



# Strategic Thinking Simplicity

Brian J. Rhiness

*"Great leaders are almost always great simplifiers, who can cut through argument, debate, and doubt to offer a solution everybody can understand."*

- General Colin Powell

You frequently hear people in organizations lament that we need to think more strategically. Where are the strategic thinkers when we need them?

In our day-to-day lives we are faced with many complex issues and challenges. We are trying to grow our organizations, meet tight deadlines, manage a crisis or just respond to the latest unreasonable request from a customer or supervisor. Where do you find the time to think strategically?

Fortunately, thinking strategically can be easily learned and applied to your daily life. Once you have mastered a few simple principles, you will find that strategic thinking can be used in both your business and personal life to dramatically improve your performance. It will also provide clarity of purpose which reduces stress and improves job satisfaction.

## What is strategic thinking?

In simple terms, strategic thinking is the unwavering focus on the *desired outcomes* of your business, project or initiative. Stephen Covey, in his book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, refers to it as *beginning with the end in mind*. It can also be referred to as backward thinking, future thinking, long-term thinking or high-level thinking. The foundation for strategic thinking is based on systems thinking which is covered in other Rhiness Group articles.

Strategic thinking is different from analytical thinking, which is tactical, process oriented and linear. You will need both strategic and analytical thinking to be successful. The key is to start with strategic and then move to the tactical when you know your desired outcomes. Great strategic leaders never lose sight of the desired outcomes even after they have moved into tactics.

We are not suggesting that strategic thinking is undisciplined or lacking a process to follow. Actually, it is quite the opposite. By following a simple process, strategic thinking is possible for even the most analytical thinkers.

Strategic thinking is not the same as strategic planning. Many strategic plans are developed with very little strategic thinking. In those cases, they should be more accurately called business plans. With strategic thinking missing, they have a very high failure rate. Strategic thinking is a vital piece of a successful strategic planning process. To successfully execute a strategic plan, you will need the continued strategic thinking focus and sound tactics that come from analytical thinking.

## Getting started

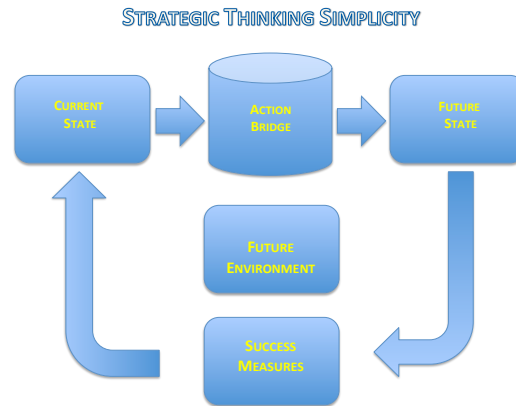
*"Confusion is a great opportunity to simplify"*

- Brian J. Rhiness

We like to start with encouraging people to take a "helicopter view" of the situation. This means getting above the daily obstacles that face the organization or individuals. Free yourself to think in broader terms of where you want to be, why you want to be there and what that looks like.

It is also a great idea to identify critical issues facing you or your organization at this early stage. By focusing on these critical points, we can ensure that throughout the thinking process we are developing solutions. If your strategic thinking does not lead to constructive results, you are wasting your time. Later in the model we will come back to the critical issues.

There is a very simple model that can support your strategic thinking process:



Thinking backwards means we start with the Future State. What is our vision for the future? Where do we want to end up? What are our desired outcomes? This needs to be a real, deep conversation. Forget the clichés and buzz words. You are looking for a clear, easily understood statement of your desired future state. A poor job at this stage, will make the rest of the process a waste of time. Spend the time here to ensure real clarity. Leadership requires that clarity for communication and buy-in from stakeholders.

You are defining not only where you want to be, but why it is important and also who you are. A powerful vision, mission and core values will set a strong foundation for success.

This is also an important place to engage an effective project team. If team members can rally around an agreed upon outcome for the project, they can improve buy-in, ensure accountability and improve the changes the initiative will succeed.

In your personal life, start with determining where you want to be. We know that this is the most powerful motivation for success. This may be setting career goals, defining the future with your partner or as simple as deciding where to go on vacation. Once you have a set destination, it is much easier to take steps to get there.

