



Strategic Thinking

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Put on Your Thinking Caps: What is Strategic Thinking..... 2

Chapter 2: Key Steps to Foster A Strategic Thinking Mindset..... 6

Chapter 3: Creating The Culture To Develop A Team of Strategic Thinkers..... 15

Conclusion..... 19





Chapter 1:

Put on Your Thinking Caps: What is Strategic Thinking?

A person takes decisions based on a particular thought process. How you think can determine whether the decisions you've taken are the right ones or not.

In a corporate context, the decisions that an employee takes as part of his day-to-day job, have the potential to make the company or break it. It then becomes imperative that employees be encouraged to adopt a thinking/mindset that enables the success of the company.

This type of thinking process, that focuses on the overall goal fulfilment and profitability of the organization, is known as strategic thinking. It is one of the most important skill sets that employees need to have, in order to succeed at the workplace.



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ALL ABOUT FORESIGHT

The word “strategy” in an organization scenario, refers to “long term” or “big picture”.

Essentially, strategic thinking is about understanding and accounting for the repercussions that day-to-day decisions will have on the long term goals and objectives of the company. As an integral cog in your organizational machinery, you need to put great thought into how your decision to do or not do something today, can affect the future of the company.

ONLY THE DOMAIN OF THE (-LEVEL?

The most common misconception is that strategic thinking is a skill that is necessary only for managers and top level executives.

Yes, managers and senior executives do need to think strategically to lead the company to profitability. But, it’s equally important for other employees – those in the lower rungs of the organization – to also possess the skill of strategic thinking. Here are a few reasons why:

- The work that base-level employees do, forms the foundation for the work the rest of the company does. If lower level staff don’t think of the big picture, the future of the company is compromised.



- Most of the changes in the market (i.e. buying decisions or technology developments) first manifest in the touchpoints where customer interact with the company. Senior level management get to know of these changes only later. If grassroot-level employees aren't able to envision the magnitude and future scope of these market changes, the entire company may lose its competitive advantage.
- If strategic decisions are left only to managers and senior staff, there will be great disconnect between the reality of the market and the visions of the top management. It is only when lower level employees are allowed to participate in strategic thinking and decision making, will there be a synergy in operations.
- The days of pacifying staff with only pay and benefits are long gone. Today's employees experience professional satisfaction if they're allowed to take an active role in day-to-day decision making. Their performance, productivity and attrition is also impacted by this. Encouraging all levels of staff to develop a strategic thinking mindset can help the company in numerous ways.



SOMETHING TAUGHT OR SOMETHING INHERENT?

The biggest debate in the corporate world has been – is a leader born or is he made. But this isn't the only debate that's been ongoing for years.

In fact, there is a lot of talk about whether strategic thinking is an innate skill or if it is a skill that can be learned.

Studies show that while a person's cognitive abilities determine how much of a strategic thinker he/she is (i.e. how quickly and how well can he/she think strategically); strategic thinking in and of itself, is a skill that can be taught to everyone. The focus here, is to train people to move out of their siloed, unidimensional way of thinking and move towards a broader, multi-dimensional thinking approach.

If an employee has the right experience, a learning mindset and the adequate motivation, he/she can easily learn how to think strategically. So, just like a leader, a strategic thinker is both born and made.

So, now that you know this, let's take a look at how you can develop strategic thinking and become a key resource in your company.



Chapter 2: Key Steps To Foster A Strategic Thinking Mindset

There are a few important steps you need to follow to develop your strategic thinking skill. Here's what you need to do:



1. Understand your current reality

Strategic thinking involves going beyond a “Me/I”-centric approach to an “Us”-centric approach. But, for this to happen, you need to first recognize what type of a thinker, planner and decision maker you are.

Once you recognize your thinking style and mindset, you need to understand how you use your thinking process at work. How do you perform your routine tasks? Do you look at jobs as individual tasks or do you view them as part of an entire corporate system?



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2. Evaluate what the future holds

No job is static and that goes for the job you're in too. At some point, there will be a change – in the process, in the product, in the customers, in the supply chain, in the technology etc. Your competitors may affect how you do business or the laws may change, requiring you to adapt on-the-go.

When you adopt a static, short-term thinking, you don't ready yourself to face the future. So, it's important that you analyse how any anticipated changes may impact your company and in turn, your job. That way, you can keep yourself updated with the skills, knowledge and resources needed to discharge your duties efficiently.



3. Become aware your company's vision

The unfortunate truth is that only 4 out of 10 employees are aware of what the company's mission and vision is. Only 50% of employees truly feel connected to their company's long term goals. This can be detrimental to the company, since lack of awareness doesn't really encourage innovation on part of the employees.

In order to become a strategic thinker, you need to be first aware of what your company's overall strategy, mission and vision is.





4. Identify your role in your company's progress

Just knowing about your company's strategic goals isn't enough, when you're fostering strategic thinking skills. You should buy-into this vision and work towards fulfilling it.

