

6 Habits of True Strategic Thinkers

You are the boss, but you still spend too much time on the day-to-day. Here is how to become the strategic leader your company needs.

In the beginning, there was just you and your partners. You did every job. You coded, you met with investors, you emptied the trash and phoned in the midnight pizza. Now you have others to do all that and it is time for you to "be strategic."

Whatever that means.

If you find yourself resisting "being strategic," because it sounds like a fast track to irrelevance, or vaguely like an excuse to slack off, you are not alone. Every leader's temptation is to deal with what is directly in front because it always seems more urgent and concrete. Unfortunately, if you do that, you put your company at risk. While you concentrate on steering around potholes, you will miss windfall opportunities, not to mention any signals that the road you are on is leading off a cliff.

This is a tough job, make no mistake. "We need strategic leaders!" is a pretty constant refrain at every company, large and small. One reason the job is so tough: no one really understands what it entails. It is hard to be a strategic leader if you do not know what strategic leaders are supposed to do.

After two decades of advising organizations large and small, my colleagues and I have formed a clear idea of what is required of you in this role. Adaptive strategic leaders — the kind who thrive in today's uncertain environment — do six things well:

Anticipate

Most of the focus at most companies is on what is directly ahead. The leaders lack “peripheral vision.” This can leave your company vulnerable to rivals who detect and act on ambiguous signals. To anticipate well, you must:

- **Look for game-changing information at the periphery of your industry**
- **Search beyond the current boundaries of your business**
- **Build wide external networks to help you scan the horizon better**

Think Critically

“Conventional wisdom” opens you to fewer raised eyebrows and second guessing. But if you swallow every management fad, herdlike belief, and safe opinion at face value, your company loses all competitive advantage. Critical thinkers’ question everything. To master this skill, you must force yourself to:

- **Reframe problems to get to the bottom of things, in terms of root causes**
- **Challenge current beliefs and mindsets, including your own**
- **Uncover hypocrisy, manipulation, and bias in organizational decisions**

Interpret

Ambiguity is unsettling. Faced with it, the temptation is to reach for a fast (and potentially wrongheaded) solution. A good strategic leader holds steady, synthesizing information from many sources before developing a viewpoint. To get good at this, you have to:

- **Seek patterns in multiple sources of data**
- **Encourage others to do the same**
- **Question prevailing assumptions and test multiple hypotheses simultaneously**

Decide

Many leaders fall prey to “analysis paralysis.” You have to develop processes and enforce them, so that you arrive at a “good enough” position. To do that well, you have to:

- **Carefully frame the decision to get to the crux of the matter**
- **Balance speed, rigor, quality, and agility. Leave perfection to higher powers**
- **Take a stand even with incomplete information and amid diverse views**

Align

Total consensus is rare. A strategic leader must foster open dialogue, build trust and engage key stakeholders, especially when views diverge. To pull that off, you need to:

- **Understand what drives other people's agendas, including what remains hidden**
- **Bring tough issues to the surface, even when it's uncomfortable**
- **Assess risk tolerance and follow through to build the necessary support**

Learn

As your company grows, honest feedback is harder and harder to come by. You have to do what you can to keep it coming. This is crucial because success and failure--especially failure--are valuable sources of organizational learning. Here is what you need to do:

- **Encourage and exemplify honest, rigorous debriefs to extract lessons**
- **Shift course quickly if you realize you are off track**
- **Celebrate both success and (well-intentioned) failures that provide insight**

DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

Obviously, this is a daunting list of tasks, and frankly, no one is born a black belt in all these different skills. But they can be taught and whatever gaps exist in your skill set can be filled in. I will cover each of the aspects of strategic leadership in more detail in future columns. But for now, test your own strategic aptitude (or your company's) with the survey at www.decisionstrat.com. In the comments below, let me know what you learned from it.

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