

Time as Context: Kairos, and the spatio-temporal “quality” of Strategic Leadership

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Sub-theme 27 - Re-conceptualizing Leadership and its Development: Space, Place and the Virtual World



Figure 1: Kairos, copy from Lysisppus. Museo Archeologico, Turin

Now in every piece of work, beauty is achieved through many numbers coming to a congruence (kairos) under some system of proportion and harmony.

[Plutarch, Moralia, 45C]

Life is short, and Art long; the crisis (kairos) fleeting; experience perilous, and decision difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.

[Hippocrates, Aphorisms, I,1]

This paper explores the qualitative, subjective and contingent values of the Ancient Greek concept of Kairos, and argues its utility in developing an adaptive, pragmatic, persuasive and creative model of Strategic Leadership. A kairotic model of Leadership, we argue, is more coherent with current and future approaches to Strategy and to its spatio-temporal qualities.

In the following we first present the concept of Kairos and discuss its relevance to Strategic Leadership and its challenges, we then introduce current conceptualizations of Strategy and their implications for Strategic Leadership, and finally synthesize these insights and the literature to gauge implications.

Kairos

At a most elementary level, Kairos was in Greek mythology one of the deities that personified Time (together with Chronos). In fact, the semantic bandwidth of Kairos in its Greek context of origin is very rich (Onians 1951), thus supporting its transfer and transformation in subsequent times, where it blended with concepts such as *fortuna* (Wittkover 1938), *occasio* (Paul 2014) and eventually streaming into contemporary ideas of being in time (Rickert 2014; Heidegger 1954) and about the social experience of time (Nowotny 1994; Adam 1995). The relevance of Kairos to decision-making and specifically to the argumentative quality of the persuasive effort of leadership in social systems was firmly established by Aristotle, who gave Kairos a role of primary importance in the treaty on Rhetoric (Kinneavy and Eskin, 2000). Here, and elsewhere in the Greek sources, we find the articulation of a value that combines the expression of contingency (in relation to context) and of judgement (its timeliness and appropriateness). This range of meanings is synoptically captured in Lysippus's bronze statue of Kairos (Stewart, 1978), of which the original is lost but of which we have memory in replicas (ill. 1), descriptions and interpretations. Here the instance, the moment that presents itself to us at the point of choice and determination (characterised by the winged feet of the figure and the baldness at the rear of its head, that stand for its fleeting transitoriness and for the impossibility to hold on to its value once past) is associated symbolically to the expression of judgement from which that determination emerges, in terms of a congruence, a "weighing" of its significance (characterised by the hand resting on the scale).

Lysippos chose Kairos as the appropriate subject matter with which to exemplify his aesthetic principles. In a single instance of creative effort diverse meanings are substantiated, seamlessly flowing into each other for reciprocal semantic enhancement: by holding within it a dynamic sense of timing of action and of relational coherence with the space of being (the moment of utterance, of issue of action) the artist establishes a new canon, one better suited to his experience of turbulent modernity. Strategic Leadership calls for similar principles by which to design actions in time.

Kairos has been, rightly, understood as the expression of the subjective, relative and qualitative experience of time, as opposed to the objective, absolute and quantitative experience of Chronos. The practice of leadership in current and future contexts can derive

greater effectiveness from the adoption of kairotic values (Orlikowski and Yates, 2002; Rämö, 2002, 2004) because they specifically relate to the context of an evolving non-repetitive world. To establish the relevance of those values to Strategic Leadership we posit that its main concern is qualitative judgement (to resolve uncertainty and induce/guide commitments) with respect to:

- The nature and dynamics of change in the environmental context
- The idiosyncratic effects on the organisation to changes in the context
- The spatial arrangement of options that can furnish renewal opportunities
- The opportune timing (the timeliness) of strategic commitments
- The appropriateness of those choices and the new identity they induce

To support the development of effective Strategic Leadership capabilities, the range of meanings that issue of Kairos are best arranged around three terms of reference to structure leadership development:

Coherence: The spatial quality of presence (being there) and relational appropriateness (with context); it is the balanced and harmonious arrangement of an identity, an expression, an activity with the disposition of the context and its elements. It is the “natural”, intuitive, aesthetic, empathic recognition of the terms of reference with which to be “at play”, the nature of the dynamic “space” of being. And as it is “there” it informs its intent and actions with values that recognise the moral spectrum preponderant in the context. Kairos as coherence establishes a model of Leadership that is humane, ironic, “at” time, disposed toward the negotiation of difference through learning and change.

