

The Strategic Leader: How to Think, Act and Influence Others More Strategically

Management consultant and author Peter Drucker once explained, "Strategic management is not a box of tricks or a bundle of techniques. It is analytical thinking and commitment of resources to action. But quantification alone is not planning. Some of the most important issues in strategic management cannot be quantified at all." Today's strategic leader must connect organizational performance to how work gets done while transforming both to thrive in a rapidly changing world. Some professionals have rejected strategic work and planning in recent years because they have seen too many plans fall apart or feel it is more useful to focus on today's problems rather than focus too far into the future. However, every organization needs a clear vision of the future and an understanding of the path to realize that vision. Strategic leaders anticipate change, envision a different future, create clarity around executing a plan, and influence and motivate others to achieve goals.

"Strategy is a style of thinking, a conscious and deliberate process, an intensive implementation system, the science of ensuring future success."

-Pete Johnson

Thinking Strategically

The first step to becoming a more strategic leader is understanding the elements of strategic thinking and



putting them into practice. The following five elements are skills that can be learned and improved with practice by leaders at all levels of an organization.

Intellectual Curiosity

One of the most important elements of strategic thinking is intellectual curiosity—a leader's willingness to learn new things and look beyond the surface of a problem or question. Mike Parker, the former CEO of Dow Chemical, once explained the importance of questions, "a lot of bad leadership comes from the inability or unwillingness to ask questions. I have watched talented people—people with much higher IQs than mine—who have failed as leaders. They can talk brilliantly, with a great breadth of knowledge, but they are not very good at asking questions. So while they know a lot at a high level, they don't know what's going on way down in the system. Sometimes they are afraid of asking questions, but what they don't realize is that the

dumbest questions can be very powerful. They can unlock a conversation.” Strategic leaders consistently ask questions and pursue knowledge. Easy ways to awaken more curiosity are to read on a wide variety of topics, pursue new hobbies, or enroll in a class or other learning opportunity.

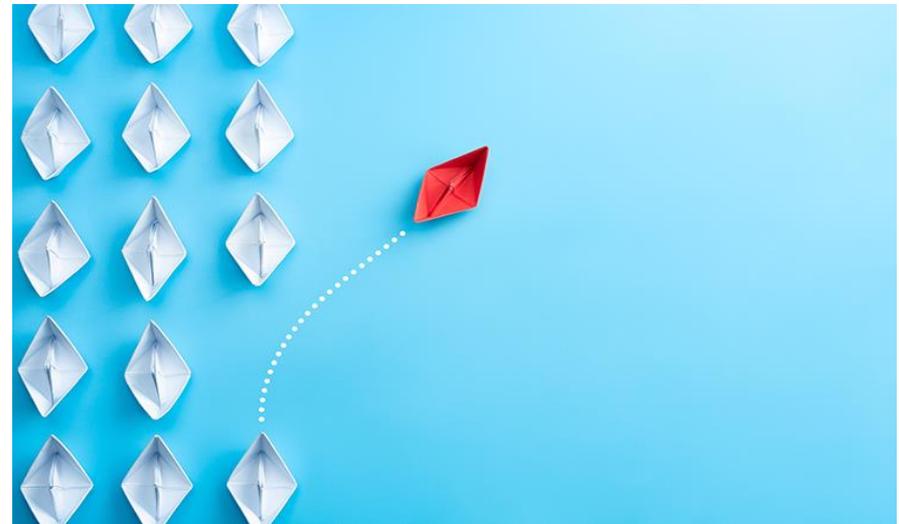
Creativity

The World Economic Forum describes creativity as “the ability to come up with unusual or clever ideas about a given topic or situation, or to develop creative ways to solve a problem.” The element of creativity is vital to strategic thinking because it allows us to view problems in new ways and find solutions where no one else thought to look. Many people mistakenly believe that some people are naturally creative, and everyone else is just out of luck. In reality, creativity is a skill that can be developed and improved. Renowned choreographer and author of [The Creative Habit](#), Twyla Tharp, explains, “creativity is not just for artists. It’s for businesspeople looking for a new way to close a sale; it’s for engineers trying to solve a problem; it’s for parents who want their children to see the world in more than one way.” One way to spark creativity is to try activities that challenge assumptions or disrupt usual routines. For example, try writing with both hands at once or driving a different way to work every day for a week. Boost creative thinking by going on a walk and taking photos of anything that resembles a letter—a tree branch that resembles an E or a gate that looks like an M. Later, try to spell something with the letters. These activities may seem simple, but they are a great warm-up for more complex thinking.

