

“When people can’t see the **big picture**, show them a small one.”

Involving everyone in strategic thinking

By John M. Fulwider, Ph.D.

“[T]he greater the sum total of strategic thinking and thinkers in the organization the more readily and effectively it can respond to and take advantage of the vast array of changes occurring in today’s ... environment.”

— Iraj Tavakoli and Judith Lawton¹

Can an organization’s entire staff and its stakeholders think strategically even when individuals don’t have the necessary competencies? Yes. Leaders can aid their own strategic thinking and foster it in others by compensating for individual deficiencies. They can *use small pictures, free people from distractions, and keep data in the room.*

Why involve people outside the leadership circle at all? Why consult your staff and your stakeholders? Darden Graduate School of Business Professor Jeanne Liedtka writes, “[F]arsighted leaders are finding ways to make planning processes more open, creative, and inclusive and, in the process, are linking strategic thinking and strategic planning more powerfully.”² Strategy writers long have urged organizations to seek input from staff closest to the stakeholders, but why bother with that extra layer when you can reach stakeholders directly with a [One-Day Consensus Conference](#)?

The strategic thinking leader draws as many people into her or his organization’s strategic thinking as possible. But strategic thinkers have competencies not everyone in the organization possesses. The strategic thinker must see the forest *and* the trees, focus intently on goals, and think experimentally. We can look at each of the competencies to see how we can involve people who don’t have them—and discover that in doing so, we make the strategic thinking leader’s job easier. The strategic thinker’s competencies are:³

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“Freeing yourself and your people from distractions takes deliberate action.”

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A system perspective: She sees the entire system of creating value, knows where she fits in that system, and knows how all the system’s part depend on each other. She [sees the forest and the trees](#).

Simple pictures help here. Do you have one sheet of paper with your strategic plan on one side and the major ways you create value on the other—both in attractive, information-rich infographic format? Why not, when there are [easy-to-follow instructions right here](#) and (if you want to make it really pretty) [talented graphic designers](#) looking for work? One-sheeters make visualization easier for you and your staff. *When people can’t see the big picture, show them a small one.*

Unshakable focus on goals: He resists distraction and focuses his effort for as long as it takes to reach the strategic goal. But for your people, and even you sometimes, “Strategic thinking rarely occurs spontaneously as day-to-day concerns tend to prevail; the future is forgotten.”⁴

First your people must know the strategic goals on which they should be focusing; that’s where the above one-sheeter comes in. Next you need to free them from operational, day-to-day concerns—which you can do at any meeting by following the ABCD method of facilitating strategic thinking. (That’s Agenda, Briefing book, Careful facilitation, and Delegation.) Sometimes you’ll need to change the environment with an offsite one-hour mini-retreat or the aforementioned [One-Day Consensus Conference](#). *Freeing yourself and your people from distractions takes deliberate action.*

Experimental thinking: She comes up with hypotheses—testable, informed guesses about how something might work—and then quickly uses any available data to test them. As Liedtka writes, “Strategic thinking is both creative and critical in nature.”⁵ The strategic thinker subjects her own ideas to critical scrutiny, but does not allow this scrutiny to stifle his creativity—rather, to enhance it in step-by-step experimental improvements.

Strategy expert Fiona Graetz suggests creativity and tolerance for ambiguity are necessary personality traits for strategic thinking.⁶

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What of people who are more concrete thinkers? Keep them in the room as foils for your hypotheses! These concrete thinkers likely have concrete numbers to go with their thoughts, which you can use to immediately test your ideas. *When you’re thinking experimentally, have your data in the room.*

Notes

1. Tavakoli, Iraj, and Judith Lawton. 2005. Strategic thinking and knowledge management. *Handbook of Business Strategy* 6, no. 1: 155-160. doi:[10.1108/08944310510557170](https://doi.org/10.1108/08944310510557170).↑
2. Page 35 in Liedtka, Jeanne M. 1998. Linking Strategic Thinking with Strategic Planning. *Strategy & Leadership* 26, no. 4: 30-35.↑
3. [Jeanne M. Liedtka](#), author most recently of [The Catalyst: How You Can Become an Extraordinary Growth Leader](#), described what I call competencies as “major attributes of strategic thinking in practice” in the 1998 “Linking Strategic Thinking with Strategic Planning” research article noted above. I have employed, slightly rephrased, three of Liedtka’s five attributes.↑
4. Porter, Michael E. 1987. The state of strategic thinking. *The Economist*, May 23.↑
5. Page 31 in Liedtka, Linking Strategic Thinking with Strategic Planning.↑
6. Graetz, Fiona. 2002. Strategic thinking versus strategic planning: towards understanding the complementarities. *Management Decision* 40, no. 5: 456-462. doi:[10.1108/00251740210430434](https://doi.org/10.1108/00251740210430434).↑

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