the organisation's activities¹.

¹ On the other hand it must be pointed out that focussing solely on concepts may be misleading. Merely using the methods of strategic planning says nothing about whether the municipalities really acted in a strategic manner or not. The municipal organisation may act in a very strategic manner although it has never applied the doctrines of strategic planning available in books. On the other hand it may make use of many methods but in practice there may be nothing at all strategic in the actions. Strategy is neither in concepts nor on paper.

In the 1990s strategic planning has found a more established position. This is firstly due to the fact that the general development of local government has given the municipalities even more power to decide about their own affairs. Simultaneously planning in the municipalities has been lightened and new modes of governance have been sought which embody certain basic tenets of strategic planning. By way of generalisation one could state that the entire thinking on the policy-making of public administration has developed in the direction of strategic planning¹.

Those who research (strategic) planning are usually unanimous that the planning process is more important than the product it yields. But why is this so?

This article proposes the assumption that one of the functions of strategic planning is to generate strategic consciousness and the assumption that it is this developing of strategic consciousness which makes planning process important. This hitherto vague response is scrutinised by reflecting empirical evidence from Town of Raisio.

The examination of the case of Raisio uses ‘voices from Raisio’ i.e. direct quotations have been taken from the interviews¹ to illustrate the observations made. The quotations from the interviews are marked so that Raisio/PO refers to a professional official and Raisio/EP refers to a person who has been elected to a position of trust.

The aim of the present article is to analyse the importance of strategic planning from the standpoint of strategic consciousness.

2. Towards a more strategic approach in Raisio Town

The planning process and intended strategies of Raisio town

Raisio town is one of those municipalities in Finland which set out in the early 90's to reform its planning in the direction of strategic planning, but as is evident, in Raisio, as in many other municipalities, old approaches are incorporated in the new ones.

In the new approach the concentration was on strategic aims derived from a vision and on focal points for strategic development. The idea was to prepare a strategic programme by the town council intention being to lay down the strategic aims and general direction for the activities of the town organisation.

“The wording in the new plan is not so precise as it used to be. The old municipal plan was too unwieldy and clumsy and it wasn't true anyway. Now they only go for wider entities and try to act so that what gets done is along those general lines.” (Raisio/EP.)

The new strategic planning approach sought to stress the position of the town council and strives for factors to unite the different parts of the municipal organisation and decision-

¹ Examples include industrial strategies, strategies to promote culture, regional development strategies, etc.

makers. The administrative bodies formulate their own objectives and strategies on the basis of the strategic programme formulated by the council.

“It seems to me that we are surely looking for some equally simple denominator that might just show the direction for development, some kind of uniting force for our activities. Earlier it was very much fragmented. Now we wanted to put those fragments together, find a line and ways of doing things that were quite simple and clear.” (Raisio/PO)

There is no reason to examine the concrete goals and means presented in the strategic programme of Raisio town in this connection, but to describe briefly the results produced by the officials and elected persons. Let us begin with the vision.

The Vision for Raisio 2005

Raisio will be a sub-regional centre of Turku urban area for education, trade and exercise
 Raisio will be verdant and appreciated as a place to live with comprehensive basic services
 Raisio will react rapidly to the needs of residents and business life

I now present a condensed version of the intended municipal strategies. Only the intended municipal strategies are presented in this connection. Services, administration, environment and other sectoral strategies have been relegated to the background. The intended strategies of Raisio town are the following:

- Raisio is to strengthen its role as the western sub-regional centre of the Turku urban area for education, trade and exercise
 - the town aims at the position of regional centre for example by selling services to neighbouring municipalities
- Reacting rapidly and making decision flexibly - a competitive advantage *vis à vis* other municipalities
 - Through delegation of decision-making the various layers will be disposed of so opening up the opportunity to react rapidly to the needs of residents and business
- Disseminating information openly
 - The negative image of Raisio¹ was among the reasons for improving the dissemination of information
- In housing focus is on utilising the growth of the Turku urban region by an active policy on building plots
- A strong economic base is a precondition for the implementation of the other strategies

Competition is generally also linked to the strategies. Raisio town, like other municipalities, is competing for residents and enterprises. The interviews indicate that the following competition strategies may be found behind the Raisio strategies:

Raisio competes

¹ In Raisio there has been a deliberate attempt to improve the image of the Town - “Years ago Raisio had an awful image, that it was just a road junction and some concrete bridges” (Raisio/PO). The local standing joke was that Raisio was the only road junction in Finland with the charter of a town. In Raisio the questionable image has been felt to be a problem in attracting new residents and businesses. The creation of the new image has emphasised pleasant residential areas, quality of services and fast decision-making. The investigation shows that putting effort into improving the image has produced results. (see Miettinen & Varhe 1993; Kuntatutkimus 1994.)

