

# Strategic Thinking: Lessons from Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech

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by Michael Hoyes

Imagine being 34 years of age, addressing not just your coworkers and associates, but an entire nation, and setting that nation on a strategic course. At that age, you would not qualify to be the President of the United States, yet you are setting the nation’s agenda. Neither are you a Member of Congress with the power to legislate and create law. However, you have a dream. You present to the nation that dream, which carries forth even to this day, some 49 years after your delivery. On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave not only his fellow citizens, but also the world, a view of what could be. Leaders aspiring to understand what strategic thinking looks like from a practical standpoint and apply those lessons can view that speech as they ponder what it means to think strategically. Those lessons would then transcend from the leader to the led, inspiring followers to think strategically. A national stage is not required, rather, an understanding of the nature of strategic thinking and how to develop that skill in the people within your circle of concern. Excerpts from that speech are used as we explore these topics. Why is it important for you to think strategically? Look no further than the CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation, who, the same year that Apple Computer was founded, thought, “there is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his or her house” (Altier, 1991, p. 20).

## What Strategic Thinking Is and Is Not

*Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice.*

*It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.  
But one hundred years later, the Negro is still not free. (Sullentoys, 2011)*

Scholars have wrestled with creating one clear definition of what strategic thinking is. For example, Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2005) define "strategic thinking as seeing," combining seeing above, behind, below, beyond, ahead, beside and through. Sanders (1998) highlights two major components of strategic thinking: insight about the present and foresight about the future. For Hughes and Beatty (2005), "strategic thinking refers to the cognitive processes required for the collection, interpretation, generation, and evaluation of information and ideas." Though one encompassing definition is continuing to evolve for strategic thinking, it is clear that strategic thinking is not the same as strategic planning. Sanders sees strategic thinking as "the obvious precursor to any strategic planning session" (Sanders, 1998, p. 162). With that view, strategic thinking is likened to a cornerstone for strategic planning. Overall, scholars have found that "planning concerns analysis—establishing and formalizing systems and procedures; thinking involves synthesis—encouraging intuitive, innovative and creative thinking at all levels of the organization" (Graetz, 2002, p. 456). Strategic planning is viewed as logical, systematic, conventional, prescriptive, and convergent, in contrast to strategic thinking, which is synthetic, divergent, creative, intuitive, and innovative (Graetz, 2002, p. 457). There is scholarly agreement that strategic thinking and planning are different but complementary, with the outcome of strategic planning being a plan and the outcome of strategic thinking being a perspective (J. Liedtka, 1998, p. 121). We will carry the following attributes of strategic thinking forward for discussion: holistic, focused on intent, thinking in time, hypothesis-driven, and intelligently opportunistic (Liedtka, 1998, pp. 31-32). These attributes are clear within Dr. King's speech.

### **Holistic**

That we live in a complex world escapes no one. Global access to increasingly rapid telecommunications, transportation, and information blend to form a sort of chaos. There is an increasing interconnectivity because of our technical advances. A competitor today could be a collaborator tomorrow, and back again the next day. Though we have made technological advances, "only the human mind is capable of understanding the multiple complexities in today's world...visual thinking is the key to strategic thinking" (Sanders, 1998, p. 144). Visual thinking allows us to view our corporation from a holistic point of view—the external, the vertical and horizontal factors within the company, as well as personal contexts. An example of two bricklayers, provides a holistic view:

one sees his job as laying bricks the other sees his job as building a cathedral. The first, though doing the job, has a narrow view, but the second realizes “everything we see and experience can be thought of as happening within a larger system (Sanders, 1998, p. 53).

### **Focused on Intent**

If one desires to hit a baseball pitched near 100 mph, in addition to other skills, focus is required. The same applies for corporations. “Strategic intent provides the focus that allows individuals within an organization to marshal and leverage their energy, resisting distraction and to concentrate for as long as required to achieve a goal” (Liedtka, 1998, p. 31).

### **Thinking in Time**

It has been stated that all of us “live in the dash.” We see that dash on headstones: born, date – DASH – died, date. Thinking in time focuses on the “dash,” that gap between the present (created by the past) and the future. “It is that gap between today’s reality and intent for the future that is critical” (Liedtka, 1998, p. 31). Strategic thinking implies the ability to form a link between past, present and future.

### **Hypothesis Driven**

By asking “What if...?” followed by “If...then...?” strategic thinking, by spanning both the analytic and the intuitive trains of thought suggests that strategic thinkers are “experimental” thinkers, able to see several alternative courses of action and critically evaluate them to craft viable ways ahead (Tavakoli & Lawton, 2005, p. 156).

### **Intelligently Opportunistic**

Strategic thinking recognizes and takes advantage of newly emerging opportunities. We must be prepared to strike the curve ball or the slider as well as the fast pitch. There must be a balance between effective and efficient organizational efforts and the risk of losing sight of alternative strategies, which might be better suited to a changing environment (Liedtka, 1998, p. 32).

With those principals in mind, we must briefly concern ourselves next with how they might apply within our organizations.