Intuition

Intuition is the ability to understand something without rational thought or conscious reasoning. It allows leaders to

make difficult decisions even when lacking reliable data. Rick Snyder, author of [Decisive Intuition: Use Your Gut Instincts to Make Smart Business Decisions](#), explains that “intuition is our deeper intelligence that is able to read the room or the marketplace, make decisions from a wiser resource, and extract data faster than the conscious mind can analyze. We make better decisions when we integrate intuition with critical thinking.” Snyder divides intuition into three categories: directional, social and informational. He describes directional intuition as an inner compass that helps people navigate day-to-day situations. It is the sense that it’s time to take a project in a new direction or the feeling that it is too soon to launch a specific product. Social intuition is an aspect of emotional intelligence, or the ability to “read the room.” Successful salespeople are often socially intuitive, able to hone in on the customer’s needs or anticipate the right time to close a sale. The third type, informational intuition, describes people who can quickly process large amounts of data and integrate and synthesize it. These people can see patterns others might not and instinctively





know when something is off. While individuals may have a natural talent for one or more of these dimensions of intuition, anyone can develop and improve their intuitive abilities. Tapping into intuition takes some practice, but most experts agree that mindfulness techniques like meditation can help. Taking time for quiet reflection, learning to notice physical sensations, and becoming more self-aware can help any leader tune in to their intuition and make better decisions.

Research and Analysis

Strategic thinking also requires research and analysis. Creating effective organizational strategies requires gathering available information and analyzing it to form more complex ideas. Analytical thinking is vital to problem-solving and strategic planning. To successfully provide meaningful conclusions and recommendations, leaders can boost their analytical skills by practicing three things. First, consider opposing viewpoints to combat bias. One great way to do this is to practice arguing for and against any new strategy. This practice improves the ability to consider multiple viewpoints, predict obstacles and identify potential

issues in any plan. Next, playing games and brain teasers can strengthen the ability to visualize relationships between variables, to examine situations from multiple angles and to draw conclusions from known data points. Fun activities like crossword puzzles, strategic board games, or even reading mystery novels to guess the ending can improve analytical thinking. Leaders can also use these activities for team building to benefit the whole organization. Finally, engage with data! Find better ways to gather information and provide access to it. No one can analyze data they cannot find, so strategic leaders prioritize ensuring their teams have the information they need across departments and locations.

Systems Thinking

Learning to apply systems thinking can be essential to forming a strategy for any organization. Systems thinking is a holistic approach to analyzing a situation that focuses on how all the parts interact with and impact each other. In practice, systems thinking explores inter-relationships, perspectives and boundaries. It is useful for solving complex, ongoing or recurring problems with more than one possible solution. Systems thinking can help leaders see past the clutter of everyday activity to recognize patterns and structural causes. It can also help separate solutions from underlying problems. It is not uncommon to identify and describe an issue in terms of its solutions. For example, "The problem is we don't have enough resources." The statement has limited the scope of solutions to either getting more resources or using fewer resources. However, the systems thinking approach would be to ask questions that get at underlying structural relationships or behavior over time, like "what are the underlying causes of our lack of resources?" Systems thinking broadens the view of the problem and looks at it from several angles to open the door to innovative solutions.

Acting Strategically

Of course, strategic leadership requires more than thinking. Once the data is gathered and there has been time for reflection and planning, it is time for action. Strategic action requires decisive leadership that is consistent with the direction of the organization. Strategic planning only works when people's decisions and actions align with the strategic objectives. Leaders must facilitate strategic action by balancing the urgency of daily tasks while maintaining focus on the organization's long-term success.

There are five essential steps to creating an action plan:

1. Map it Out

Create a written strategic action plan that includes short and long-term goals and the actions needed to accomplish them.

2. Assign Ownership

Once the general actions are determined, assign them to the appropriate team member and hold them accountable for specific deliverables.

3. Draft Realistic Timelines

Set deadlines for each deliverable, but remember that target start and end times should have some built-in flexibility to allow for the unexpected. Include mini-goals in the timeline as these milestones will help measure progress and ensure the plan is on track.

4. Allocate Resources

Part of any strategic plan includes figuring out who and what is needed to accomplish it. That means ensuring that the right people are involved and provided with the right

tools and budget to be successful. This also includes ensuring that managers have the right skills to reach long-term organizational goals. [Learning and development programs](#) can play a large role in realizing the organizational strategy.