- with *small municipalities* through amount of services and the proximity of Turku. It cannot compete with the lower community costs and building plots of small municipalities
- with *municipalities of the same size* through building plots, costs of municipal services, rapid and flexible decision-making and good image
- with *the City of Turku* through rapid and flexible decision-making, availability of building plots and cost for community services

2. Strategic consciousness and mirroring

Strategic consciousness

In connection with both the Raisio case and the generalisations derived from it the concept of strategic consciousness has come intermittently into view. It is obvious that in Raisio the importance of strategic planning was not in the strategic programmes and the visions and intended strategies therein appearing but in how in the discussions in connection with the process of preparing the vision, intended strategies etc. strategic consciousness has been emerging.

So what is strategic consciousness? How can the programme be used as a mirror in decision-making and in taking strategic consciousness further? Let us begin to answer these questions from the concept of strategic consciousness.

Consciousness presupposes that the actor knows and recognises his/her own existence and environment. For the development of consciousness it is necessary that the actor have the ability to monitor and interpret events and to make sense of them. Consciousness expands to be strategic when the actor has the ability to find the strategic issues essential to developing and development from the long-term perspective. The assumption then is that as strategic consciousness grows so does also the probability that decision-makers and officials will act in keeping with the strategies formulated and in practice strategic programmes may turn out to be pragmatic, because long-term strategies are not so much on paper but in the spinal-cords of the key-actors. According to my analysis Town of Raisio has implemented its strategies efficiently. The main factor in the effective implementation of the strategic programme was on the one hand its being geared to the near future and current issues on the surface. Despite visions and strategic approach the gaze faltered very near.

“Our strategies are practical ones and I think that they will therefore work. When I looked at what had been achieved of our objectives I thought we have been shortsighted so that we set things going that were sure to come off. Did we after all look very close, are we intellectually dishonest or what is this. Maybe it’s quite natural that nothing so very great comes about that you don’t set about doing it just because you can get it down on paper.” (Raisio/PO)

On the other hand strategic consciousness is good in Raisio.

When the definition of strategic consciousness is linked to the municipalities, i.e. when there is more than one actor involved, a totality composed of individuals and groups, the foregoing definitions can be extended into collective strategic consciousness. It is a communicative learning process by nature. However, good strategic consciousness does not necessarily mean that there is overall unanimity on every question of the contents of the strategies. In

such cases strategic consciousness is that an individual, despite his own differing opinion, still recognises the strategic solutions on which the town has decided and the reasons behind them.

When strategic consciousness is good the opportunity for flexible and fast decision-making opens up. It is possible to decentralise decision-making power to be closer to where things happen. If strategic consciousness is bad it becomes necessary to have possibly very fundamental strategic discussions over every single issue.

In Raisio such strategic factors as flexibility, fast decision-making and rapid reaction are an important part of strategic consciousness. They are inculcated into the decision-makers and senior officials. The importance of the process and of communication is also seen in the fact that those modes of operation are emphasised, which run deep and are in the thinking of the town manager. Many times the solutions are for a situation at a time and the strategies are unidentified.

“...well... all the surprises just came along, there was no looking up advice in that book (programme).. the Strategy itself, do we have a conscious strategy. I don't know... I think that we don't. In our subconscious we have ways of doing things. We may have some big things, main strategies outlined in the head of the town manager. We have taken on board some ways of doing things. Business people are given building plots at a favourable price, but we don't give them any money. We have main lines for actions that you could call a main strategy, but we have not consciously made official papers on strategy for the whole town that direct our actions. So we arrive at solutions one by one and it still somehow is fragmented, but still I don't say that things are bad, that we wouldn't be able to think about things here. Everybody knows what the town manager thinks about certain main lines what way our affairs have been taken care of.” (Raisio/PO)

One facilitating factor central to creating strategic consciousness and carrying through the strategic programme is that the Raisio strategies are not new inspirations but have been processed for a long time. Strategic consciousness has been developing for over 10 years. Ideas about Raisio as the western sub-regional centre for the Turku urban area, of fast and flexible decision-making and improved information already appear among the objectives of a municipal plan of 1983.

“The ideas in the programme didn't just come into being at that moment, they are long-term ideas that have existed here for some time.” (Raisio/PO)

On a collective level good strategic consciousness is seen in the fact that it fairly easy in many strategic decisions to reach unanimity.

