JUDGMENT · STYLE

The Three Dimensions of Leadership Thinking

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Knowing when to look ahead, connect the work, and make it happen

Great leadership is not about thinking at a higher level. It is about thinking at the right level, at the right moment, for the right reason, and knowing how to connect all three.

Busy is not the same as effective

During more than fifty years of leadership, I have watched exceptionally talented people work hard, solve difficult problems, and meet nearly every deadline, only to discover that much of their effort did little to advance the organization's larger purpose. I have also watched executives devote hours to discussing the future while the people responsible for delivering results remained uncertain about what that discussion meant for their work.

Neither group necessarily lacked intelligence, effort, or good intentions. What was missing was the connection between direction, decisions, and action.

An illustration of three levels of strategic thinking depicts a ladder: tactical thinking at the bottom, a bridge between tactics and strategy in the middle, and strategic thinking at the top. It is a useful starting point, but I would challenge the suggestion that leaders simply graduate from one level to the next. A person who occupies a senior position does not become effective by leaving operational realities behind. Nor should someone working on the front line be discouraged from seeing patterns and questioning assumptions. These are not three ranks in an organizational hierarchy. They are three dimensions of leadership thinking.

My central premise is simple: effective leaders know when to look ahead, when to connect purpose to priorities, and when to engage with the work. Just as importantly, they recognize that information must travel in both directions. Results from execution should shape the next strategic decision.

Activity, execution, and strategy are different

Michael Porter distinguished operational effectiveness (performing activities well) from strategy (choosing a distinctive position and designing activities that reinforce it). Both matter, but one cannot substitute for the other (Porter, 1996). Henry Mintzberg similarly challenged the assumption that formal planning by itself produces strategic insight. Thinking and doing should not be separated into isolated worlds (Mintzberg, 1994).

A team can become faster at producing something customers no longer value. An organization can complete every item on its annual plan while failing to recognize a change in the market. And a leader can articulate a compelling vision without giving anyone the authority, resources, or clarity to pursue it. The answer is not to disparage execution or strategy. The answer is to bring them together deliberately.

The three dimensions in practice

DIMENSION	LEADERSHIP QUESTION	VISIBLE RESULT
STRATEGIC Look ahead	**Where are we going, why, and what should we choose not to do?**	**Direction, priorities, choices, anticipation**
CONNECTIVE Build the bridge	**What must change, who owns it, and how does the work serve the purpose?**	**Clear objectives, ownership, resources, alignment**
TACTICAL Deliver and learn	**What should happen now, how will we know, and what are we learning?**	**Execution, service, measurable outcomes, feedback**

The order is not a ranking of importance. All three dimensions are essential, and good judgment determines which one deserves the leader's attention at any given moment.

Dimension one: Strategic thinking to see beyond today

Strategic thinking starts with a willingness to look beyond the immediate request. What are we trying to accomplish? Whom are we serving? What might change? Which assumptions no longer hold? What will we stop doing so that the important work can receive the attention it deserves?

Those questions ask leaders to make choices, not merely to express hopes. Porter (1996) emphasized trade-offs, while Hambrick and Fredrickson (2001) argued that a coherent strategy must connect its essential choices rather than consist of disconnected initiatives. A list of attractive goals is not yet a strategy.

My years in the Navy taught me that technical knowledge, valuable as it is, does not automatically produce leadership. In challenging situations we need the ability to understand the problem (IQ), work with people (EQ), and adjust as circumstances evolve (AQ, meaning adaptability in the framework I use). Strategic thinking without an appreciation for people and changing conditions can become detached from reality.

I would ask leaders to spend less time proving that they possess the answers and more time determining whether they are asking the right questions. A leader who spots an emerging problem while it is still small often serves the organization better than one who brilliantly resolves it after it becomes a crisis.

Dimension two: Connective thinking to turn purpose into ownership

Of the three dimensions, the middle one may be the most neglected. Organizations frequently have an impressive strategic plan and very busy employees, yet those employees cannot explain how their daily decisions advance the plan. Connective thinking closes that gap. It translates an intention into objectives, operating responsibilities, resources, timing, and ways of knowing whether progress is real.

Kaplan and Norton (1992) helped popularize the idea that measurement should connect organizational priorities with multiple dimensions of performance, not financial results alone. Sull, Homkes, and Sull (2015) examined why strategy execution often breaks down, emphasizing coordination across organizational boundaries and adaptability rather than treating compliance with a plan as the whole answer.

The bridge also runs upward. People closest to clients, operations, and changing circumstances often see important patterns first. Their observations should inform strategic adjustments. A leader who only sends instructions down the organization and never listens upward has built a one-way street, not a bridge.

