

Improving Your Strategic Thinking Skills

In the dictionary, Strategy is defined as a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim. According to Blake Leath, Ph.D., author of *Cultivating the Strategic Mind*, *Strategic Thinking* involves an understanding of the big picture, such as competencies and skills, products and offerings, environment and industry, markets and customers, competitors and substitutes, suppliers and buyers, and the operational implications of all those factors. Creativity, innovation, exploration, questioning, challenging the status quo, testing, proving and disproving are all part of Strategic Thinking. In today's fast-paced world, Strategic Thinking is required to avoid being overrun by competitors. Are you a strategic thinker? Assess yourself below:

Strategic Thinking Assessment

Source: *Cultivating the Strategic Mind*

Answer True or False to the following questions:

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| 1. I thrive in ambiguous roles and situations.
I don't mind not having total control in my environment. | T | F |
| 2. I am a committed life-long learner. I continually seek information and have a natural curiosity that I indulge. | T | F |
| 3. I always seek to apply the knowledge that I gain. | T | F |
| 4. I often "see" organizational opportunities and options that others do not. | T | F |
| 5. My memory is superior to most people I know. | T | F |
| 6. I am able to understand different disciplines at a deep level better than most people I know. | T | F |
| 7. I am highly organized. I am able to manage multiple strategies at the same time. | T | F |
| 8. I have a knack for asking the right questions. | T | F |
| 9. I am seen as being highly competent. | T | F |
| 10. I have a balance between thinking and acting. | T | F |

If you answered False to 7-10 questions, you may not be a strong strategic thinker and this edition of *Talent Point* may help get you started thinking more strategically. If you answered False to 4 to 7 questions, you probably think strategically some of the time and may benefit from some of the tips below. If you answered True to 1-3 questions, you probably are a good strategic thinker and this issue can help you improve your strategic thinking skills even more.



Tom White
General Manager Business Analysis and Enhancement

As an almost 30-year CITGO veteran, Tom White has had plenty of time to hone his strategic thinking skills in various planning roles. He believes everyone practices strategic thinking whether they are aware of it or not, either in their personal lives or at work.

"It's important to begin by defining your ultimate goal and then stepping back and viewing it from the 30,000-foot level. From there you can define various ways to get from where you are to where you want to be, and what obstacles you may encounter along each path. The same concept applies to personal as well as business projects, no matter how large or small. For example, you can think strategically when putting together next month's budget or planning a vacation. Of course, everyone is different. Strategic thinking can range from a well thought out and documented plan to a 'just do it' plan like the Nike commercial suggests," says White.

"Because I've been in business development and planning roles most of my career, I've had lots of practice with strategic thinking. I find that CITGO employees want to know where we're going. Strategic plans generally have a greater chance of success when they are well communicated and the entire CITGO team is pulling in the same direction. It is incredibly satisfying to be a part of this process and seeing CITGO evolve as a result."

White agrees with Walt Disney, who said "The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams." "Dreaming is akin to strategic thinking," White says. "Think what would happen if no one ever dreamed."



Attributes of Great Strategic Thinkers

According to Leath, strategic thinkers have, at their core, the ability to Embodiment or get in the minds of others, to understand how other people think. Additionally, there are three commonalities among strategic thinkers, what he calls a “triune” that surrounds the core. Those three are their Mind (how it operates), their View (of the world and how it operates), and People (and how to engage them).

EMBODIMENT

- They have the ability to understand how people think.

MIND

- Embrace “what if?” questions and thrive in an ambiguous world.
- Have an insatiable quest for knowledge.
- They are not afraid to apply their ideas to real world needs.
- They understand all aspects of their company and its environment.
- They are organized so they can manage multiple strategies simultaneously.

- They are doers, eager to roll up their sleeves and get dirty.
- They are able to recall lessons of the past to avoid history’s mistakes.
- They are able to avoid burnout through self-management and discipline.

VIEW

- They have a broad view and consider multiple issues integratively.
- They have exceptional situational awareness, considering an issue as it relates to all other factors.

PEOPLE

- They are emotionally intelligent and excel at involving others in implementing their ideas.
- They realize that all team members must feel they have a voice in order to engage and invest in their ideas.

Source: Cultivating the Strategic Mind

Strategic Thinking Exercise

Bernd H. Schmitt, author of *Big Think Strategy: How to Leverage Bold Ideas and Leave Small Thinking Behind*, suggests this thinking outside the box and outside the current time frame exercise.

1. Think about the oil industry. Do a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) on a broad socio-political-environmental-industry basis. For example, strengths may be rising oil prices. Of course, that may also be a weakness as customers switch to alternative fuel sources to save money.
2. Brainstorm different futures (10-15 years out) based on the SWOT factors, but base the futures on three different scenarios, one where oil is readily available, one where oil is limited and one where it is non-existent. What do those futures look like? What might be happening? What alternate products might be available to substitute? Now come up with ideas about ways to respond to each different scenario. Think big – the more radical the better.
3. Now think backward. Take the ideas you generated in number two and scale them down to versions of the same ideas that could be implemented today. What would need to be done today to have these ideas become realities in the future?

Recommended Reading

Big Think Strategy: How to Leverage Bold Ideas and Leave Small Thinking Behind
by Bernd H. Schmitt. Harvard Business School Press, 2007.

Cultivating the Strategic Mind: Growing from Leader to Visionary, Creator, and Architect of Strategy
by Blake Leath, Ph.D. Allagi Learning, 2007.

Strategic Thinking, DK Essential Managers series
by Andy Bruce and Ken Langdon. DK, 2000.

The Associated Press Stylebook
by The Associated Press. Basic Books, 2004.

Quotables

“The chains of habit are too light to be felt, until they are too heavy to be broken.”
— Warren Buffet



Tips to Improve Your Strategic Thinking Skills

1. Read everything you can: Newspapers, industry publications, competitors websites, CITGO's website. The more information you have, the more fuel you have for ideas.
2. Keep an idea journal. If you keep a small notebook with you, you can always jot down ideas as you think of them. If you have a great idea that you don't write down, it's unlikely you'll think of it again.
3. Play the what-if game. What if there is a recession? What if gas-fueled cars become obsolete? You can do this in all areas of your life to improve your thinking skills.
4. Encourage brainstorming sessions with team members. Encourage their ideas. Write them down. Make it fun. Make sure to listen.
5. Never assume you have everything right. Review and update decisions regularly.

To complete the quiz over this issue of the Talent Point and be entered into a drawing, [click here!](#)

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If you work at any other CITGO location, please e-mail CITGO Training & Development (trandev@citgo.com).