“We take our decisions fast, we don't waste time on them. The decisions are made in a good constructive spirit. Very few matters are left undecided and very few are sent back, so that shows that in our municipality there is a relative unanimity about things. The political parties are pretty well unanimous, although there's sometimes a bit of scrapping.” (Raisio/EP)

One aim of the reform of planning was to increase the chances for elected persons in positions of trust to exert influence on the development of the town. An attempt was made to make the role of such persons more one of drawing broad outlines. This is how long-term persistence and future orientation has been sought, likewise a basis for the delegation of decision-making.

“Yes the participation. Yes in my mind it is felt that one is more involved than before. Before it was just that the old plan was taken and read through and looked at and the date was changed and the year, a few sentences were changed...it may be that the councillors now feel that they have done it.” (Raisio/EP)

“Because earlier it was a pretty stupid way that the officials prepared some paper right to the end, then it was handled once in the municipal executive board. After that it went in a nice, clean packet to the town council and they rubber stamped it, it was no longer of this world. It was done because it had to be done... Yes it is seen as a resource that the elected persons are involved from the beginning, makes later stages easier and more flexible.” (Raisio/PO)

But although the commitment of the elected persons and generation of their strategic consciousness is a major idea, the political nature of municipal decision-making still haunts the background. The town council is not a unified group whose commitment to a shared strategy is to be taken for granted.

“...but I still think that most of the politicians and I admit that I myself am one of them to a great extent, they still do not see the matter in such a way that we the council are one team which as one man carry through certain strategic objectives. Even in spite of the fact that the council certainly when it confirms those municipal plans and annual budget and decides on certain programmes, of course it’s making its decision, but commitment to those programmes is variable depending on to what extent they coincide with their own personal opinions and the opinions of their political party.” (Raisio/EP)

The same fragmentation of ‘one united team’ appears in co-operation between different units. That is, although shared intended strategies are made, support for them is not automatically forthcoming.

“ We’re not yet terribly good at setting all those objectives and then reconciling our objectives...there is still a lot to be learned between administrative bodies and within them, and its still frequently a matter of chance, not on all counts, but there’s still things to be learnt.” (Raisio/PO)

Yet, although the situation could easily break up - the factors which unite different actors, persistence and consistence in decision-making must constantly be sought. Although strategic planning has not made the Raisio town organisation one big team it has supported the endless search for common directions, it has generated better strategic consciousness.

“In that sense the strategic programme also directs the elected persons so that there can come no moves in the middle of the council’s term or in the middle of the budgetary year where some big project is suddenly brought out of the hat, well there are no more of those now.” (Raisio/PO)

“An effort has been made to rise above that mass of small issues and to see the totality. It’s not easy to say how many of us have succeeded in this and how many have not. It’s very human that small issues are interesting and big ones are difficult to encapsulate and hard to take a hold of.” (Raisio/EP)

Based on the observations made in the Town of Raisio it can be concluded, that collective strategic consciousness comes into being in communication addressing the following themes.

- strategic intentions

- Strategic intent¹ is a manifestation of the strategy designers - in Raisio case, of town council - about a) the desired leadership position among communities, b) the position of the municipal organisation in community governance and c) the establishment of the criteria to chart the progress.
 - the original tasks of the municipal organisation and its various service units and the changes in these over time, i.e. that path which has been taken
 - the resource base - possible opportunities and threats to it
 - the desired future
 - the direction of present development, where we are going if the present development continues
 - possible futures - both undesired and desired future alternatives (scenarios)
 - necessary changes and strategic issues - opportunities and threats
 - internal situation of the municipal organisation and its effects on timing of strategy
 - meanings and affects on timing of the situation of the municipal community and society

In strategic consciousness it is essential that the municipal decision-makers and officials have the core of municipal activities constantly in mind in the background of their thoughts and actions. There may be several differing opinions and views on this, but collective strategic consciousness directs individual decisions and measures towards more strategic.

Strategic consciousness includes the notion that the most direct route in society between the present situation and the desired future is not necessarily the straight one. With strategic consciousness of strategies and objectives the direction the development of the organisation takes may be momentarily 'wrong' for the objectives, as strategic consciousness will rectify the direction when time provides a suitable opportunity, or then the objectives will change when something new is learned - but not without mirroring.

Strategic consciousness does not mean that visions and strategies have been made in the municipality and recorded in documents under the name of strategic plan. Strategic consciousness means that the decision-makers and officials have themselves realised and comprehended the importance of these matters for everyday actions. Strategic consciousness is not on paper, nor yet can it be only presented through sense. Strategic consciousness is in the veins.

