

Forward thinking: Inside the mind of a strategist

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If you are confused about what the word strategy actually means, then you are not alone. Nearly every book on strategy uses the introduction to outline the history of the word and a variety of definitions and purposes. To be a good strategist, it is important to understand what this word means.

The chief strategist

The head of an organization or business owns the strategy of the organization — and that leader's number one job is to be the organization's chief strategist. These types of people are hired for several reasons:

- To establish new destinations such as new products, services, goals and attitudes that create or reveal the strategic elements and actions needed for success.
- To direct, motivate, educate, monitor and mentor those individuals and the organization to successfully meet the goals and new destinations that have been identified.
- To measure, analyze or modify whatever elements or ingredients are needed to reach the ultimate objective.


The job of the manager, at any organizational level, is to complete his or her part of the plan. Forget the overblown rhetoric about super managers, hyper-energized organizational leadership and overexcited performance. That is merely management school jargon. What the leader wants and expects from those who manage is that they carry out their share of the plan — 100 percent of what is expected.

New destinations

What sets leaders apart from man-

Want to learn more?

There is a lot more information to discuss about this topic. You may wish to join the author in a 90-minute PRSA teleseminar on this concept called "How to Develop the Mind-set of a Strategist" on Jan. 22 from 3 - 4:30 p.m. EST. Please visit www.prsa.org for more information and to register.

This teleseminar provides 1.0 Maintenance Credit toward the minimum of 10 credits required to maintain your APR. Please contact Kathy Mulvihill at PRSA, (212) 460-1436 or kathy.mulvihill@prsa.org. 



agers is that while managers work almost completely inside the box, meaning within the limits and goals of the business plan, it is the leader's responsibility to work outside the box, beyond and ahead of the business plan and what others are doing.

It is the leader's role to look past the horizon — to look for new destinations and challenges, and tell us what direction we are going in and why. Once this has been accomplished, then those in charge of the organization — those inside the box — have an obligation to determine their roles in achieving the goals now established by the leader. This is how strategies are born.

Motion and direction are key byproducts of establishing new destinations. If an organization has no particular goals, or its aims are undefined, then the organization can't have a viable strategy or strategic approach. Instead, there is confusion, timidity, hesitation and failure. Once destinations have been set, strategies can be devised or often become self-evident, providing guidance, direction and success.

Tomorrow

The concept of destination leads to a powerful realization about leaders. Leaders are always more concerned about tomorrow than anything else. Do you ever wonder why the boss is on his or her BlackBerry while someone else is talking? This is likely because the other conversation concerns something that

happened yesterday, last week, last month or even last year. That was yesterday — so the boss doesn't care. Yesterday doesn't matter to someone like this boss who is already looking toward tomorrow.

Strategy

My definition of strategy is: mental energy injected into an organization through verbal communication that helps achieve the boss's and the organization's goals and objectives. I came to this definition after recognizing that the principal reason that so many organizations fail is because the leader, or those around the leader,

fail to helpfully communicate and stress the importance of where we are going and why.

Jack Welch, the former chairman of GE, has an interesting definition of strategy that he, according to one of his biographers, appropriated from a Prussian general from the mid-1800s. Welch's concept of strategy is a core idea or concept moving through changing circumstances.

An illustration of Welch's philosophy was his re-organizational proclamation: To remain part of GE as a business unit, you have to be number one in your category, or number two with a plan to become number one in a reasonable amount of time — or have an exit plan and a timeline.

There are two questions you have to ask yourself when you think you are dealing with strategy and acting strategically.

First, is your concept, idea or thought about tomorrow? Is it about a place that you must get to that is different from where you are today?

Second, does your concept or idea provide the energy, motion, emotion or focus to help achieve the goals and objectives that the leadership has established for the organization?

If not, move on to things that matter from the boss's perspective.

Being a strategist

It is difficult to be strategic. A strategist is always searching for the unusual —

something that is different. And as communicators, we tend to apply that lens to everything we do.

Here's what being a strategist means:

A strategist is able to set all assumptions aside. Are you predictable? Does all of your advice and counsel come wrapped in the traditional language and concepts of the communicator?

The strategist strives to intentionally look at things from different perspectives and to resist being put in a single category, or letting one unusual decision dictate or forecast future decisions.


Offer a range of action or decision options, which the boss will choose from. Can you, as Jack Welch's approach suggests, understand and accommodate the leader's thinking, and apply it to different outcomes? In other words, can you adopt a more management-oriented perspective on what you contribute to the organization?

Strategic mind-set

Being a strategist is a state of mind. The first step toward developing a strategic mind-set is to focus on the needs of the person who is required to be strategic — the operational leader of your organization.

Public relations becomes strategic when it is directly related to achieving the organization's goals and moving towards tomorrow. This is true of every staff function — human resources, law, marketing, strategic planning, IT, security, etc. The next time you feel the urge to designate something you are doing as strategic, subject it to these crucial tests: the Tomorrow Test, the Goal Achieving Test, the Energy Test and the Does It Really Matter to the Boss Test. If the plan passes all of these tests, then it is likely a part of the organization's core strategy.

More important, you can achieve a strategic mind-set if you focus in this direction and think about what you want to accomplish and contribute from these perspectives. To be a strategist, remember:

- Try not to make assumptions
- Strive to be different
- Look ahead to tomorrow
- Maintain confidence and knowledge about your goals and strategy
- Focus on what really matters 



James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, helps clients deal with touchy, sensitive and high-profile situations. He recently published the book, "Why Should the Boss Listen to You? The Seven Disciplines of the Trusted Strategic Advisor." E-mail: crisisguru@e911.com.