Pat Grimes: The power of connecting the work

At a financial services company, I was fortunate to work with Pat Grimes, whose leadership shaped our district in ways that an organizational chart could never convey. I had seen her leadership ability earlier in my career. When we later worked together, I gave her room to exercise that ability, and she developed a pooled administrative team rather than forcing every advisor to replicate the same support structure.

That solution addressed practical problems, including unnecessary duplication and the continuity and quality of administrative support. It also created clearer responsibilities and an environment in which people could help one another. In my experience, the approach reduced administrative costs and turnover.

Pat did not merely carry out instructions. She understood the intended culture and outcomes,

developed an operating approach to support them, and led people in making it work. This is connective thinking at its best: strategy becomes a system, the system serves people, and the people improve the system. It is also a reminder that leadership follows the person, not the position.

Dimension three: Tactical thinking to make the work matter

The tactical dimension is where promises encounter reality. Clients need service. Decisions require follow-through. Obstacles must be removed. Standards have to be met. The tactical leader asks what must be accomplished now, who is responsible, what resources are needed, and whether the outcome meets the real requirement.

There is nothing inferior about tactical thinking. A senior leader may need to engage directly when a client commitment is at risk, a safety issue arises, or an execution problem reveals a faulty assumption in the strategy. The danger is not being tactical; it is remaining tactical when the situation calls for a wider view, or refusing to become tactical when circumstances demand it.

The 50-minute rule: A tactical choice with strategic purpose

I once observed a chief executive regularly spend as much as four hours in meetings with direct reports. Much of the time was consumed by the executive speaking, and when I asked participants what had been accomplished, they often struggled to identify meaningful results. Employees elsewhere in the organization told me they rarely saw their leaders. Time had been consumed, but leadership had not necessarily occurred.

I adopted a personal rule: I would not remain in a meeting beyond fifty minutes. At that point, I left; others could continue if necessary. Our organization had one regular weekly all-hands meeting, with additional meetings when circumstances truly required them. Knowing that shared time was limited encouraged preparation, prioritization, and clearer communication.

At first glance, that is a tactical operating practice. Underneath it is a strategic choice about how people should spend their time and what we value. The connective dimension translated that choice into meeting expectations, and the tactical dimension made the practice real. One decision touched all three dimensions. The rule was never meant to prevent thoughtful discussion or evade important work; it was designed to make shared time purposeful.

A loop, not a ladder

The three dimensions should form a continuing loop. Strategic thinking defines a destination and the choices required to pursue it. Connective thinking converts those choices into coordinated commitments. Tactical thinking delivers the work and exposes what is actually happening. Evidence from the work then travels back through the bridge and informs the next strategic judgment.

Imagine that an organization wants to become the most trusted service provider in its market. Strategically, it must decide what trust means for the customers it serves and what trade-offs it is willing to make. Connectively, it must assign responsibility for response standards, training, client communication, and measurement. Tactically, it must keep commitments, correct errors, and learn from complaints. If clients continue to report confusion, the answer is not automatically to demand that employees work harder. The organization may need to reconsider its assumptions, its service design, or its priorities.

When leaders confuse activity with progress, they ask for more reports. When they connect all three dimensions, they ask what the reports are telling them, and what decision should change as a result.

The Business Transformation Plan: From meaning to movement

This thinking aligns naturally with the Business Transformation Plan (BTP) we teach in the Certified Professional Business Leader program. Our BTP progresses from Values to Mission to Vision to Strategy to Objectives to a Tactical Action Plan. It begins with what the organization stands for, develops a clear direction, and then turns that direction into accountable action.

BTP ELEMENT	ROLE ACROSS THE THREE DIMENSIONS
Values	Sets the nonnegotiable principles that govern decisions in every dimension.
Mission	Clarifies whom we serve and why the organization exists.
Vision	Describes the desired future that strategic thinking must keep in view.
Strategy	Makes choices about where to focus, how to create value, and what not to pursue.
Objectives	Creates the bridge: defined priorities, measures, owners, and checkpoints.
Tactical Action Plan	Specifies the actions, timing, resources, accountability, and learning process.

Values and mission are not confined to one dimension: they are tests applied across all three dimensions. Likewise, objectives and execution plans can prompt a revision of strategy when the evidence warrants it.

The CPBL sequence follows the same path. CPBL 401 develops the leader and establishes Values and Mission, the foundation that every dimension draws on. CPBL 402 develops Vision and Strategy, the strategic dimension. CPBL 403 turns strategy into Objectives and a Tactical Action Plan, the connective and tactical dimensions, and addresses leadershift: the work of navigating change. John C. Maxwell also examines the need for leaders to change in his book

Leadershift (Maxwell, 2019). The PBCA Business Operating System can then support the recurring discipline of priorities, meetings, measures, and accountability. None of those tools can substitute for judgment, but good tools can make sound judgment more likely to become consistent action.