Although this is so, it does not detract from the importance of strategic planning, plans, analyses and various workshops. Through these many actors can consciously search for and create strategic consciousness and inculcate this as a part of communicative planning. The essential is that it be done consciously.

¹ In local government strategic intent should express political purpose, and as such it might be used to ensure consistency and coherence between various objectives, strategies and projects within a municipal organisation, and within a set of interrelated strategies of various service providers and actors in the community. In this view strategic intent may resemble vision, but grounded more on action and benchmarking, its potential may be better. The question behind strategic intent is not "what will the future be like", but "what must we do differently". Through strategic intent decision-makers and the whole organisation are provided with an essential part of what is called strategic consciousness (see Sotarauta 1995).

Strategic consciousness - synoptic planning - incrementalism

To clarify the essence of strategic consciousness I compare it, albeit simplistically, with comprehensive rationalism and incrementalism¹ in proportion to the choices available. Basically, in every decision-making situation, the question is about making choices. Incrementalism assumes that policy processes and outcomes are largely reactive, driven primarily by considerations of partisan mutual adjustment (see Braybrooke & Lindblom 1963), and the rational planning process is about going through a generation of alternatives, evaluation, and choice is based on that evaluation. (see Faludi 1973.)

If approaching decision-making by incrementalism, e.g. at time t_4 (Figure 2.), the choice is based on the first solution found that is good enough, i.e. the choice is based on situation at that moment and earlier decisions made at time t_3 , and perhaps t_2 , organisation is muddling through (see Lindblom 1959). If approaching the decision-making through the ideal of rationalism, choices to be made in t_2 - t_9 are planned already at t_1 .

Using strategic consciousness, choice is made at every time-point by considering the situation at that moment in relation to the intended strategy and emerging strategies. In a way, the choice made is the best (or the most suitable) possible, both in relation to the situation in hand and in relation to strategies. Thus, decision-makers may consider changes in the environment, previous decisions and future prospects in relation to the intended strategy and the choice at that moment. Discussions and strategic questions force decision-makers to consider both short-term and long-term prospects and thus they are using and generating strategic consciousness. For example in Figure 2., at times t_2 and t_3 , it is not possible to implement strategy as it was formulated, because there are no real choices available, environment has changed since t_1 . But later, from t_4 to t_8 new opportunities have been created or have emerged, and strategic consciousness leads the choices made towards the original "path to the future", or it might be that the learning process redirects them.

Without strategic consciousness, depending on pure incrementalism, the basic mission of the organisation is relegated to the background and desired futures are not considered in the decision-making. Therefore the time-span of decision-making is narrow based on only the present situation and short-term future. If using pure rationalism it might be that decision-makers did not even notice that there were no real possibilities at times t_2 and t_3 to act as planned, the choices made were more or less artificial. Acting "as planned" may look good, strategy being implemented as intended, but the outcome is weakened interlinkages between the organisation and its environment.

¹ Comprehensive rationalism and incrementalism, their strengths and weaknesses, are well known in planning discourse. Here, they are used as aids in making clear the essence of strategic consciousness

