

# The Best Strategic Thinkers – 5 Sure Characteristics

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When it comes to determining the best strategic thinkers to invite into strategic planning efforts, the easy and frequent decision is rattling off a list of people based on titles and positions in an organization or team. There's a lot more to being a strong strategic thinker, however, than one's organizational position. Consider looking for these five characteristics among strategic planning participants. The best strategic thinkers should be:

## 1. Open to valuable perspectives from multiple sources

Some elements of strong strategic thinking can certainly be enhanced by seniority. Importantly though, great strategic thinking is about the right combination of three diverse perspectives: front-line organizational experience, broad functional knowledge, and creative energy. These three mindsets are important because each will process and develop strategic perspectives in different ways.

People with front-line experience help frame and ground business issues. Those with functional knowledge of key business processes understand important capabilities. Creative people see and address opportunities in unconventional ways.

Any of these groups, working by themselves, will create a strategic direction lacking in some essential way. Working together, there's the potential for game-changing moves.

Some people have one of these perspectives; others have two or all three. No matter how many one has, the more open someone is to considering perspectives he or she doesn't possess, the stronger their strategic thinking skills.

## 2. Adept at incorporating both logic and emotion into their thinking

While there's often an organizational premium placed on left brain thinking – the quantitative, analytical, logical processing that moves toward definitive answers – strong strategic thinkers need both a left brain and a right brain orientation. Right brain thinking incorporates a qualitative, connecting, and a more abstract view of market threats and opportunities.

Rarely do important organizational and market changes succeed or fail solely through an analytical and logic-based business case. Hard numbers may win the day for selling new ideas in the executive suite, but when it comes to successful implementation, emotions such as fear, hope, passion, and frustration are vital in moving people to embrace major change.

If a strategic thinking team only depends on logic and does not incorporate emotion, the strategy it develops will be lacking a vital component.

## 3. Comfortable thinking in ways extending beyond today's reality

You can't afford to have people masquerading as strategic thinkers who cannot think outside today's reality. Solid strategic thinkers have to be able to free themselves from today to consider multiple possibilities for how your organization's course may play out in the future.

But that's only half the story.

When trying to view a current situation dramatically differently, people need to be able to think in ways that have only loose connections to what today actually looks like. Effective strategic planning exercises force thinking along new paths and incorporate unexpected twists and thinking detours. This SHOULD make people uncomfortable with their standard ways of

thinking. A strong strategic thinker is fine with that. A strategic thinking wannabe won't be able to go along for the unexpected ride. It's vital to hone a strategic team's openness to what may today seem impossible or preposterous; that's where tomorrow's innovation will likely originate.

#### **4. Constantly questioning both the familiar and the new**

Many people are fine questioning what they don't support.

As a result, you have people clamoring for change who are excited to question everything about the status quo. People who are completely comfortable with just the way things are right now suddenly discover their questioning mojos when the possibility of dramatic change rears its head.

The best strategic thinkers question yesterday, today, tomorrow, and everything in the future. Additionally, the more they explore strategic options, the more new questions they generate. Strategic thinking is about exploration. If it's fruitful exploration, the best strategic thinkers are okay with the new strategic paths they uncover being laden with new questions.

#### **5. Open to not answering or resolving every strategic issue**

This characteristic goes hand in hand with the previous one about constantly questioning. While successful executives are largely rewarded for moving things to successful resolution – and that's vital for business performance – effective strategic thinkers do have to be able to moderate any tendencies to prematurely resolve strategic issues.

Even successful strategic thinking cannot be expected to answer everything. The future is never completely certain. Especially now, it's imperative for organizations to be nimble enough to adapt to changing market conditions. That means it can be important to leave certain strategic options open for future consideration. An adept strategic thinker isn't rattled by that possibility.

#### **How does your team stack up against the best strategic thinkers?**

Based on these five characteristics, does your strategic planning team stack up well against the best strategic thinkers? If not, it's time to make some adjustments to ensure you get the most effective strategic plan.

And while you're evaluating your team, it's the right time to do a self-evaluation and ask yourself how YOU are doing as a strategic thinker. If you have gaps in your own strategic thinking approach, consider adding new people to your strategic planning team to shore up where your own skills are lacking.