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ISSN 977-1837-97901-2



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WHAT IS BEING STRATEGIC?

We live in a time of accelerating change in the global landscape. The business arena is changing fast, and the pace of change is quickening. The pressure to sustain a flourishing business in a wildly chaotic and frantic marketplace falls on the individual leader, writes **Stephen and Chutisa Bowman**.

To thrive consistently over the long haul requires discipline and a reliable way for dealing with new opportunities and unforeseen adversities. The notion that a strategic plan will assist in this fast paced environment is quickly losing momentum. Being strategic, however, has become the new leadership trait that is allowing organisations to outstrip others.

Being strategic matters, now more than ever. Regardless of your title or job function, you must develop the capacity to be strategic. Looking at things from a different viewpoint or new perspective can expose different possibilities and reveal innovative strategic advantage as well as risk and threat. When you master the skill and the ability to be strategic you will be able to stay ahead of emerging opportunities, respond quickly to unexpected threats, and make timely decisions. And you'll be on the creative edge of the possibilities instead of on the solution of the problem. People who are not choosing to develop the competency to be strategic run the risk of their organisations becoming laggards.

Today, organisational leaders are required to consciously deal with not just the speed of change but also with complexity, chaos, uncertainty, and paradox. Detecting changes in the external environment on a continual basis and knowing what these changes mean to your organisation and your communities, and what needs to be

done about them, is what we call being strategic. It takes robust strategic awareness to effectively deal with the complexity and decipher the ambiguity to identify the trends and the new arrangements that are emerging. It is this robust strategic awareness that allows you to perceive and know where the world is going so that you can put a strategy in place to handle the impending hazards and the potential opportunities.

Being strategic is a process of 'being' rather than 'doing'. That is you must see strategy as a way of 'being' rather than as a task to be accomplished. When you are 'being strategic', you have awareness of everything that goes on around you without projection, expectation, conclusion or judgment. It is a state of flexible awareness, with no fixed points of view. You will be able to have total awareness of everything but not from a place of superiority. With awareness, you can know the potential future, you can perceive the possibilities, you can perceive the limitations and you can see everything that's going to happen.

Strategy is about shaping the future. The future arises from a constant stream of actions, choices, decisions, and strategies that have to be made in the present with as much awareness, foresight, skill, astuteness, and wisdom possible. For business leaders to truly be strategic, they must develop their strategic awareness capacity. Strategic

awareness is a space where new ideas and innovation are constantly generated from a heightened non-contextual awareness (an awareness that is not trapped in the existing context). With this strategic awareness, leaders operate beyond the goal of competing to actively seize new and different possibilities. They live in the question and act on the possibility of things. They make the improbable or the seemingly impossible come about by bringing awareness and resources to things that lie beyond business-as-usual. This enhances the potentiality and probability of success enormously, ensuring that prospects and possibilities get generated into reality.

Here are 5 tips for cultivating the skill and ability to be strategic:

1. Expand your awareness. The key to being strategic is 'awareness'. Awareness is your intrinsic faculty and inner resource; however, for most people it has been concealed and undeveloped. They are not aware that it is possible to actually experience this state. This is truly possible—except you have to be willing to change. It takes the willingness to be aware of everything, which allows you to perceive different possibilities. It also requires you to develop clarity of vision to see beyond this contextual reality. If you have the awareness to know what is happening and where you are going, you will be able to generate something different. You will be more likely to see



trends outside your industry that could affect the positioning of your business, and generate new growth opportunities. Without the willingness to be aware of everything, you may be unaware of new opportunities or unable to appropriately perceive critical risks.

2. Be open and intensely curious about everything you encounter, and be persistent and relentless in your search for insight, inspirations and ideas. Insatiable curiosity is the key to being strategic. Seek to become aware of the boundaries that define conventional practices, predictable outlines, conformist behaviours, and business-as-usual approaches — and then deliberately step beyond them.

You must not allow yourself to operate within the limitations of this reality or be bound by what is. Do not be dictated to by this reality where everything is bound by context.

3. Cultivate the courage to stand alone, even in the face of unfavourable consequences and be willing to be a nonconformist. This involves a shift in the way you function in the world and the way you perceive and create your reality. You have to be willing to be indefinable and willing to be receptive, yielding, open and naturally connected to life, spirit and all that is. Be willing to be controversial.

4. Keeping an eye on the big picture. A key ingredient in 'keeping an eye on the big picture' is the willingness to let go of a fixed position and all of the predictability and constancy involved in that fixed position. A fixed position is the limitation that keeps you from seeing other possibilities. You won't see other possibilities because you have shut them out of your awareness with your point of view. But since the big picture keeps changing, you must cultivate an ability to be aware of future trends



“What if, and I know this sounds kooky, we communicated with the employees.”

and how these trends may affect your business. Rather than closing your eyes to forewarning indications and hoping that things don't change too much, you must be willing to break with your own successful conventional practices and discover different ways of seeing the world. If you have these skills and attitude you will be able to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. You can respond instantaneously to fast changing business demands and you will be ready for anything.

5. Be open to change. Commit yourself to change in every aspect of your life and give up defining yourself in any way, shape, or form. Be willing to stay open to the new, the unfamiliar, and the unknown. Choose to be ever aware and mindful, ready to shift strategy and tactics as the situation requires. Most vital, you must cultivate the ability to change and transform on a dime. The ability to change and transform on a dime comes from the capacity to adapt as needed and to create

flexible structures that are appropriate and suitable for that moment. You cannot take shifts in stride if they become attached to a fixed strategic direction or predetermined outcome.

Once you have put these practices into operation, then you are most likely ready to have a strategic plan. The strategic plan then becomes a tool to assist based on your ever growing strategic awareness, and will change as your awareness changes. TGR

*Chutisa and Steven Bowman are internationally renowned advisors on strategy, risk, leadership, governance and creating a culture of strategic awareness at Board and senior executive levels. Together, they have authored *Leading from the Edge of Possibilities* and *No More Business As Usual*. Connect with them on *No More Business As Usual* and *Pragmatic Futurist Blog*.*

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