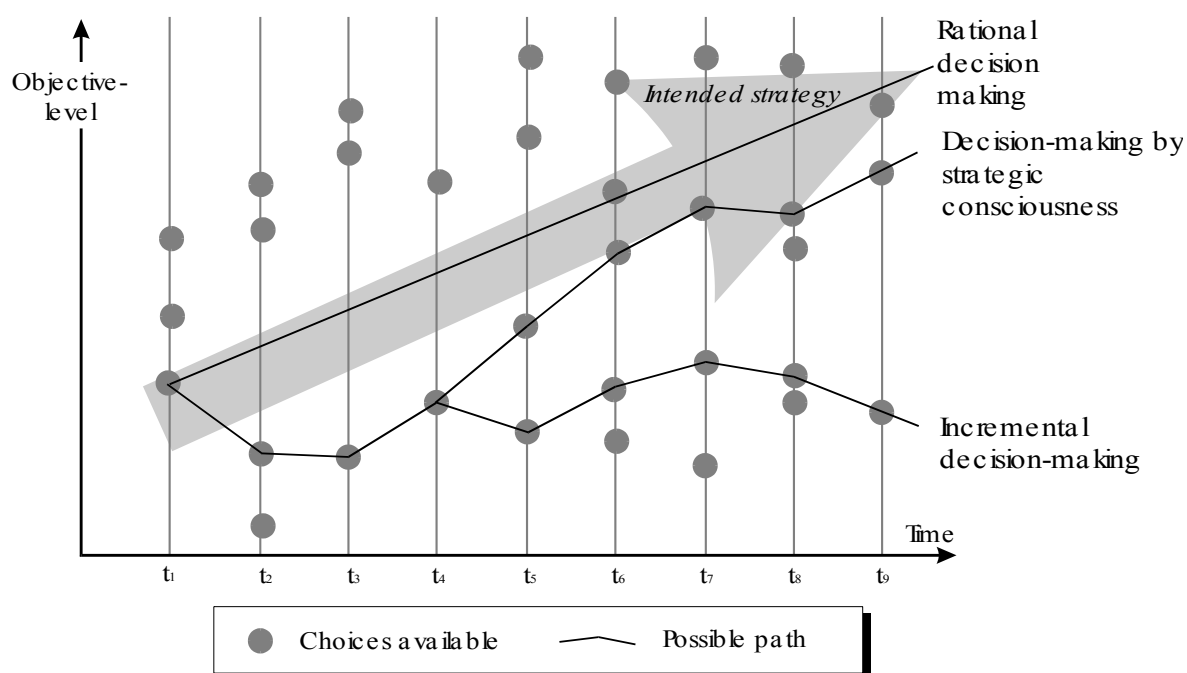


FIGURE 1. Strategic consciousness and choices available (strictly speaking there is not such phenomenon as management by strategic consciousness, because strategic consciousness guides decision-making from the background)

Strategic consciousness entails the direction of efforts and choices made at different times toward a common purpose, thus budgets, sectoral plans and separate measures are in relation to the strategic issues. Strategic consciousness is based on objective analyses, personal strategic thinking and intersubjective communication. By strategic consciousness strategies guide the functions flexibly and softly. In this view, strategy is not only a plan, but a combination of individual and collective views of desired future and needed actions. Thus, based on ongoing communication, implementation may be incremental in nature, because strategic consciousness by the aid of mirroring provides the long-range view. Unlike disjointed incrementalism strategic consciousness suggests that there is long-range consistency in action despite a short-term view in daily operations. The view of strategic consciousness is closer to Quinn's (1980) idea of logical incrementalism, the significant difference being the emphasis on foresight by the aid of strategic planning and mirroring.

In the municipality strategic consciousness is composed of individual and collective views of the desired future taken together and of necessary measures. The conception of time stretches from the past via the present to the future and moves in both directions. The future is discussed in the light of the past and the present, and the present is discussed in the light of what has been and what is to come. In the making of new decisions people learn from experience. Learning is not necessarily confined to the contents of decisions and strategies; it extends to the interactive relations between individuals and organisations and the forms they take, the successes tasted and the conflicts.

One function of strategic planning is thus to create strategic consciousness. If its creation is confined to the planning process it may not have sufficient space to grow and develop. Moreover, intended strategies are frequently separate from decision-making. If the intended strategies formulated are used as mirrors for activities and decision-making it is possible to include strategies and strategic consciousness in constant activity and decision-making. But what is mirroring? How can mirroring on the one hand influence decision-making and on the other create strategic consciousness?

Mirroring

In general the mission of strategic planning is to indicate the direction of future decisions and measures and so to direct operations. In soft strategy¹ the primary task of intended, planned strategy is not only to directly guide action but to support the ongoing process of strategy, the emergence of new ideas, to provide a mirror. The idea is not to stick at strategy on paper but to use the strategy document as part of a continually changing strategy process.

When the strategy is based more on the strategic consciousness of decision-makers and managers than on planning documents, the significance of the planning document decreases.

“In point of fact the planning document is not so important. It is not so important as the one which went before it at all. That is just one step, really is ceased to be dealt with when it went to that council meeting and there was a great deal of discussion and there was no obligation to confine the discussion to the book. They didn’t need to say that on page this and that there is this and that issue, but the politicians remembered and said that when we were in the group we considered the issue etc. Certainly the importance of the document diminished.” (Raisio/PO)

Mirroring is thus a part of communicative planning. The function of the strategic programme is thus not to direct various actors at first hand but to be of itself an arena for discussions, struggles and quarrels (Healey 1992). The earlier conception emphasised that discussion be held in the strategic planning process, after which the various actors committed themselves to the result of planning and implemented it. In soft strategy commitment, too, has a new content. No direct commitment to the notions arrived at in the planning process is sought; the communicative process constantly seeks for shared views and projects which require commitment and render it possible.

The strategic programme may therefore be seen as a mirror, but not a conventional one-dimensional mirror reflecting only the image of the one looking into it. There are at least four dimensions reflecting in different directions. The function of the mirror is to direct the discussion of different interest and intentions and individual measures towards being strategic. In this way there is a constant search for new futures and different measures to support the development of the municipality.

