

Strategic Thinking To Grow Your Business

Strategic Thinking - The Most Valuable Skill Leaders Can Build

By Tara Powers, CEO

90% of leaders have never had any training on how to think strategically.

75% of strategic change efforts fail to achieve their intended results.

The facts are clear. There is an enormous need today for leaders at every level to use strategic thinking on a daily basis. Practicing strategic thinking on a regular basis will help you make better decisions, get you noticed and get you promoted. And more leaders need to engage regularly in practicing this critical thinking habit.

In this article, you'll learn a strategic thinking process for making decisions and solving problems that will help you build your credibility and be seen as a leader. You will also receive a Scorecard to help you assess your own unique strategic thinking skills.

"If we want to develop leaders that can think critically, anticipate and adapt to change, and align their respective teams for the future, it's essential that we teach leaders how to start practicing and developing a strategic thinking habit."

- Tara Powers, CEO of Powers Resource Center

Strategic thinkers take a holistic, long-term approach to problem-solving and decision-making that involves questioning and challenging the status quo, researching and asking questions, performing objective analysis, considering future possibilities, recognizing connections, patterns and relationships, facilitating important conversations, planning, and most importantly...keeping an open mind.

If you want to start thinking strategically, you must be able to think about the past, present and future when considering where to go next. It also involves identifying a clear vision and what needs to happen today, in six months, in a year, in three years, to get there.

Benefits of Strategic Thinking

Practicing strategic thinking on a regular basis will help you make better decisions, get you noticed and get you promoted. It shows a dedication to quality, productivity, problem solving and continuous improvement. Strategic thinking also demonstrates a broader way of thinking and looking at things, which is a highly desired leadership skill. I have seen leaders use the strategic thinking process to produce more innovative outcomes and results for customers, companies and individuals. But most importantly, practicing strategic thinking will position you as a big thinker and leader and that is what will help you rise to the top.

Strategic Thinking Competencies and Ideas for Building Them

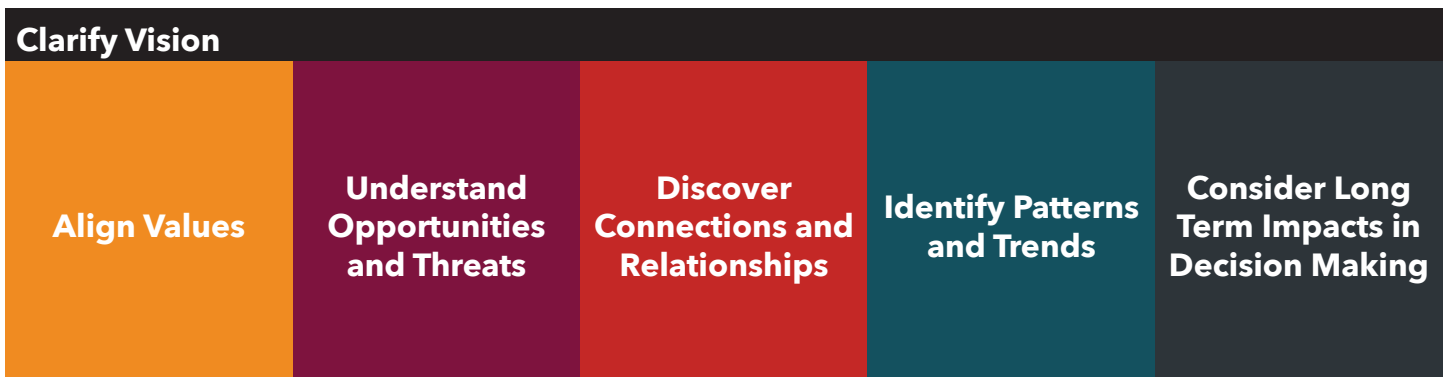
If you are ready to begin practicing strategic thinking, the first thing to focus on is developing habits that will build your strategic thinking muscle. In the table below, I have listed several important competencies that successful strategic thinkers use anytime they are faced with a problem, challenge or opportunity. As you review the ideas and questions in this table, consider how well you use each competency and where you need to begin developing better habits.