5. Take Action

Once the plan is in place, the team members have their tasks, the timeline is set, and the resources are provided, it's time to get going. Remember to schedule check-ins and status reports along the way to make sure things are going smoothly. There is no such thing as a perfect plan, so periodic adjustments may need to be made. It is the leader's job to ensure that the team stays focused on the overall strategy despite any setbacks or changes in the plan.



Influencing Strategically

Another key aspect of strategic leadership is building consensus around a vision and motivating others to stay committed to the strategic direction of an organization. Leaders must be strategic influencers that communicate the organizational vision clearly and invite others into the strategic process of achieving it. One way to accomplish this is through the power of storytelling.

Leaders must be strategic influencers that communicate the organizational vision clearly and invite others into the strategic process of achieving it.

Strategic Storytelling

Crestcom subject matter expert [Kelly Swanson](#) explains why storytelling is an essential leadership skill, “whatever your industry, how important is it that you are able to influence other people? How important is it that you need to get people to do what you want them to do? Are you in a position where you want to influence people, get them on board, change their minds to get them rallied around a vision? Are you ever trying to persuade people in business? And, of course, the answer is yes. I mean, all of us in life are—no matter what our industry— we’re all in the business of persuasion. Whether it’s to get somebody to embrace an idea or get somebody to hire us, or promote us, or just to get our kid to clean up his room, we’re all trying to influence. Storytelling is important because the data, the information, or just telling people what to do— on its own -- can’t persuade people on an emotional level. As leaders, we care about what we’re doing, care about our work, and care about the brand. We care about the vision, and we want



other people to care about it too. We wish they could see that this change will fit a bigger purpose. How do I make them care? And data cannot make them care. Strategic storytelling can get those people to care in the same way that you do as a leader.” In her book, [The Story Formula: The Art of Story Meets the Business of Persuasion](#), Swanson emphasizes that storytelling is really about connecting with others to share information, or in her words, “facts compel, but stories sell.”

There are four things to remember when learning to be a strategic storyteller:

1. Have Fun

Use humor when you can, and incorporate fun, especially when working with dry data.

2. Be Vulnerable

No one connects to perfection, but they can connect with a leader who has flaws and makes mistakes like everyone else.



The Power of Strategic Leadership

Ultimately, strategic leadership requires work on both a personal and organizational level. Strategic leaders must continually hone their skills while focusing on their organizational vision. However, strategy is not limited to a few top executives, and strategic leaders are needed at every level of an organization. Prioritizing continuous learning is essential to ensure that organizations can adapt, innovate and succeed in the future.

3. Be Caring

Show how much you care, not how much you know. Connection is personal and requires going deeper than just information.

4. Be Passionate.

Show your enthusiasm for your vision, make sure they know why you are passionate about it.

References

- Birsel, A. (2018, August 28). 23 more exercises to boost your creativity every day. Inc.com. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://www.inc.com/ayse-birsel/23-easy-exercises-to-boost-your-creativity-every-day.html>
- Bowman, N. A., Carucci, R., & Sullivan, J. (2021, September 13). 4 ways to improve your strategic thinking skills. Harvard Business Review. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://hbr.org/2016/12/4-ways-to-improve-your-strategic-thinking-skills>
- Colarelli Beatty, K. (2013, June 19). The three strengths of a true strategic leader. Forbes. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://www.forbes.com/2010/10/27/three-strengths-strategy-leadership-managing-ccl.html?sh=af3624e5280e>
- Cote, C. (2021, January 7). How to improve your analytical skills: HBS Online. Business Insights Blog. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://online.hbs.edu/blog/post/how-to-improve-analytical-skills>
- Dr. Marie Morganelli (2020, March 18). What is systems thinking? Southern New Hampshire University. Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://www.snhu.edu/about-us/newsroom/business/what-is-systems-thinking>
- Snyder, R. (2019). Decisive intuition: Use your gut instincts to make smart business decisions. Career Press.
- Storytelling expert Kelly Swanson visits the Leadership Habit Podcast. Crestcom International. (2020, January 17). Retrieved February 9, 2022, from <https://crestcom.com/blog/2020/01/17/episode-18-the-power-of-storytelling-with-kelly-swanson/>
- Swanson, K. (2017). The Story Formula. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Tharp, T. (2006). The creative habit. Simon and Schuster.