Strategic Thinking

Strategic thinking entails an element of risk – to push the boundaries – as well as long-term commitment. Relying on a framework such as the STAR Model to guide the process can make the difference between success and failure. The ability to STOP, to take the time to reflect on the desired outcomes, is very hard for today’s leaders and managers, when faced with the daily challenges of our complex workplace. Most leaders are guilty of jumping to conclusions, an unsurprising result of the shortages of resources that we all face. In some instances, those conclusions are correct and might have been reached through a more comprehensive analytical process, but there is always the risk that key points will be missed. Taking the time to define the problem, assess biases that could easily undermine the ability to reach the desired end-state, and clarify assumptions at the corporate or organisational level, will enable the leader to define the problem that demands a strategic response.

THINKING is a logical next step, almost as hard to do as stopping, as we all tend to rely on a quick gut response to any situation. Part of thinking process focuses on problem identification – ensuring one is solving the right problem – and includes reviewing and assessing the assumptions that will determine the ultimate strategic outcomes. The third step, ACT, should systematically follow the strategic thinking phase, ensuring that action is clear, rational and direct, with the leader’s skills in directing actions to obtain results being called into play. The leadership competency that is normally referred as Action Management really involves the definition of solutions and their application, based on a sound strategic analysis of any particular situation or challenge. Finally, taking the time to REFLECT, not just at the conclusion of a strategic process but at regular intervals throughout the process, on various aspects of the
Valerie Keyes challenges will bring a strategic thinking process to a successful conclusion. A leader may need to direct a change in outcomes, particularly if mid-course guidance received from senior management differs from that established at the start, or if one has to respond to political or other external pressures.

There are important lessons to be learned from taking the time to do the job right. Pausing before embarking on a process to assess the situation, including assumptions, biases, stakeholder identification and defining the preferred outcome, has been proven to be very effective in saving precious time, energy and resources. Taking similar pauses for reflection during various phases of the process, including during the thinking and action phases, is also essential for ensuring that the exercise remains on track and on target. Equally important is engaging stakeholders early in the process, in order to ensure ‘buy-in’ throughout the various stages of the process. Nothing can replace a dialogue between partners as part of the strategic thinking learning process. Working with certain, carefully selected or well-placed people from the very earliest days of the effort can enable the introduction of changes in a much more considered and effective manner than would otherwise have been possible.

The need to step back and take the time to reflect on requirements, next steps and the actions taken and to be taken is a clear lesson. I think this point, along with the need for good communications, will make a difference to those who are engaged in any strategic thinking exercise. The errors I have made in the past by being too impetuous and too eager to move straight to solutions have shown me that there is a real need to adhere to a standard set of rules even in such an abstract subject, whether one uses the STAR or any other framework. Having such a sense of direction can benefit all players whilst reinforcing personal and team efforts. I
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see this as perhaps the most important benefit that I can transmit to others as a leader in any future strategic thinking endeavour.