People and culture determine whether the bridge holds

Jim Collins (2001) made the memorable case for getting the right people on the bus and in the right seats. That idea is important here, but the “right seat” is not simply a job title. It includes an opportunity to use a person’s abilities, the clarity to understand the standards, and the freedom to contribute within those standards.

In my own leadership experience, an effective culture combined genuine care with accountability. We tried to understand the whole person, celebrate successes, delegate responsibility, and protect the team from distractions that added no value. We also owed clients reliability and owed one another clear expectations. Culture was not a substitute for execution; it was the environment in which good execution could flourish.

I have long used the phrase “Fun First, Business Second.” It never meant that results did not matter. It meant that when people trusted and respected one another, work could become more satisfying and effective. As I have also said, “I equals We in success.” An excellent strategy executed by people who do not trust one another is unlikely to achieve its full potential.

The right dimension at the right moment

Some versions of the three-level diagram assign a fixed percentage of time to each level of the organization, with a small share of strategic thinking for a vice president and a much larger share for a chief executive. I would not adopt fixed percentages without evidence or context. A leader’s appropriate allocation depends on the organization’s size, capability, maturity, and current circumstances. During a crisis, a strategic leader may need to become intensely tactical. During a major transition, a technically proficient manager may need to spend much more time connecting teams to a changing purpose.

The key is not protecting a predetermined percentage of the calendar. It is noticing when attention is misallocated. If I am repeatedly solving work that others are ready and authorized to solve, I may be preventing their development. If everyone is completing assignments but cannot articulate the purpose, I have neglected the bridge. If we have an excellent plan but no willingness to change it after learning from the field, our strategic thinking has become rigid.

Where this fits in the Petersen Leadership Model

The three dimensions are not a separate model. They show how three elements of the Petersen Leadership Model work together in practice. Judgment (how you decide) is the discipline of recognizing which dimension a situation requires and when to move between them. Execution (how results are achieved) lives in the bridge and in the work itself: objectives,

ownership, follow-through, and learning. Culture (what you create) determines whether the bridge holds, because people share what they are seeing only when they trust that it will be heard.

The other elements are present as well. Character keeps values from bending under pressure in any dimension. Style shapes how a leader engages people, whether looking ahead, building the bridge, or working alongside the team. And Legacy is measured by whether the organization keeps thinking this way after the leader has moved on.

A practical leadership thinking audit

I would encourage leaders and coaches to test the model rather than simply admire it. Review the past thirty days of significant decisions and meetings. For each, identify the primary dimension engaged, whether that was the dimension the situation needed, and whether information flowed in both directions.

- Strategic: What change, opportunity, or assumption deserves our attention before it becomes urgent?
- Connective: Can the people doing the work explain the objective, their authority, their ownership, and the measure of success?
- Tactical: Which commitment must we deliver next, what is blocking it, and what will we learn from the outcome?
- People: Have we placed capable people where they can contribute, and have we listened to what they are seeing?
- Time: Which activity consumes attention without materially advancing our purpose?
- Adaptability: What evidence would cause us to revise our strategy, and who is empowered to bring it forward?

Then make one adjustment: stop a meeting that produces little value, clarify ownership for a strategic priority, invite frontline observations into a planning conversation, or remove an obstacle preventing a capable person from doing excellent work. The point is not to create another assessment that sits on a shelf. The point is to change one behavior and learn from it.

Conclusion: Thinking that becomes leadership

Great leaders do not live permanently in the future, and they do not spend every day putting out fires. They move among strategy, connection, and execution according to what the moment demands. They recognize that a plan must become a promise, a promise must become action, and action must produce learning.

The real test of leadership thinking is not the sophistication of our language or the length of our planning documents. It is whether the people we serve are better off because we understood the situation, involved the right people, chose a direction, and followed through.

Great leadership is not about thinking at a higher level. It is about thinking at the right level, at the right moment, for the right reason, and knowing how to connect all three.

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Author's note: The three-dimension framework presented here is a Petersen synthesis inspired by a general "levels of strategic thinking" illustration, not a claim that the cited researchers developed this exact model. The leadership stories are personal recollections.

About the author

Jim Petersen, PhD, Captain, USNR (Ret.), is an author, executive coach, and keynote speaker whose fifty years of leadership span the Navy, financial services, and coaching. A 1976 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and a former nuclear submarine officer, he is CEO of Diversified Professional Coaching LLC (DPC), President of the Professional Business Coaches Alliance (PBCA), and a faculty member at The American College of Financial Services, which inducted him into its Alumni Hall of Fame in 2024. He created the Certified Professional Business Leader (CPBL) designation and the five-day Lead With Purpose leadership program.

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