

## Thinking Strategically? How about just THINKING?



In many ways, people seem to think of strategy and execution as two very different things. “Strategy” seems to conjure up an impression of castles in the air, ivory towers and those sorts of things. “Execution” seems to have more sympathy with the majority, who seem to think of themselves as those who “Make Things Happen”, and without whom those giving strategic direction could not possibly function, let alone thrive.

Generally, people seem to prefer clear-cut boundaries, “This or that”, “Us or Them”, “Now or later” sorts of thinking. Dealing with continuums and flexible courses of action based on the Unknown is, surprisingly, quite unthinkable to most. Perhaps that is understandable, for thinking is one of the hardest of tasks, is it not? Think of all the times you have heard someone say things like “I prefer it like this, no need to think...” Perhaps you have that line of thinking yourself!

Thinking “strategically”, or perhaps just simply thinking, isn’t the province of the anointed few whose business cards include the words “Board” or “Executive” or “Chief”. If you serve customers at a McDonalds restaurant, thinking strategically could go beyond the “How about some fries to go with your drink?” that you’d been trained to do. It could very well be discerning that a weary mother of three young children would simply like to sit down in a cool place for a while, hopefully with something to keep the kids occupied at the same time. What could you offer her to meet that need? How about if you sell real estate? Thinking strategically in this case could be recommending a wedding planner, interior designer, renovation contractor, geriatric care specialist, doula, or any number of a host of related trades that you don’t need, but which your clients might. Of course, you would want to ensure that the people you recommend who ply those trades be dependable, trustworthy and deliver sterling service. Have you done that before? What if you happen to be a Learning and Development Co-ordinator and your Boss has asked you to put a team-building workshop together? Thinking strategically would cause you to ask for your Boss’ intentions, and, if possible, what the intentions of your Boss’ bosses are. Once you have that direction, quickly put together a few options, all of which will fully support the Boss’ intentions, and put forth your recommendation, with all YOUR reasons why. Needless to say, or perhaps it IS needful, the reasons for your recommendation ought to be in the best interests of your Boss, or the company, whichever is higher up the ladder.

I would like to share four aspects of being that I think are important in order for anyone to be able to start thinking strategically, or perhaps to start thinking at all! They are:

- Storehouse of Knowledge and Experience.
- Thinking in Analogies and Parallels.
- Intimate Understanding of Operating Principles for Effective Application.

- Forming a strong Team to work with you.

### Storehouse of Knowledge and Experience.

The word “creative” is so much a buzzword these days that people have ascribed it to all manner of folly. So much of what is quirky, what is grotesque, what is downright horrible, has been called “creative” that most people would probably not recognize creativity if it came up to them and barked in their face! Creativity is a much-needed quality if one is to think in a strategic manner. However, unlike the Creator, we humans do not possess the ability to create something out of nothing. We can, however, construct new things by combining the same parts in different ways, using different parts, working from another perspective or viewing point, folding things over each other, and in a myriad different ways. Here, I do not speak only of physical, tangible things but include thought patterns as well.



All of us have a storehouse of knowledge and experience that is being continually added to and built upon, or it ought to be. In the process, we continuously throw out “old” stuff or we renew it. One of the greatest fallacies of this age is the thinking that just because something is old, it is no longer “valid” or applicable. Be careful. In the future, if someone happens to invent an antigrav vehicle, it does not mean that gravity is no longer valid. A parallel fallacy is that if two documents which talk about the same thing are discovered, the older document is more “valid” because it is older. Beware of such thinking. Examine each piece of evidence and come to your own conclusions, not what the popular media wants you to believe.

If you are already in the top echelons of leadership in any particular organization, growing your storehouse of knowledge and experience is actually even more crucial. Many in your position have “no time” to sharpen the saw because they are too busy putting out fires and dealing with minor crises which ought to be the bailiwick of subordinate leaders. You need to make time to grow your storehouse, and it has to be scheduled or you won’t get around to it! Growing your storehouse doesn’t mean that you need to know intimately everything that happens in your organization, because there are simply too many details for one person to master in one lifetime. Having said that, you MUST be acquainted well enough to have a working understanding of how things work in various Divisions or Departments. You don’t need to know everything, but you need to know when and how to look for information you might need.