¹ See Sotarauta (1996 and 1997)

The first dimension turns inwards. Although intended strategies may be merely the recording of existing strategies the strategic programme can be used in support of their realisation. Intended strategies are recorded for purposes of co-ordination, through them the management of the municipality seeks to ensure that the different parts of the organisation work in the same direction.

Thus the purpose of the first dimension is very traditional - to direct the activities of the organisation. It provides a) management with an opportunity to bring out the desired directions and b) individuals and units with an opportunity to mirror their own activities in relation to the strategic intentions expressed by the political decision-makers, thereby enabling the unification of the strategies of the units. (see Mintzberg 1994, 351-361.)

In the underlying assumptions of the strategic planning in Raisio the first dimension is dominant.

The second dimension looks back at those forming the strategies of the municipal organisation, the political decision-makers and leading officials. The function of mirroring is to facilitate the formulation of the right questions as part of the continuous strategy discussion and to support the inclusion of new demands and ideas in the intended strategies.

In Raisio, vision has been used as a tool, for example in the allocation of resources. After all, it has something to say about the sectors considered most important in the town.

“Oh the vision is a grand thing to lean on. They say so because it’s been decided in the council and generally approved of so it’s grand to lean on it when you’re deciding about things and taking them forward. What could you do without a thing like that. It’s hard to imagine just living from day to day just seeing what life puts in front of you without thinking about those things.” (Raisio/EP)

By mirroring the strategic management can dovetail individual issues into the strategies. In practice this means that when a new threat, opportunity, demand, request, innovation etc. is encountered the question is

Shall this emerging issue be included in our strategies?

if supported, then...

Do we have the resources to implement it?

What matters speak for it?

Are there considerations which do not speak for it?

If there are no resources can we extend the resource base through co-operation or in some other way could some other organisation be interested in it etc?

if not supported, then

Should it be rejected?

What do we lose if we reject it?

If the matter is intrinsically so good that it cannot be rejected out of hand, how does it re-direct our strategies, can we accept this change?

Such questions lay the foundation for continuous strategy processes as part of decision-making. Strategy is implemented or renewed constantly in connection with decision-making

but with an eye to the relation of individual matters to strategies. Mirroring can be used, for example, as follows when the town manager presents a proposed decision to the council.

- Decision X should be taken because it supports the implementation of our strategy A
- Decision X does not support the implementation of our strategies, nor does it conflict with them. The decision should be taken because...
- Decision X conflicts with strategy A, but it should still be taken because... And so our strategies will take a new direction as follows...
- Given that change Z has occurred in our operating environment our strategies must be changed. Decision X reforms our strategy A as follows... this is relevant because...

The second dimension provides the political leadership of the municipality with criteria derived from strategic intentions and intended strategies to monitor the development of the municipality and to discuss the importance of individual decisions as part of the strategy process.

In Raisio the second dimension of the mirror is used from time to time. however, it appears that its use is incidental and not a deliberate development of the second dimension.

The first two dimensions look inwards, to the municipal organisation and the decision-makers. *The third dimension* looks outwards. The outward-looking mirror offers the municipal organisation the opportunity to seek both material and non-material support for its endeavours. The intended strategies recorded in the planning document are the municipality's expression of its problems, intentions, future prospects and potential to solve problems and develop in the right direction.

The importance of the outward-looking dimensions is growing as several national and international institutions constantly monitor the broad lines of European development. Some of these grant support for various projects, whereas others produce influential reports on different endeavours to develop subareas and still others may be looking for partners for their own developmental aspirations. The basic message in the third dimension is "Granted, we have problems, but as you can see we also have the potential and innovativeness to solve them, do you want to join in our endeavours? This strategy document is our analysis of the situation and our own intentions. We can begin some discussions..." the strategic programme for Raisio town has not been prepared with an eye to the third dimension.

The fourth dimension, last but not least, reflects on the residents of the municipality. In the ideal case strategies are created together with the residents, but this was not so in the case of Raisio. The fundamental message of the fourth dimension is: "Granted, we have created the strategies on the basis of the feedback we had from you, here they are, let us seek their concrete forms together if you are interested. We are naturally grateful if you have views regarding strategic issues in our community, but if you wish, we can concentrate on only those issues pertaining to you."

Getting feedback, discussion with residents is a continuous process in matters which interest each individual or group. Not all residents have opinions or even interest regarding strategic questions of the community, nor need they have any, but generally many people have

views on issues directly pertaining to themselves. The day care centre for one's own children, the residential home for one's father or the local football ground. Discussing these matters produces feedback which can be utilised in the fine-tuning of the strategy process.