One way to do this, is to understand how your own goals contribute to vision of the company. Once you understand this, it becomes easier to align your thinking process, on-job activities and decision making to the company's vision.



5. Reshape your cognition

Changing your outlook to your job aside, you also need to consciously change the way you think. This is a fundamental requirement when you wish to become a strategic thinker.

Here are some activities that can help you with this:

- Puzzles & quizzes – they can help you expand your knowledge and become a lifelong learner.
- Case studies – they can improve your critical thinking and analysis skills.
- Board/card games & jigsaws – they can help you become more creative and find out-of-the-box solutions.





- Books – they can increase your awareness, deepen your global perspective and rid you of any prejudices.
- Workshops & trainings – they can upskill you and help you think like a manager even if you're not one in your official capacity.

It's very important that you include these cognitive activities in your daily life. The human brain needs time to learn how to think afresh and it's important that you train it to think strategically.



6. Become a forward thinker & go-getter

A strategic thinker is a person who subconsciously considers how the outside world i.e. the customers, competitors, partner-businesses etc. are affecting the company. We use the term “subconsciously”, because this type of thinking has become the instantaneous response of the individual. In fact this is one of the hallmarks of a strategic thinking mindset.

The individual considers what sort of opportunities or challenges these external stakeholders are creating for the company. Then he tries to make good use of the opportunities to help the company get ahead in the market through focused improvements in his job role.





If you want to adopt a strategic thinking mindset, then you need to do the same. Proactively seek opportunities that can help fulfil company goals. Push yourself to think of your job or your company from an outside perspective. This can help you envision what may be instore for your company in the future. Additionally, it will help you find excellent, often overlooked opportunities, which can help you add tremendous value to your job.



7. Learn the art of judicious planning

Once you start thinking more strategically, its time to give your ideas a more concrete shape. Afterall, that's the only way you'll create real results at work.

This is where judicious planning takes precedence. A strategic thinker takes care to make the optimal use of company resources to get the best results out of them. Similarly, you need to slowly make changes to the way you select and use resources allocated to you.

In order for your plans to work, you need to reframe your operational goals. Take your goals for the day/week and see how you can approach them keeping the overall company's performance in mind. See where you can shave-off unnecessary resources or how best to use what you have to get more out of them.





If you need to change the metrics for calculating goal completion, do it. For example, instead of focusing on quantity of tasks completed, focus on quality or cost savings on the tasks done.



8. Seek inputs from all stakeholders

As a strategic thinker, you'll need to adopt a 360-degree thinking approach when it comes to actioning your plans. Such an all-rounded approach ensures that you're abreast with what's happening both inside and outside your company.

This is where it helps to get information and help from your colleagues. Everyone, irrespective of level/position can give you info or help to do a good job. People working under you can give you the realistic figures/data of the work being done. Your supervisors can guide you about the company processes, standards and practices. When you combine these inputs, you can ensure that your plans are fuelled by real, ground-level data and have been processed in accordance with the company practices.

So, hone your questioning/research skills to get the information you need.





9. Discount for biases

To err is human and so is to be biased.

All of us have our own perceptions, prejudices and biases about things, people and situations. But if we wish to achieve our goals and those of the company, we need to overcome these biases and think

A lot of time, employees hold onto biases because they've helped them in the past. If you continue to do so even now, when these biases aren't serving you well, you're not thinking strategically.

So, review each information you're working with, by removing the lens of bias and take decisions that are logical and which actually are in your and the company's best interests.



10. Transform your decision making from reflexive to reflective

A very important part of being a strategic thinker is to understand the cause-and-effect-relationship of your actions/decisions. You need to be able to visualize the consequences the company will face because of any plans that you implement.





Most of the time, people take reflexive decisions i.e. those that are just a reflex action based on what we've done in the past. These decisions/actions are easier to implement because they promise a tried-and-tested result. But such decisions and actions can be detrimental to the company, since the company doesn't work in a static environment.

The company functions in a dynamic space where things are changing very fast. So, your decisions need to be reflective and not reflexive. You need to reflect on the current situation, the anticipated problems/threats/opportunities in the future and the impact your plans may have on the fulfilment of corporate goals.



11. Don't be afraid to go against the grain

So, while we're on the subject of taking reflective decisions, it's important to also remember that it's okay to do something or take a decision which you haven't before.

In fact, one of the hallmarks of a strategic thinking mindset is the ability to adapt on-the-go and do what needs to be done, irrespective of whether we've tried it before or not.

The more you push the boundaries that confine you and the more new decisions/actions you take, the better is your ability to think critically, creatively and strategically.





12. Become a lifelong student

Finally, one of the key requirements to become a strategic thinker, is to simultaneously become a learner.

Always being receptive to learning allows you to grow your knowledge, expand your perspectives and upskill yourself. You can then change, adapt and align yourself to the corporate vision. In fact, we recommend that you find yourself a mentor – someone who you know is a great strategic thinker and whose thinking process you can learn a lot from.





