JUDGMENT · STYLE

Strategic Thinking at Every Level

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Connecting daily execution, organizational alignment, and long-term direction

An organization can be extremely busy and still make very little strategic progress.

People answer emails, solve customer problems, complete projects, and report results. Individually, these activities may be performed well. Yet a fundamental question often goes unanswered: Are we accomplishing the things that will make the greatest difference? The difference between activity and progress is not merely a matter of effort. It is a matter of thinking.

A useful way to examine that difference is to distinguish three interconnected disciplines: tactical thinking, translating strategy into action (the bridge), and strategic thinking. These are not three ranks in an organizational hierarchy. They are three modes of judgment that leaders and team members must learn to use together.

1. Tactical thinking: doing the work well

Tactical thinking focuses on the immediate task. What needs to be done? How can we solve the problem? Who has the resources? What must be delivered today, this week, or this month? Its value is concrete: customers receive service, teams meet commitments, and operations remain dependable.

Tactical excellence is necessary but insufficient. Michael Porter (1996) distinguished operational effectiveness from strategy. Improving how efficiently an organization performs its activities matters, but greater efficiency alone does not establish a distinctive direction or resolve what the organization should choose to do.

A team might be proud that it delivered a new product feature ahead of schedule. That achievement is real. But if the feature does little to serve the organization's chosen customers or future direction, the team may have executed the wrong priority exceptionally well.

2. The bridge: connecting work to purpose

The middle discipline is frequently the most neglected. It translates strategic intent into decisions that people can understand, own, execute, and evaluate. It asks more than whether a task can be completed. It asks why the task deserves resources and how its results contribute to a larger objective.

Leaders working in this mode connect objectives, people, deadlines, dependencies, and measures. They clarify trade-offs, coordinate across functions, and make sure that employees

understand not only what they are doing but what success will accomplish.

Robert Kaplan and David Norton (1996) made this connection central to the Balanced Scorecard, linking long-term strategic objectives with short-term activities and meaningful measures. Research by Donald Sull, Rebecca Homkes, and Charles Sull (2015) likewise emphasized the importance of coordination across organizational units and the role of managers in turning strategic direction into results.

The bridge works in two directions. Leaders translate strategy downward into operational choices, but they must also carry information upward. Frontline employees may recognize shifts in customer behavior, emerging risks, and practical constraints before senior executives do. A strategy that cannot learn from execution eventually becomes disconnected from reality.

3. Strategic thinking: choosing the right direction

Strategic thinking asks a different set of questions. What is changing around us? What patterns are emerging? Which assumptions should we challenge? Where can we create the greatest value? What are we willing not to pursue?

Henry Mintzberg (1994) warned against confusing formal planning with strategic thinking. Plans can organize and communicate choices, but strategic thinking requires synthesis: recognizing relationships and possibilities that are not revealed simply by extending the current task list into the future.

A strategic leader must make choices under uncertainty. Those choices require a clear understanding of mission and values, an honest assessment of present capabilities, and an informed view of the environment. They also require the discipline to say no. Not every worthwhile opportunity can be the organization’s priority.

Importantly, strategic thinking is not reserved for a chief executive. A frontline employee can see an emerging pattern; a supervisor can challenge a faulty assumption; a business coach can help a client consider a different future. Senior leadership carries greater responsibility for organizational direction, but insight is not distributed according to job title.

Three questions, one decision

Consider a vice president choosing between two product features. A tactical question is, “Which can we ship sooner?” A bridging question is, “Which advances our current strategic objective?” A strategic question is, “Which better positions us for the market we believe is emerging?” Each question is legitimate, but none should be answered in isolation.

If the organization chooses the faster feature without considering its direction, speed may become waste. If it chooses the future-oriented feature without the capabilities to deliver, aspiration may become frustration. The leader’s responsibility is to make the three questions inform one another.

Leaders must move among the three modes

Some leadership diagrams suggest that a vice president should spend a specified percentage of time thinking strategically, with larger percentages for more senior executives. Such figures can provoke a useful conversation about how leaders spend their time, but they should not be mistaken for research-validated rules.

The right balance depends on the organization, the assignment, and the moment. A major operational failure may demand immediate executive attention. A turbulent market may require even frontline teams to challenge assumptions about tomorrow. The goal is not to eliminate tactical involvement; it is to avoid becoming so absorbed in immediate activity that direction disappears.

The deeper competency is the ability to shift perspectives deliberately: zoom in to understand execution, zoom out to examine direction, and connect the two before deciding.

The human dimension: IQ, EQ, and AQ

Strategic choices are made by people and carried out through people. I find it useful to view sound leadership judgment through three complementary lenses: cognitive intelligence (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ), and adaptability (AQ). This is an integrative leadership framework, not a claim that three scores mathematically determine performance.

IQ helps leaders evaluate evidence and alternatives. EQ helps them listen, understand how decisions affect others, and communicate difficult choices with respect. AQ helps them adjust when assumptions prove incomplete or circumstances change. The strongest strategy can falter when leaders ignore the human experience of implementing it.

Culture matters here. If employees believe that challenging a senior leader is dangerous, information may never travel upward. Amy Edmondson’s (1999) study linked team psychological safety with learning behavior, reinforcing why a climate that permits candid questions is important for organizational learning.

A leader should therefore ask two additional questions: “What are we assuming without adequate evidence?” and “Whose perspective have we not heard?” These questions protect strategic thinking from becoming simply the opinion of the highest-ranking person in the room.

From vision to measurable action

Within the PBCA Business Transformation Plan, the movement from values to mission, vision, strategy, objectives, and a tactical action plan provides a practical means of integrating these three modes. Values and mission establish boundaries and purpose. Vision and strategy clarify the desired future and the choices needed to reach it. Objectives and tactical plans translate direction into accountable work.

PBCA BOS can then serve as an execution and follow-through mechanism, providing visibility

into commitments, ownership, and progress. The system is valuable not because it substitutes for judgment, but because it makes the consequences of judgment observable and subject to review.

A sound operating rhythm should create opportunities to move both ways: from strategic direction to measurable action, and from operational evidence back to strategic reconsideration.

A practical leadership test

Before approving a major initiative, I ask five questions:

1. Are we solving the right problem, or merely the most visible problem?
2. How does this decision support our mission, vision, and strategy?
3. What will we stop doing, delay, or deprioritize to make room for it?
4. Who owns the result, what evidence will tell us whether it is working, and when will we review it?
5. What new information would cause us to change course?

These questions test direction, translation, execution, and adaptability together. They also make strategy a continuing practice rather than an annual planning event.

Conclusion: The real measure is alignment

Strategic thinking does not begin when someone receives a senior title, and tactical thinking does not lose its value when someone becomes an executive. The three disciplines are inseparable. Tactical work produces results. Strategic thinking determines which results matter. The bridge connects the two through people, priorities, and accountability.

Organizations need people who can execute well, leaders who can translate purpose into action, and thinkers who can recognize when the future demands a different choice. The greatest leadership challenge is not choosing one level over another. It is making all three work together.

Being busy is not the same as making progress. Leadership begins when we can explain why today's work matters to tomorrow's success.

References

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Conceptual note: Inspired by an unattributed infographic titled “The 3 Levels of Strategic Thinking.” Its executive time-allocation percentages are treated as illustrations, not validated benchmarks.