Even small matters are important in strategy. It is also through these that the strategy process goes in two directions.

By mirroring, intended strategies change while they are implemented. In this way the emergent nature of strategies is exploited and emergence becomes a slightly more conscious process.

Let us here condense the dimensions of the mirror once more:

1. The mirror to the organisation: "These are important things which we ought to do in the future. Do all you can to accommodate your own strategies to these, or have we forgotten something? Should our strategies be retargetted?"
2. The mirror to the political decision-makers: "These are our strategic intentions, objectives and strategies for the development of this municipal community; are they still justified, should they be changed, does this decision support them or not?"
3. The mirror to other organisations and their decision-makers, including possible financiers and co-operation partners: "Such are our problems, but we are ready, willing and able to deal with them. We are on the lookout for joint projects, points of intersection between our strategies."
4. The mirror to the residents and various groups of residents: "This is the way we believe we are, and this is the way we believe we ought to be. Tell us what you think, large and small matters are appropriate."

When the plan is seen as a mirror it is stressed that the plan is something different to different people. It has different functions and audiences in different situations.

What is the balance after Raisio?

The Raisio strategic programme is a list of jobs to be done, the vision a description of the present situation, and nothing new or revolutionary has come into the plan. The most hasty might condemn the plan as pointless and a failure. This would be too abrupt a conclusion.

Although from the perspective of classic strategic planning there are clear deficiencies in the Raisio strategic planning, still, from the perspective of interaction and communication...

It has been one way to get to the essence of strategic consciousness, one way of processing strategic questions, one way to attach significance to issues. It is a step towards communicative planning.

Strategy work has been one way of getting reforms through in the organisation. But this has not been without a tough squeeze. When strategy work is successful the emphasis is on discussions, reasoning and analyses and on the conscious managing of the process. Strategic planning and programmes were only one tool among many.

"Making a strategy sometimes feels like taking rotten medicine. The divisional chiefs are rumbling, it's felt to be extra work on top of all the routine work. Sometimes it feels that it would be easier to do without these strategy things, one could just get down to the daily jobs. But then the new things, development, they come through strategic planning. Otherwise nothing would happen here. Paper

doesn't mean a thing, but that various issues are considered - that's important. It takes persistence and motivation." (Raisio/PO)

In Raisio what is emphasised is not only the classic goal-oriented strategic view but also the communication and interaction occurring in planning. In such a case the contents of the strategies is a secondary factor and the more important position is occupied by reviewing whether the planning process has brought value added to the discussion on the development of the town, whether it has promoted learning, whether it has increased the strategic consciousness of the decision-makers and leading officials. And from this standpoint Raisio town has been fairly successful in its strategy work, not in community but within organisation.

Despite the emphasis on discussion and interaction the mode of thinking of the leading elected persons and professional officials is dominated by the classic modes of strategic thinking. In Raisio strategic planning has been constructed to serve the outlining of a vision, goals for results and focal areas. Emphasising the classic planning needs may well be due to the experiences gained from earlier planning and to the general dominant strategy view in Finland. The need to be more communicative emanates from practical situations.

"There has been the same problem in the strategic programme as has been for a long time in this society anyway, that is, everything happens so fast, a lot of new things come along. So you should react awfully fast and such long-term plans, you should check all the time that they correspond to the times we are living in. (Raisio/EP)

Although the Raisio strategic planning may be described as one step towards communicative planning, it is in no way in keeping with pure communicative rationalism. There is no contact to the various groups of residents on the level of the rest of the process. Strategic discussion has been to a great extent within the organisation. Attempts have been made to compensate for this shortcoming by open dissemination of information.

5. Summary

It may be stated as a generalisation that most of the Finnish municipalities and the regions have made their own strategies. Strategic planning, however, has not turned out to be such an efficient producer of success as the handbooks and consultants indicated. At times it has been difficult to shape that very own, unique comparative advantage, scenarios have remained at too general a level divorced from action, SWOT analyses have been augmented by many important matters without an awareness of what was to be done with them. Strategic programmes have frequently not progressed beyond the general level, simplicistically put, it has been decided in these "to support all that is nice and beautiful and to avoid all that is nasty". Thus with good will almost all activity can be interpreted as supporting strategy or going over the lines depending on the perspective and goals of whoever is making the interpretation. This means that intended strategies are everybody's and nobody's. For this reason they do not embed themselves in the actions of the organizations. Strategies easily remain floating, they con-

tinue to be paper among more paper. The credibility of the main tenets of classic strategic planning is also undermined by the fact that very frequently in strategic planning existing and incipient patterns are recognized, to be legitimized with the help of strategic planning (see Sotarauta 1996; Sotarauta & Linnamaa 1997.)