Opportunity: The “temporal” quality of deriving value from being “in” time, of seizing the moment, the occasion when action is most beneficial, when its utility can be expressed in terms of therapeutic effect (Eskin, 2002) or accrued value (Wilson, 1981). The capability to act and exercise choice at the “right” moment in time, to realise intent when all elements are optimally arranged is a function of timely interpretation and effective determination. A kairotic capability emerges from the succession of meaningful episodes that induces learning, re-conceptualisation and adaptive renewal (Hippocrates). The preventive development and

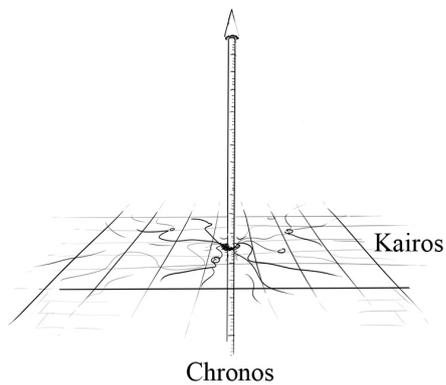
arrangement of options “here”, in the present instance, locating them around areas of possible change and meaningful difference, enables this across time. Options can enhance intelligence and develop capabilities for future expressions of Kairos, and deliver ongoing experience, intelligence, resources and new models, to be leveraged opportunistically at some future point in time.

Innovation: The “space” where creative emergence and flux (the “Khora” of Plato) becomes experience and learning. As the instance, the moment, is seized its stability is dissolved: within the phenomenology of kairotic time there can only be an extended sequence of “nows”, stability is perpetually unhinged, there is a perpetual flow, and the possibility of living another such moment as fruitfully as this one is a function of readiness rather than information, of discovery and learning (Nowotny, 2008) rather than ‘absolute’ knowledge.

Kairos and complexity

In the articulation of emergent models of “kairotic” leadership, two areas of research and reflection appear to surface as of primary importance: (1) Facilitate the capability to (instantly) comprehend and resolve a complex distribution of information and interpretation of significance, and (2) enhance the capability to understand dynamic and emergent properties of experience and strategic decision-making.

The layers of meaning nested in Kairos are best appreciated syncretically, as a blended enhancement, an ideaesthesia (Nicolic, 2009) of Leadership traits with respect to the spatio-temporal qualities of Strategy as enacted by a social group of individuals and its implications for ongoing decision-making. The “point in time” of kairotic action calls for leadership capabilities that can, at that point, resolve spatial complexities (the “here” and its significance) and temporal uncertainties (the “when” the “here” will be different) and thus support the renewal intent of organisations (the “who” and “how” to be in the future). That *occasio* (Machiavelli, *) in which intelligence and action occur in an instance is a leadership capability that calls for an intuitive imagination and a synoptic representation, a conceptual abstraction that will afford greater purchase on the meaning of informational turbulence. This kairotic thinking is visual, and an essential capability for the challenges of Strategic Leadership.



III. 2: Chronos & Kairos

Visual thinking resolves complexity, (ill. 2) it reduces ‘the number of distinct concepts which we can manipulate cognitively at one time’ (Alexander, 1964: p. 61). Visual thinking is designerly (Suwa, and Tversky 2003; Alexander 1964), it is creative and pragmatic. Visual thinking enhances a phenomenological understanding of the world; it is a cognitive function that makes happen, that supports “action” in the world. (Rorty et al 1980; Dewey 1938).

In this sense, visual thinking can support the conceptualisation of time, timing, space and place, to produce more kairotic forms of thinking (fig. 2) which can lead to intuitive leaps (Bjerke, and Ramo 2011). Intuition, the capability to instantly resolve a multiplicity of references and meanings as embodied sensory/aesthetic, as opposed to intellectual/explicit knowing (Agor, 1986; Hansen, Ropo and Sauer, 2007), is a crucial capability of Leadership, where its object is Strategy and its renewal.

Contemporary business environments are dynamic and complex; they undergo rapid and frequent changes across a multitude of interrelated dimensions. Frequent technological changes and ongoing innovations continuously challenge the competitive advantage of incumbent firms and create “hypercompetitive conditions” (e.g., Thomas and D’Aveni, 2004). These conditions are associated with fundamental uncertainty where new strategic challenges are virtually impossible to foresee (Bettis and Hitt, 1995). In these unpredictable settings, strategic response capabilities (Bettis and Hitt, 1995) and dynamic capabilities (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997) are considered important. Under turbulent conditions Strategic Leadership must deal with large amounts of information, complex activities, and diverse knowledge-based competencies that reside with many individuals across the organization (Child and McGrath, 2001).

The effectiveness of strategic decisions and actions depends on the circumstances around them including the conditions of the organization’s internal and external environment. This is the underlying premise of *contingency theory*. It has prompted common applications of environmental analyses in strategy-making including considerations for economic,

demographic, social and political developments that affect the ability to achieve strategic objectives. The underlying thesis is that good Strategic Leadership can predicate environmental changes and adapt the organization accordingly. It is argued that “the essence of management is coping with change” (Chakravarthy, 1982: p.35) where a “mechanistic” structure optimizes processes in stable conditions and fluid “organic” structures are more adaptive under turbulent conditions. An organic structure has little formality and much decentralization with wide information-sharing.