### **Scan the Environment**

You will note in the middle of the model is Future Environment. This reminds us to do a complete and thorough future environmental scan as part of setting our desired outcomes. Go back to your helicopter view for a clear picture of what is going on in your industry, jurisdiction or life. Check out Rhiness Group Articles for an effective environmental scanning process.

### **Success Measures**

How will you know if you are making progress? We put success measures in place. These measures should be few in number and give you immediate feedback on how you are doing. If you picture the dashboard of a car, and what you can see with a quick glance, that is your objective. Do not wait to year end to measure your progress – that is too late. See more on building success measures in Rhiness Group Articles.

### **Current State**

Now is the time to make an honest and complete assessment of where you are today. This includes such things as resources, capacity, support and barriers to moving forward. A common approach is to use a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis. Use the helicopter again to get above day-to-day frustrations, institutional silos, egos and turf protection. These are all real obstacles to honest assessments.

We stress that this must be an honest assessment. If you gloss over real issues, you are not seriously thinking about success. Embrace skeptics in every phase of the planning process. They are your best friends.

### Action Bridge

By this point in the model, we have a clear picture of where we want to be, a set of measures to test our progress in getting there and have an honest sense of where we are today. It is time to build the strategies, actions and tactics to bridge us from today to our desired future state.

**Strategies** are how we close the gap between where we are today and our desired future state. They are the ways, methods or group of activities we will use to get there.

Again, we stress the need for simplicity and clarity in the strategy statements. Avoid buzz words and general statements. We suggest starting the strategy statements with “We will .....” If it is your personal life, make it an “I will ....” statement. These are more powerful, action-oriented statements and will be easier to understand and explain. Remember, someone will be responsible for getting this done. Will they have a clear understanding of what they need to do?

Under each strategy there must be a set of actions to achieve that strategy. **Actions** are the projects, initiatives or programs we will undertake to ensure the success of the strategy. We are still in strategic thinking mode. Get up in the helicopter again. What specific steps will get that strategy done? Once we have turned an action over to someone, they can come up with the specific tactics necessary to get results.

We have mentioned a number of times about keeping things simple and clear. This does not mean that the tasks needed to get the job done will not be difficult – most will be. If they are worth doing, odds are they will be difficult. Some may take many people, years to accomplish and some will fail. You improve the odds of success by ensuring clarity of purpose and direction for those assigned the tasks. Then turn them loose, support them and trust them to get the job done.

Each project related to an action item can go through the same strategic thinking process. They can come up with their own desired outcomes, measures of success, current state assessment and then tactics.

A value tool for an overall corporate strategy, project or even your personal life is to have an **Action Summary Update** report. This document should include each strategy statement and then a list of all actions necessary to achieve that strategy. For each action, list the person responsible, the deadline and a place for regular status updates. We stress that an individual person must be assigned for each action item. Do not fall into the trap of assigning a committee or a position. Accountability is personal. That individual should have the task worked into their performance contract to ensure support and accountability. There may be a large team working on an action item, but one person needs to be accountable for leading and reporting. If everyone is clear on the individuals leading various action items, it is easier to provide support, feedback and to celebrate successes. Success in getting things done is where promotions come from.

The Action Summary Update is a powerful document for boards and senior managers to monitor progress, ensure accountabilities and celebrate successes. We recommend that

boards and executive teams start every meeting with a review of the Action Summary Update. If the people leading the organization are focussed on the strategic priorities, the entire organization will have the same focus.

#### **Stress Test**

You must stress test your strategies and actions against the critical issues discussed earlier. Ask this question: *"if we successfully implement these strategies and actions will they address the critical issues we identified?"* If you are not confident, they will, keep going back and adding or adjusting the strategies and actions until you have the package you need to move forward.

#### **Summary**

Building and implementing a successful strategic plan does not need to be difficult. By using strategic thinking and a simple planning model such as the Strategic Thinking Simplicity model, you will see a dramatic improvement in the results you achieve.

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and tools to help your organization become an  
industry leader at strategic management

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***Simplicity – Clarity – Action - Results***

