

THINKING STRATEGICALLY



A continual process of invention and refinement can propel companies toward current goals and build capabilities that lead to even more accomplishment. Less-than-obvious elements comprise "thinking strategically."

Strategy is the plan of action that directs us towards the realization of our chosen goals. Goals inspire us to ask, "How do we make progress towards our goals?" Strategy answers this question. Goals without strategy are little more than empty dreams; strategies without goals are little more than dogs chasing their tails.

For most companies, strategic planning is the mechanism that answers the question: "How do we make progress toward our goals?" Those who approach strategic planning with logic, reason and analysis develop plans that look reasonable, at least on paper. Yet, though this coldly logical approach seems to make sense (after all, don't we need a roadmap that guides strategic execution?), it tends to be a dry, mechanical, lifeless process that generates documents that are never referred to again.

Not only that, the traditional approach takes too long. The cycle of planning and budgeting can easily consume six months; it is not unheard of for it to take virtually the whole year. So, more often than not, people bumble along, taking actions and making decisions without a robust understanding of what is truly important. This confusion and muddle make it difficult to harness the organization's resources and lead to missed opportunities.

This can be incredibly frustrating for someone in a leadership role. He or she sees are people forever waiting to be told what to do or continually seeking feedback about whether or not they are doing the right thing.

There is another way.

"Thinking strategically" typifies companies that see strategy as a continual process of invention and refinement. "Inventive" in the sense of creating novel and fresh solutions that propel the companies towards their goals. "Refinement" in the sense of building capabilities that lead to even more accomplishment.

Companies like Dow Chemical, General Electric, and NationsBank (now Bank of America) come to mind. Each is constant in its purpose (Bank of America kept a single set of goals in mind for 20 years!), but flexible in its methods (speed, workout, self-confidence, and Six Sigma have been GE programs over the past 10 years). And they are not afraid to set goals even when they have no idea how they will achieve them (Dow's 1995 commitment to something they called "zero economic profit", yielding a positive return on capital at the low point in the pricing cycle).

In studying companies like these, most people see the steps that led to success but fail to understand the deeper principles at work.

Thinking strategically is nothing more than the continuous process of directing the collective unconscious to the question "How do we make progress towards our goals *today*?" This may seem too simple. But great strategy is always obvious. What may be less obvious is what a leader does to elicit it.

Rely on inner resources

First of all, leaders who understand the principles that govern strategic thinking know that everyone has inner resources of common sense. They can't prove it, but their own experience provides too many examples for them not to trust this human capacity. It's the "kids say the darnedest things" that Art Linkletter pointed to. Children's common sense can amaze adults who wonder, "Where did they learn that?"

Perhaps the point is that they didn't. Their insights come from a deeper resource of understanding, from a reservoir of intelligence that everyone possesses. Unlike knowledge or experience, common sense cannot be learned; nor does it depend on how long you've lived. You need only to wait, quietly and without "thinking too much," for insight to emerge from the recesses of your mind.

Socrates pointed to this when he said, "All knowledge is just remembering." And he was speaking about all human understanding. Another way to put it is that wisdom is the "thought before thought." It's that intuitive leap of understanding that lies just beyond what we can tangibly put into words. If you are distracted, busy, worried, or just thinking too hard, then it is very difficult to listen or be patient enough for common sense to emerge. Your noisy mind is obscuring the soft voice of wisdom.

Stay in the question

Next, leaders who stimulate strategic thinking are not afraid to keep exploring the relevant question(s). They realize that "staying in the question" or "not knowing the answer" stimulates everyone to reflect more deeply and thereby generates the most powerful insights.

The questions themselves are always simple: "How do we achieve the goal?" "What needs to happen next?" or "Where do we go from here?" The hard part is not borrowing yesterday's solution or running with the first thing that comes to mind. We are so used to leaping into action that staying in reflection seems hard at first. But when a group of people works in a state of true reflection, listening to the insights of others becomes transcendent. All of a sudden, your thoughts don't seem to matter as a group process takes over, evolving a solution that is beyond what any individual could ever hope to achieve alone. The "collective unconscious" comes to life before our eyes. All that is really required is that state of listening where agreeing or disagreeing with someone else's ideas is much less important than truly understanding what that other person is seeing.

Another way to say this is that concerns about how you look to others, how you'll deal with a looming deadline, or where you need to be in 30 minutes fade away. Your mind "clears" so that you can truly "see" what is being said.

Stretch the boundaries of time

The last element of thinking strategically is stretching the boundaries of time. Strategy defines how goals will be achieved in the present while goals, by their very nature, are future-oriented. Yet we are living day to day. Consequently, when people are thinking about goals, they find it difficult to see beyond the current obstacles or to understand how to translate goals into practical action now. Untangling this Gordian knot is a matter of expanding your definition of time. The easiest way to do it is to step back from the present by extending your understanding of "now" to include the future. In this way what lies ahead seems tangible, right this very moment. The future goal suddenly jumps the boundaries of time and appears real.

The feeling associated with this state is one of certainty, of confidence. Because you can see the future clearly, you have no doubts. With no sharp distinction between now and then, you can easily link today's action to tomorrow's outcome.

What gets in the way of this perspective are fears and anxieties about what can go wrong. When these negative thoughts intrude, someone is almost always bringing up the past, or just imagining the future. The key is that while these thoughts appear "real" to that individual, they are mere chimeras for others. The easiest way to see this is to listen deeply to what this person is saying and ask questions about whatever puzzles or confuses you. In just a moment or two the person will stop and be unable to proceed, proving that their fears and anxieties are simply fantasies.

Best of all, stretching time to make the definition of "the now" more elastic generates a tangible satisfaction. Almost any task can take on new meaning when it is seen as part of something larger. Seeing a small step within broader perspective creates a clearer sense of its importance and illuminates something that lies in the distance.

Choosing to rely on your inner resources of common sense and intuition and to expand your sense of the present to include the future gives you the confidence to explore the toughest questions and accomplish your goals. Strategies become robust through daily evolution. Capabilities are strengthened step by step. Lofty goals are accomplished with considerable ease and grace

Best of all a virtuous pattern takes hold. Bold goals yield to the march of ever more refined actions, which, in turn, make raising one's sights look obvious and possible.

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