These views have formed prevalent ideas about “fit” between the environment, strategy, and organizational structure at times referred to as “strategic fit” where performance (at least partially) is determined by a good match between strategy, structure and environment. That is, “organizations having an optimal strategy-structure match will give higher performance” (Jennings and Seaman, 1994: p. 461). This is formalized in “strategic reference point theory” aimed at aligning strategy content and organizational structure to external conditions (Fiengenbaum, Hart and Schendel, 1996). A structural solution to deal with the increasing information flows and complex dependencies is to move decision power down the organization to the location of the relevant information and expertise (Child and McGrath, 2001).

The Kairotic nature of the environment is implicated in recent conceptualizations of organizational change where the world is conceived as constantly evolving in path-dependent but otherwise random forthcoming evolutions of activities (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). This is also embedded in theories of organizational learning (Nonaka, 1994; Nonaka, Toyama and Hirata, 2008) where learning is commensurate with the creation of new knowledge, i.e., it constitutes something new, it is not ‘just’ uncovering a given truth. Hence, effective strategy-making must enable prudent processes to discern an emergent evolving competitive reality.

These adaptive strategies must rely on integrative structures that allow dispersed decision-makers to explore through incremental actions that can inform coordinated execution of updated strategic initiatives (Andersen, 2013).

Discussion and Conclusion

We draw the following conclusions with respect to the spatio-temporal qualities of Kairos and its implications for Strategic Leadership:

- The emerging “adaptive” paradigm of Strategy demands a distinct Strategic Leadership approach that furthers coherent capabilities, mindsets and behaviours that recognise the constraints of context, and make the “realm” of an evolving context the “space” of Strategic decision-making and of the Leadership capabilities it calls for. Effective Strategic Leadership in business organisations is a function of both stewardship and entrepreneurship: both have “over time” and “in time” concerns, and they often appear to stand in opposition (as literally dis-placed within the organisational decision-making and control systems) thus establishing an often unresolved tension, a paradox of leadership. To resolve this dilemma, Strategic Leadership subsumes within it a variety of activities: it engages with change, negotiates differences, interprets and represents significance, develops and positions options, leverages opportunities and determines appropriate commitments to renewal. This complexity requires a pragmatic framework, a “praxis” that blends the spatio-temporal dimensions of the strategic decision-making experience. The polyseme of Kairos, when it is applied to model Leadership, conflates and thus resolves the paradox at the heart of Strategic Leadership, the seeming opposite values of stewardship and entrepreneurship.
- We argue that this syncretic value is to be found in the Greek concept of Kairos, for it harbours within it the qualities of contextually derived relevance and of utility of coherent positioning to derive advantage from the dynamic, complex and non-linear business context, where appropriate choice is determined by timely and effective action. Kairos affords a “qualitative” leadership model that satisfies current concerns about developing capabilities and processes in governance systems to effectively and appropriately deal with emergent complexity and structural changes in context. It does so by establishing values and inducing behaviours (individual and organisational) that are better aligned with the rapid and random transformations of context – expressions of a post-modern social experience – that organisations and the social systems of individuals that make them up need to manage effectively.

- Space can be seen as past and present social meanings attached to materiality (Kornberger and Clegg, 2009) including ways of conceptualizing the environment and ways to strategize in it. As a consequence, it may also represent socialized collective interpretations of how we see the future that influence the way we try to exploit expected changes and emerging opportunities. Accordingly, Kornberger and Clegg (2009, p. 1101) argue that “strategies are developed, implemented, and justified by their usefulness” where the interpretation of ‘usefulness’ is affected by prevailing conceptualizations of the space we operate in here and now. The “space” of Strategy that leadership recognises as its own is the relational dimension with context: interpretation of its relevance and of its evolution is a function of visual cognition and symbolic imagination. The “time” of Strategy is the seizing of the moment, the point at which elements in the context are arranged so as to represent an opportunity, a situation from which to derive value and in which to manifest and express value. These spatio-temporal qualities of Strategy are made available to the qualitative judgement of Strategic Leadership for it to determine courses of action that are timely, opportune, useful and virtuous (i.e. kairotic).
- Kairos is the place (the “now” of time, the “here” of space) in which intent substantiates and enters the realm of experience from which issues forth a creative difference, a new proposition, a representation of the self that negotiates context and renews its own meaning. As Leadership extends its concerns and practices beyond the conventional space, into the realm of the emerging space of virtual reality, we see new ways to gather multiple insights and uncover the temporal manifestations of an evolving business context to be exploited at the right moment. The uncovering of the temporal nature of the emerging context can be supported by technologies to gather ongoing learning from responsive actions to determine “spaces” of experience that may foster opportunities in a portfolio of options for future strategic renewal.

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