

Strategic Thinking Made Simple

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by Nathan Magnuson

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail,” the old adage tells us. While most of us are quick to agree, not as many of us have a good grasp on the planning process – or strategic thinking as a whole. If we’re good, a comprehensive strategizing experience exists on our personal to-do lists or on the department’s committee calendar. But one thing generally leads to another; the schedule fills up, business picks up, somebody starts or quits, or necessary changes get in the way. For all our well-meaning, strategic thinking initiatives get pushed to next year’s New Year’s resolutions or the “I’ll get to it when I have time” pile.

Perhaps, if today’s everyday leaders were able to quickly understand some of the concepts of strategic thinking and were provided a guide to begin utilizing today, they would more easily see the value (necessity?) of getting their attempts off the ground and into the works. Or as Ziglar puts it, they could make the switch from being a wandering generality to a meaningful specific.

Daft provides an excellent definition of “strategic leadership” that can serve as a template for explaining its relevance and importance. According to Daft (2008), strategic leadership is “the ability to anticipate and envision the future, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and initiate changes that will create a competitive advantage for the organization in the future.” For our purposes, our discussion of strategic thinking will revolve around the process of vision, mission and planning, a brief self-assessment, and a guide for beginning your strategic initiatives right away! But first, the question, “what difference do leaders

make in the strategic process in order to bring about organizational change?” is one that needs to be addressed.

Leading Change

For the group that believes that leaders drastically influence organizational culture and its ability to bring about necessary and instrumental change, there is another that believes organizational culture simply exists and there is not much any one person (or leader) can do about it. Which is correct?

We don't have to look far to see extraordinary examples of leaders who truly led the way. If not for George Washington leading the militia, the United States probably would never have lasted. Winston Churchill stood up against the advance of Nazi Germany and ended up saving Europe. In business, Henry Ford committed to “democratize the automobile” to the point that every household could afford one. In the same way, Bill Gates led Microsoft with the vision of a computer in every home.

But ultimately, it wasn't simply a broadly cast vision that made the difference in these revolutionary efforts. Boeing had a vision to be a pioneer of the aeronautics industry. In order to realize that vision, they essentially bet their entire pot on the 747, based on their assessment of the situation. When Sony entered the playing field of electronics technology, they similarly desired to pioneer the technology industry movement. Unfortunately, the public perception of Japanese electronics was that they were cheap and second-rate. In order to realize their mission of leading the way in their industry, Sony concluded it first needed to raise the public perception of Japanese-produced electronics products.

The things that set these well known leaders apart are things that can set everyday leaders apart as well: the ability to capture and articulate a clear vision, to adjust when the situation calls for it, to think outside the box, and to have the foresight to stay ahead for the long haul. All of these things point back to a strategic thinking mentality, which happens at a number of different levels. As demonstrated by the above examples, it's not enough to simply utilize

the charismatic nature of a “hoorah” speech to cast an articulate vision and then hope for the best. In fact, studies have shown that in many cases, charisma can actually stunt strategic thinking. Strategic leadership goes beyond that by considering a number of factors, which we’ll discuss in more detail. While your organization may not be dedicated to saving your country or revolutionizing your industry, strategic initiatives such as vision-setting, mission-setting and planning can thrust your organization forward to create new and positive change, recognizing the opportunities that are specific to your organization. And the good news is that it doesn’t need to be hard to begin.

The Big Three

Strategic Vision

Put simply, vision is the desired future you intend to create. It is a picture of the world as it could be and, in your organization’s view, it *should* be. If your organization is successful, this is what the world (or at least your part of this world) will begin to look like over time. An overarching vision is really the element that sets the precedence for an organization. “Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint,” the old proverb tells us. Vision is what collects an organization together and points them in the same direction.

Strategic Mission

Mission is your organization’s place in the context of the greater vision. While vision is a picture, mission is an action that is yours to accomplish. It is your organization’s part to play in reaching the vision.

A strategic and specific mission is what allows the vision to be broad and grandiose, yet realizable, because it cuts through the fog to find what exactly the organization will commit to and (often more importantly), what it will avoid at all costs. Many times, a strategic mission will clarify exactly which “business” the organization is in, and thus what customer or client it will focus on. A large scale example of this was Philip Morris, who decided that while they were in the cigarette business, their real business had more to do with defending personal freedom of choice. On a smaller scale, MKM, DDS is a small community dental practice, yet their real business is the compassion business and they seek to nurture a

caring dental experience. As such, their mission is restricted to the niche of winning back customers who have had negative dental experiences over the years.