One way of ensuring that your storehouse of knowledge and experience doesn’t get old and stale is to subject your assumptions, beliefs, paradigms, etc, to rigorous debate. By that, I do not mean choosing as your debate partner someone who is like you or likes you, or simply likes to be agreeable and nice. No, you choose a good antagonist, someone who will do his level best to tear down the strongholds of your thinking, and in doing so strengthen you even more. Whatever the case,

none of us has any excuse for not building upon this storehouse. It is entirely up to us, not our teachers, trainers, managers, consultants or gurus.

### Thinking in Analogies and Parallels. Using Illustrations.

Another way of fostering strategic thinking is to develop the ability to think in terms of analogies, in terms of parallels. I am constantly astonished by how much this is lacking. So often, I hear of clients asking that the workshop or other intervention be “contextualized” to the “needs” of those who are to participate. Also, I have often been asked to “tailor the presentation down to their level”. I simply do not agree that we ought to dumb down our audience! We ought to be levelling-up, encouraging and inspiring strategic thinking! Just to illustrate, which



is something you ought to be doing on a regular basis, by the way, scientists tell us that the workings of a single cell of our body would be so mind-boggling as to rival the workings of the entire universe. Do you think this would be impossible to visualize? Yet there are many videos and animations showing us how the insides of a cell actually work! I find that even a child can understand those animations, so why shouldn't an adult? Yet, so often we limit our thinking by asking that “corporate” examples be used when we are delivering a presentation to a “corporate” audience, *ad nauseum*. What is wrong with using the illustration of a spider in a large web when describing Operations Hubs? Are you able to see similarities, or do you have difficulty connecting the two?

We need to break out of how schooling has taught us not to think. Start using analogies. Start using parallels and start using illustrations when presenting your ideas next time.

### Intimate Understanding of Operating Principles for Effective Application.

I wrote about “[Standard Operating PRINCIPLES](#)” a while back. Having an intimate understanding of such universal, non-negotiable principles ensures that you would be able to apply them effectively in everyday operations. Neither is your understanding of these principles static by any means. As time goes by, your understanding deepens and you become more and more adept at their application. This is why, theoretically speaking, it is possible for a CEO, COO, CFO or whatever other Chief of a company that sells shoes, for example, to be brought over and take the helm of a real estate investment enterprise. The reason why many such highly-paid transfers fail is because many people have been trained to think and argue at the Methodology level instead of at the Principle level.

Intimate understanding of Operating Principles is imperative if you are to remain portable and relevant. Even in your current position, you had better get a good grasp of them and translate them into effective operations. Otherwise you would be fighting fires all the time and your company will go down sooner than later. So much business literature is devoted to questions of “where, when and what”.

Debates over Marissa Mayer's move to end telecommuting at Yahoo, for example, fly thick and fast, and are quite off the mark. Few debates relate to the "how and why". Move your questions up the scale and the quality of your decisions becomes stronger as you learn how to apply Operating Principles.

### Forming a strong Team to work with you.

Most people feel much more at ease if they have a team to work with. In order to have that, you need to ensure that the members of your prospective team buy into your vision and have strengths that will both complement and challenge your own.

Yes, I said challenge. You do not want a team of Yes-Men licking your face and wagging their tails each time you look their way. If you like that sort of thing, get a dog. What you want in a strong team is people who will look at all aspects of a situation or project and give their inputs from their own strong perspectives and convictions. It is very tempting to get people who think like you, act and sound like you. If you do, you will all sound alike when the ship goes down and you drown as one set of clones. Choose your team carefully, and make sure that you "make them offers they can't refuse". In other words, make sure that you make it so worth their while that they will become angry if you do not give them a place on your team. Tall order? Go for it, it is certainly well worth fulfilling!



If you are the type that "does not play well with others", then your "team" would comprise of mentors and close friends who might be in other trades and who would be willing to both throw stones at your ideas and hold your feet to the fire, meaning hold you accountable for what you say you would do. If you think you don't even want that, then publish articles, books and the like, and get tacit feedback about what people might think. You can then choose to adapt or forge ahead in the exact opposite direction!

### Conclusion.

Developing the ability to think strategically isn't rocket science. It does, however, take a willingness to actually THINK, diligence to go find things out for yourself and making sure that you continuously operate from principles, not dogma. Start thinking in a genuinely strategic manner, and you will find that everyday execution starts to become much smoother. Go for it!