Chapter 3:

Creating The Culture To Develop A Team of Strategic Thinkers

So far you've seen what employees can do at their end, to develop their strategic thinking ability. Now let's look at what employers can do to encourage their teams to think more strategically:



1. Tell employees why strategic thinking is important

Often, employees just need a valid reason why they need to do something. By telling them how their thinking process and decision making is connected to the achievement of company objectives, you can encourage them to develop strategic thinking.

This tactic works great when you're interacting with entry-level or college graduate employees. You can train young staff to develop a strategic thinking mindset right from day one of their job.





2. Put your team's preconceived notions on the stand

The best way to foster a culture of strategic thinking in your team, is to challenge your staff's existing notions, perceptions and biases.

Push your team to think out of the box and allow them to suggest possible solutions or alternatives. This will help develop their critical thinking ability and make them more ingenious.



3. Introduce them to diverse perspectives

Apart from asking them to change their perspectives, you should consciously introduce new learnings and global opinions to them. You can do this through training sessions, meetings, calls, internships, networking events etc.

When you encourage your team to expand their horizons, you grow their mind and their ability to think in fresh new ways. The ideas they hit upon as a result, will be completely different from what they've come up with in the past.



4. Encourage your team to ask questions

Doubts and questions are the best way to encourage your team to start thinking strategically. Create an open environment where your team can come to





you or any other staff member to seek inputs, ask questions or share ideas.

This type of team participation will make the cogs in their mind work and you'll see that your staff are learning how to think creatively, critically and strategically.



5. Push your team to get out of their comfort zone

Apart from encouraging them to ask questions, you should also encourage your subordinates to do jobs/tasks that they're not used to or find difficult. By pushing them towards things that are outside their comfort zone, you force them to adopt a completely new thinking process. So, change their work allocations regularly, and promote reflective thinking.



6. Give employees at all levels freedom to take ownership of their tasks

The most important stimulus for developing a strategic thinking mindset, is autonomy.

When your staff have complete control over their own tasks and job roles, they become more responsible. They have the urge to do better and exceed expectations. They use this as an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and put their strategic thinking skills to good use.





7. Don't handhold, but show the way

Finally, while its okay to tell your subordinates why they need to become strategic thinkers, its not okay to tell them how.

By all means, display your own strategic thinking and decision making skills to them, but allow them to shape their own skills and abilities.

At the end of the day, each person is unique and when you encourage your team to develop their strategic thought processes on their own, you'll benefit from the most unique ideas, plans and solutions.





CONCLUSION

Strategic thinking is instrumental to the successful completion of corporate goals. It is only when every employee in a company – those in managerial/executive levels & those in lower rungs – develop and adopt a strategic thinking approach and mindset, will their efforts help make the company vision a reality.

Fostering a strategic mindset is easy. Employees need to reshape the way they think and focus on looking at each goal and plan from the long-term or big-picture perspective. Simultaneously, employers too need to create the conducive atmosphere to encourage their teams to expand their horizons and hone their critical and strategic thinking skills. When this is done, there will be nothing to impede the company's progress.

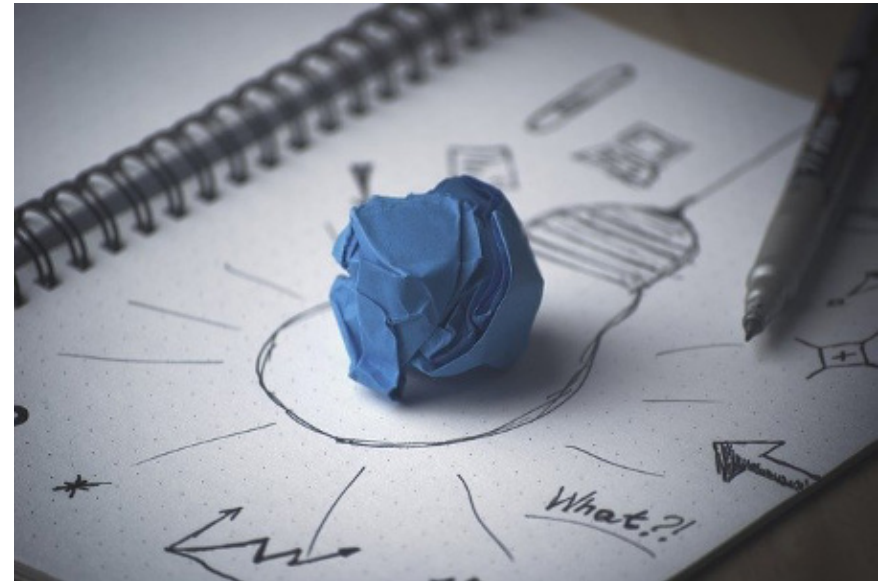


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A few books that we recommend:

