

## Are You Strategically Savvy?

During the years I spent as a corporate learning advisor, organisational developer and human resources manager I regularly came across employees whose careers had plateaued due to a perception by those above them that they were operational rather than strategic thinkers. It didn't seem to matter what their area of expertise was - management, HR, L&D, marketing, accounting - the issue of being 'seen to be strategic' eventually arose if they wanted to move into higher level positions.

As a consultant and coach, I find myself working with clients on this same issue - how to think strategically about their organisation, and as importantly, how to be seen as strategic by others. If you have ever been told you are not a strategic thinker, or if strategic thinking is a competency required for your next career step, then it's probably in your interests to understand how to have, what I call, 'strategic savvy'.

Although there are a range of models for use in strategic planning, being strategically savvy is more about strategic thinking and conversations. A difficulty with strategic thinking is a lack of consensus of what it actually is. There does seem to be general agreement amongst researchers that:

- Strategic thinking is more important than ever in our increasingly interdependent and global world
- Strategic thinking improves operational decisions and planning
- Strategic thinking involves creative thinking
- Strategic thinking involves systems thinking
- Most people are not strategic thinkers, even if their position title indicates they are, or they think they are.

It's probably pretty safe to say that strategic thinking in a planning context involves creating a vision and developing a plan to get to the vision. While this may be relevant for high level executives and strategic planners it is not highly useful for professionals and operational managers within organisations. They need a different model because they are rarely responsible for developing the vision or strategic plan, but are often required to contribute to it, comment on initiatives and policies being developed by others, implement strategy they have not been involved in creating or devise policies or processes that have strategic fit. Most of these involve some level of interaction or relationship with strategic thinkers and planners. In order to interact with strategic thinkers effectively, it's helpful to understand how they think.

To get a feel for how strategists view the world, imagine you had a magic carpet, like in the story of Aladdin, and you sat on the carpet, zoomed up into the sky and hovered high above your organisation. Now envisage that your organisation and everything else impacting on it is transparent. Now you see your organisation across all its parts and from top to bottom. You also see all the other players impacting on you - like competitors, customers, government, shareholders, employees and so forth. You can see how things interact and connect, and how shifting one element of this picture creates consequences for other elements. You can look out further and see into the future of your organisation and its industry, markets, technology and operating environment. You see how you want your organisation to look and to be, and you predict how changes now might impact on that future. This is the view of the strategist.

So a strategic thinker thinks from a high perspective about their organisation and issues confronting it. They consider impacts widely across the organisation and across its industry and markets. They also view ideas through time - being able to envisage the concept into the future and seeing impacts and consequences as they relate to the organisation and its vision of itself. They tend to use a variety of models or tools, subconsciously or consciously, to view an idea. They also draw on a range of knowledge and information. They view an idea from a variety of viewpoints, not from one area of expertise.

Strategic thinkers also treat ideas as just that, and generally do not consider implementation issues early on. This does not mean that implementation should not be considered, but strategic thinkers recognise that implementation issues come further down the track and are comfortable to look at a concept in terms of how it links to vision, values and high level priorities. They are able to discern how the idea or concept fits with these now and into the future.

When strategic issues are being discussed it is easy for operational or professional experts to quickly judge ideas from an implementation perspective. Often these people can quickly and accurately judge operational impacts of strategic ideas but their questions and comments frustrate the strategists who can perceive them as negative and too low level. 'Strategic savvy' is about asking the right questions at the right time in order to understand where strategic ideas are coming from and to indicate to others that you have heard and understood the strategic implications before considering the operational impacts. Handling these conversations effectively can avoid others perceiving you as 'not strategic'.

Just as strategic thinking can be learnt, so can 'strategic savvy'. Even highly detailed and operational experts can learn to relate to strategic ideas and concepts in ways that allow them to contribute from their area of expertise and still present themselves to others as positive and strategic. Strategic Savvy in my view has three elements:

- Understanding how strategists think and how specific strategy has developed
- Being able to interact effectively with strategists
- Being able to implement strategy within own area



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