

Strategic thinking: two words viewed as something hard to define and even harder to execute. And yet, most organizations stress the need to develop a strategic thinking mentality. While it holds the illusion of being unattainable unless you are incredibly disciplined, strategic thinking is something we all do regularly. Here is strategic thinking. De-mystified.

Strategic Thinking Defined

Dictionary.com defines “strategic” as, “the identification of long-term and overall aims and interests and the means of achieving them.” And “thinking” is defined as, “the process of using one’s mind to consider or reason about something.” Simply put, strategic thinking is using your mind to identify goals and how to achieve them. Answer the following **four questions** to demonstrate strategic thinking.

1. What are We Trying to Achieve? Why?

The first part of strategic thinking is getting a clear and full picture of what you are trying to achieve. Define the **what** and the **why**. You need to know where you are going, and more importantly, why you are going there. *Pro Tip: This is also referred to as the “business case for change” and can be used to influence stakeholders and gain buy-in.*

- What is the ultimate goal?
- What problem are you trying to solve?
- Why does this need to happen?
- What will happen if we don’t do this?
- What will happen if we do this?

2. What Actions Do We Need to Take?

After you identify the end goal, determine how you will get there. List out what needs to happen, using as much detail as is needed. If you are a broad-based thinker, create high-level “buckets” of work. For example: benchmarking, communication, and training. If you are a more detailed thinker, expand upon each “bucket” and list out all of the steps and milestones that you can think of. *Pro Tip: You don’t need to know everything up front. This part of the process continually evolves over time. Give yourself the grace to learn as you go.*

3. How Will We Know We Achieved our Goal?

The easiest way projects go off course is neglecting to define success. What is everyone expecting to see once the work has been completed? Meet with anyone and everyone who will be impacted by the initiative (end users, stakeholders, leadership, clients, etc.) and ask them to define both success and failure. *Pro Tip: Understanding stakeholder expectations lets you immediately see where you need to negotiate or re-set expectations, before you get too far along.*

4. Is There Anything to Consider Along the Way?

Don’t fall into the trap seen all the time – failing to see the bigger picture. Your initiative is usually not the only one and there is a good possibility that resources overlap.

- Are other projects being considered or are already underway?
- Do any of these projects impact yours (timeline, resources, budget, priority, etc.)?
- Are there any dependencies to consider?
- Are there any risks to mitigate?

Combine the answers for each question into a comprehensive view and you have demonstrated strategic thinking. Simple as that.



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