Sometimes all unfinished business is compiled into strategy papers and futures-oriented strategies have been implemented in a year. And, after all, when the time to make decisions comes, the strategy papers have been forgotten, the world has changed, “and now is not the time to make strategies, now is the time to balance next year’s budget.”

Attempts to eliminate the problems of strategic planning and improve its performance have generally been made through developing new methods which take better account of the future, by making better analyses, by being more creative, by refining reports, by committing better to the programme development. However, the root of the trouble in strategic planning is that:

- policy makers’ and politicians’ ways of understanding themselves and their operations seem not to have changed as much as the general policy environment. Their view of policy-making is still dominated by rational planning models, models that draw on product, accomplishment, and goal-oriented approaches that operate within means-end structured problems, i.e. within instrumental rationalism, and therefore strategic planning is in part based on old mental models but on new vocabulary.
- the thought and strategic planning models developed for the private sector are not directly applicable for public purposes.

The brief introduction to fallacies of strategic planning given above is pessimistic, cynical but above all it is one-sided and narrow, partly wrong. Strategic planning has not produced only failure. It has caused actors to take a broader view of things from different perspectives; greater and more profound consideration than before has been given to futures; actors have recognized their own strengths and weaknesses and learned to understand them better; excessive preoccupation with detail has been avoided; sectoral boundaries have been transcended; activities have been pursued consistently and persistently etc.

I argue that the most important functions of strategic planning are:

- to generate strategic consciousness,
- to produce a mirror that informs to different audiences about different things
- to produce a mirror that is one of the means of taking strategic consciousness further and is one means in communication.

Great differences can be discerned between different regions and municipalities both in the quality of output and above all in significance to activity. As a further generalization it may be stated that if the preparation of strategies has been a narrow performance led by holders of official posts, then the meaning of these is likewise narrow. However, if sufficient time has been devoted to the process and if sufficiently extensive and open discussions have been held, then contemplation of the future has at least had an indirect bearing on policy-making and de-

cision-making. It has raised the level of strategic consciousness. The process has had direct effects and the output itself has generally had an indirect effect, as was the case in Raisio.

On the basis of the observations in Raisio and my other research on strategic planning at regional and local levels the essence of strategic planning can be summarized as follows:

Discuss at sufficient length - i.e. discuss the basic issues of development with various parties taking different perspectives into account. This is not only a ‘one-off’ part of planning, rather, in order to ensure a really effective discussion it should be constantly ongoing in one form or another. Only after sufficient communication can an *insight* come to light in a wide range of actors as to which themes are current from the point of view of local development and future. Only personal realization can lead to a matter being truly *grasped*. This is essential if strategies are to develop to be strategic consciousness, if they are to become part of the actors’ ‘spinal cords’ and not merely flourish on paper and in ceremonial speeches. Real *commitment* can only follow after sufficient communication, personal realization and grasping of the issue. Plans can be used as mirrors in ensuring that a more futures oriented view is integrated into decision-making.

Such a process is no linear planning process progressing from planning to decision-making, from decision-making to implementation and from implementation to evaluation and so to a new round of planning; it is a continuous communicative process in which different elements dovetail into one another in many different ways, and in which strategic consciousness gradually evolves and thus discussions become more concrete. During this kind of process, people involved not only gain better strategic consciousness but learn to understand better the aims, strategies and values of the actors involved, their ways of acting and thinking. In practice in times of increasing interdependencies, this kind of learning is also an essential part of strategic consciousness.

“We are very easily such planning nerds that we make plans and create the next round out of the blue and then notice less what has occurred.” (Raisio/PO)

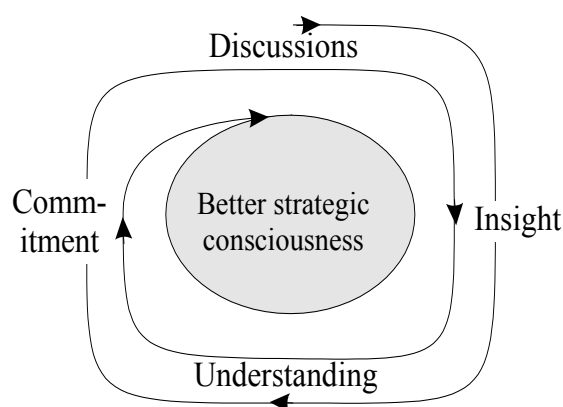


FIGURE 2. The core and the coil of the origin of the strategic consciousness

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