## **Applying Strategic Thinking for Your Organization's Success by Developing those Skills in Others**

*In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.*

*Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of  
bitterness and hatred. (Sullentoys, 2011)*

Noted organizational learning theorist, Dr. Chris Argyris surmised that modern organizations will need: 1) much more creative planning, 2) valid and useful knowledge about new products and new processes, 3) increased concerted and cooperative action with internalized long-range commitment, and 4) increased understanding to meet the challenges of complexity (Fulmer & Keys, 1998, p. 31). The preceding discussion demonstrates how strategic thinking meets those needs. Strategic thinking is based upon a philosophy of creativity, of imagining and holding in mind an image that is not currently present. Through its inherent insight and foresight, a future is conceived with the flexibility to deal with uncertainty, making planning better targeted. It relies on all levels of the organization to contribute, not just the top tier. Finally, it increases knowledge and understanding through the use of hypotheses, which are critically evaluated, and synthesis, providing a rich understanding of the larger context as well as the immediate environment within the organization's internal system.

### **Developing a Strategically Thinking Organization**

When Dr. King implored his listeners to not resort to the evils done to them by "being guilty of wrongful deeds," he was establishing a grounded, possible vision which would appeal to the values, hopes and ideals of the audience. The vision was one of equality and harmony, as described by the Nation's founding documents, to be gained through peaceful means. Scholars point out that the strategic thinking vision is not just of the head, but it comes from the heart (Schwarz et al., 2006, p. 353). This speaks to the personal nature of strategic thinking, as discussed within the holistic section. If one is in the position to do so, hiring people who are creative could be a way to spark developing a strategically thinking organization, because "creative people tend to be better strategic thinkers, because they are able to work outside their comfort levels, coping well in situations with low structure in the available information" (Tavakoli & Lawton, 2005, p. 156). But, what if you do not have the luxury of hiring those creative types? Can strategic thinking be taught? Are there barriers?

Addressing the latter question first, yes, there are barriers, one of which is culture. Culture can be examined either from a national standpoint or an organizational one. The GLOBE study indicates “future orientation” and “uncertainty avoidance” could be factors impeding strategic thinking. Future orientation concerns the extent to which members of a society or organization believe that their current actions will influence their future, (House, 2004, p. 285) and uncertainty avoidance concerns the extent to which members of a society or culture avoid uncertainty by relying on established norms, rituals and bureaucratic processes (House, 2004, p. 11). If a society, corporation or individual is not concerned with current actions and their effect on the future (have that second piece of cake when trying to lose weight) or if they do not want any change (or are unable to change) from the status quo, they are unlikely to employ strategic thought. Additionally, optimum results may not be produced if the organization’s structure is not conducive to encouraging strategic thinking by employees outside the much smaller group of senior managers (Tavakoli & Lawton, 2005, p. 156). How can these barriers be mitigated?

### **Key Strategies to Encourage Strategic Thinking**

There must be a desire and understanding from the top levels that strategic thinking is advantageous. With that, Zand (2010) offers three key questions supervisors should ask:

1. Ask penetrating questions of people who understand current and future realities so they can generate and evaluate a creative set of strategic options.
2. Reframe the prevailing view of the situation in simple, understandable terms that enable a review of priorities and an adjustment of actions to better adapt to the competitive environment.
3. Question the assumptions underlying current views. Consider alternative assumptions and diligently probe their context and strategic implications (p. 16).

Hughes and Beatty offer a “Strategic Team Review and Action Tool” (STRAT) with the purpose of generating conversation among senior leadership team members regarding what they are doing well and what they could do better (Hughes & Beatty, 2005, p. 237). The STRAT asks series of questions with which participants can agree or disagree and provides a mechanism for conversation dealing with: a) assessing where we are; b) understanding who we are and where we want to go; c) learning how to get there; d) making the journey; and e) general senior leadership team effectiveness (checking our progress) (Hughes & Beatty, 2005, p. 236). The strategic leadership teams are not teams specifically chartered as such, but exert influence on “a particular business unit, product line, function, division, or company” (Hughes & Beatty, 2005, p. 231). From this description, the reader

notes that the entire organization can become engaged. This is important because top management does not necessarily have the most current information, hence engagement of frontline managers will better serve the organization. The output of the STRAT is the output of strategic thinking: knowledge and understanding yielding perspective.

### Conclusion

*I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at a table of brotherhood...I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today. (Sullentoys, 2011)*

Schwarz states that the impact of a leader's vision depends on how the actors (for example, followers, subordinates, or peers) react to the leader's rhetoric. This example provides outstanding clarity: "If a man runs naked down the street proclaiming that he alone can save others, and if he wins a following he is a charismatic leader...if he does not win a following, he is simply a lunatic" (Schwarz et al., 2006, p. 348). The past several decades have proven Dr. King to not be a lunatic, as his movement inspired an entire nation to change its behavior, moreover, it continues today, with global influence. In a world where the pace of change is increasing, where there is increased uncertainty along with growing ambiguity resulting in increasing complexity, strategic thinking provides a mechanism to dream big dreams...dreams today that can be realized tomorrow, achievable dreams for the organization you lead.

### About the Author

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