Competencies of Strategic Thinkers	Questions/Ideas to Consider
They Anticipate What's Next	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are trends we are noticing with our customers? Competitors? How people use our products? • What services are most in demand right now and how might that demand shift in the next 1-3 years? • What customer expectations or challenges are not being met? • What new technology do we need to learn to stay ahead?
They Challenge What They Already Know	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If I were just starting this job what would I do? • How useful is this practice for helping us be the best we can be? For helping us to think creatively? • Practice ETDT - Eliminate the Dumb Things • What is getting in the way of ultimate success? • Shop around for new ideas from customers, competitors, etc. • Make idea-gathering part of your weekly tasks. • Call customers who have and have not used your services in the past 3 months and ask why.
They Adopt a Systems Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What's been happening? Have we experienced this before? • How could this issue or opportunity shift and look differently in the future? • What are all the key factors, people or parts involved with this issue or opportunity? • What are the relationships among these key factors? What patterns exist? • How am I part of the problem or opportunity? Where do I fit? • What about our thinking, beliefs or assumptions allows this to persist?
They Ensure a Clear Focus and Intent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is our purpose, vision, and goals? Does everyone understand it and agree with it? • Where are we focusing most of our time? • How do we shift our time and energy to be more focused on our vision and goals and eliminate the work that is not serving us? • If we achieve our goals, how will we know? • In what ways will we measure our success?
They Consider Past, Present and Future to Make Decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where are we today? Where do we need to be 1 year from now? 3 years? 5 years? • What can we learn from our past experiences to help us move forward? • What might change in our environment in the future? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using SWOT analysis • Using Scenario Planning

Competencies of Strategic Thinkers	Questions/Ideas to Consider
<p>They Engage in both Creative and Critical Thinking</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow time for brainstorming and exploration which invites opportunity • Engage in creative thinking with your team <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take a time out • Present what if questions • Wall of shame • Customer for a day • What's the worst that can happen? • Five why's • Look into the crystal ball • Use metaphors • Play • Challenge the rules
<p>They Are Responsive to Opportunities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stay on top of industry trends to discover opportunities. • Develop a list of opportunities facing your organization. Assign people to opportunities. • Allow time and resources to explore opportunities

The Strategic Thinking Process

Strategic thinking is a process and there are several important variables that will make the process work for you and for your team. By understanding what questions to ask during different steps of the process, you will be able to think more strategically, recognize patterns, understand what opportunities and threats are in front of you, make better decisions and become recognized as a leader in your company or industry.



- When clarifying your vision it's important that you have a clear picture of your final destination, who you serve, what your customers, vendors or partners expect from you and how you will know when you have moved closer to achieving your vision. This is the most important step because it drives every decision moving forward.
- Take time to analyze past experiences that will help you to understand where you are now. Discuss common causes of your current challenges and opportunities. Debrief challenges and problems together and encourage deeper insight and learning. Recognize and share successes. Look for trends. Consider what future scenarios are possible.
- When discussing values, your goal is to work on alignment. Ask yourself the following questions:
 - a. How are the values of the company tied to my personal values?
 - b. Where is the connection that keeps me engaged in this work and excited to get up every day?
- Talk about what could change in your environment in the 1-2 years and how that might influence your decisions. Do research on where your industry is heading and discuss where you want to be positioned. Consider what decisions you need to make now that will impact your future scenarios given the industry trends you're noticing. Ask **BIG Questions** that are thought provoking, challenges your assumptions, generates excitement about the future, creates inquiry and reflection and touches on a deeper meaning of your purpose or vision.

If values aren't aligned, it is possible you have the wrong people on the bus or you need to do more work crafting a vision and set of values that people can rally behind.

Leaders that excel at creating a story around their vision and values create teams that are aligned and can get behind the vision. Be creative and take risks when creating a compelling story that others will follow!

- When identifying opportunities and threats, get agreement on where you are today in relation to your vision. How far do you have to go? What obstacles do need to overcome to move forward and what opportunities should you take advantage of? A good idea is to have team members share what they notice is happening with customers, product returns, complaints or praise.
- Strategic thinking requires you to consider the whole system and who might be impacted by your decisions both internally and externally. Think about people on your team, other teams, customers or competitors that compete for the same resources as you. Do opportunities exist to develop different relationships that could impact your outcomes?

Sample BIG Questions for You and Your Team:

- How we position our Company as THE go to company for XYZ?
- In the next 3-5 years, what will be the three most important things I/we can positively impact in our community, country, and world?
- How we ensure that the technology we are using is leading the industry?

What's Next For You?

Peter Drucker once said that the best way to predict the future is to create it. As leaders we have to work harder to be taken seriously and to be seen and heard. Making strategic thinking a habit and not just something that is a good idea will help you to stand out, get noticed and position you as the leader you were meant to be.

What strategic thinking habits are you willing to commit to today to help you to rise up as a leader?