Strategic Planning

Your plan is the route you will take to accomplish your mission and see your vision come to fruition. There are generally a large number of routes to take to reach any given mission just as there are a large number of roads you can take to travel out of state. This is where the importance of strategy comes into place. If the vision is the big picture and the mission is the medium range picture, then planning starts breaking it down to the nitty-gritty. Strategic planning is the place where we finally ask “how will we do this?” and answer that question with specific goals that will lead our organization in the direction we want to go. And, like the strategic mission, it clarifies which steps will be avoided.

For instance, if your organization is trying to become #1 in anything, how will you do it? If you are anticipating a major innovation or structural change, what will be the difference between a successful transition and an unsuccessful one? What will be the basis for your decision making?

A major part of strategic planning is doing SWOT analysis to determine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. SWOT analysis allows you to acknowledge what is true about yourself: what are your strengths which will carry your organization through, and what are your weaknesses which will need to be neutralized? SWOT analysis also allows you to weigh the possibilities: what opportunities are on the horizon and what threats could present barriers under certain circumstances?

Self-Assessment

The following are some questions to consider in appraising your present strategic thinking mindset. Of course, not all leaders or organizations are created equal, and each is at a different stage in development and change-orientation. Answering positively should act as

confirmation that you/your organization are on the right track. Answering negatively will simply show you a good place to begin.

- Is our organization's future clear and compelling?
- Are our organization's vision and mission intrinsically motivating?
- Can all the leaders in our organization articulate our vision and mission clearly in a twenty-second elevator speech?
- Are vision, mission and planning things that are regularly talked about among leaders and staff members?
- Are action steps communicated in relation to the bigger picture of what our organization is trying to accomplish?
- Do we hold each other accountable for agreed upon goals and action plans on a regular basis?
- When considering which steps to commit to, do decision-makers have access to the key information-holders both inside and outside the organization?
- Do we have specific goals that will allow us to reach our mission?
- Will we know when we have accomplished our goals?
- Are our goals achievable for us?
- Do our goals directly affect our ability to accomplish our mission?
- Do our goals have end dates attached to them?
- Does our organization take time to celebrate our victories (even small ones)?
- Does our organization easily respond to changes in our plans?

The REACH Model

In order to begin your strategic initiatives, there are several steps you can begin to take now. The following is a goal-setting strategy called REACH that originated with Jeff Myers (2006). It goes like this:

- **Record** – The key to achieving your goals is to write them down. It doesn't matter how large or small your organization's goals are – WRITE THEM DOWN! Studies have

shown overwhelming evidence that goals that are written down are much more likely to be realized. Perhaps this is because goals that are in writing are harder to ignore!

- **Envision – Imagine the benefits you’ll receive from completing the goal.** This is visioning in action. Not only should you consider the benefits you desire from your community, imagine the benefits of *being the organization* to bring about the desired change.
- **Act – Take the first step now, without hesitation.** It’s true that a plan is just that and as soon as it is committed to, it will start to change. It is impossible to know what will happen beyond the first step, regardless of how much strategic thinking is employed. But don’t let that stop you. Commitment to action begins one step at a time.
- **Consult – Seek the counsel of experts to gain clarity regarding your goals and increase your chances of reaching them.** In virtually any area of life, there are people and organizations that know the things you don’t know that you will *need to know* to be successful. And more likely than not, they will be willing to share their knowledge if you will just take the initiative to ask. Be willing to seek the information you need from the sources who know it best.
- **Hone – Adjust and fine-tune as you go.** A strategic plan should never be written in ink! Even the best plan will need to be tweaked as the climate changes – just as a new weather report is “forecast” anew each day. Success comes from holding loosely to the plan while holding tightly to the vision! The more adept your organization becomes at making adjustments, the quicker you will arrive at your desired destination. Remember, the whole idea behind strategic thinking is change, so being able to adjust at the planning level is a must!

Conclusion

And there you have it – strategic thinking doesn't need to be hard, and its benefits far outweigh its costs. For today's busy professional, the greatest challenge is likely in making time to put it into practice. Finding a starting point is the key, whether it is a full-day staff retreat or (more realistically) a fifteen-minute brainstorming session. And don't forget what Ziglar says, "You don't have to be great to start, but you have to start to be great."

About the Author

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