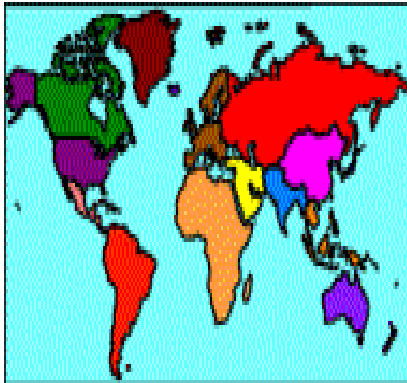


## Strategic Thinking: Psychological Concepts That Can Fine-Tune Your 'Leadership GPS'

By Janice A. Armstrong M.A.



You decide that you are going to take a road trip with your family. You will travel to Canada, a place where you have never been. You will rely on the Global Positioning System (GPS) in your vehicle to get you and your family where you need to go. Being solely dependent on this tool to get you there is a trustworthy act that will contribute to, what you hope will be, a successful trip. These are your thoughts that you will implement into action in order to take the trip.

Now take this scenario and apply it to organizations and leaders as change agents for organizations. The ability to think strategically has long been considered a requirement of top management and leaders<sup>1</sup>. As a leader who is determined to make change in the organization, you seek resources and tools that will assist with implementing the vision that you have for the unit, department, and organization. Once you have thought about these resources, whether tangible, suggested, or currently unavailable, you determine how they can work in order for you to make change successful in your organization.

This article focuses on the aspects of strategic thinking, which is the process of determining appropriate strategies prior to planning. The mind is a powerful tool that can assist with our abilities to develop ideas and visualize how they can be implemented. Strategic thinking is an immensely complex process that involves the most sophisticated, subtle, and subconscious

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<sup>1</sup> Goldman, E.F. (2008). The Power of Work Experiences: Characteristics Critical to Developing Expertise in Strategic Thinking. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 19(3), p. 217.

elements of human thinking<sup>2</sup>. The information provided in this article will help you decide the psychological concepts that can guide strategic thought as the leader. As you read, self-reflect in order to determine if your 'Leadership GPS' for change is fine-tuned enough for success.

### **Cognitive Mapping**

A cognitive map is a mental image that an organism uses to navigate through a familiar environment. Edward Tolman, who developed a concept called cognitive mapping, further discovered that the mapping process is the innate ability that allows us to automatically map our routes in our head and subconsciously follow the directions<sup>3</sup>. We can envision direction without actually implementing the action until the time warrants it.

Strategic thinking is the precursor to any strategy planning session. It begins with the exploration of the environment that results in emerging themes, patterns and opportunities. It gives us present insight (what was current desire to do) for foresight (what we envision we will do)<sup>4</sup>. This skill of cognitive mapping, along with strategic thought, can be used when determining the direction of your organization. The ability to visualize the potential progress of the organization can help the leader to develop a strategy of how to get there. Strategic thinking will allow you to develop a global positioning mindset in your organization, one that will help you navigate your way to a successful future<sup>5</sup>. Any opportunity that requires you to think about a current goal or mission should also be an opportunity for you to think about the future<sup>6</sup>.

### **Choosing a Route**

Gestalt is a discipline in psychology that looks at the bigger picture (or figures) when using cognitive thought and reasoning. The rule of thumb with Gestalt psychology is that "the whole

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<sup>2</sup> Mintzberg, H. (1994b). Planning and strategy. In *The rise and fall of strategic planning: Reconceiving roles for planning, plans, planners* (pp. 1-34). New York: Free Press.

<sup>3</sup> Zimbardo, P.G., Johnson, R.L., & Weber, A.L. (2006). *Psychology: Core Concepts*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Allyn and Bacon, p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders, T.I. (1998). *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity, and Change*. New York: The Free Press, p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> Sanders, T.I. (1998). *Strategic Thinking and the New Science: Planning in the Midst of Chaos, Complexity, and Change*. New York: The Free Press, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Loeb, M. & Kindel, S. (1999). *Leadership for Dummies*. Hoboken: Wiley Publishing, Inc., p. 135.

[picture] is greater than the sum of its individual parts"<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, at the basic level of the strategic development process, strategic thinking is simply about focusing on the whole, rather than the part<sup>8</sup>. It may take more than the individual pieces of the organizational puzzle to create the picture of change that the leader envisions. There may be points on your leadership GPS that exist beyond your initial thought strategies. Our natural decision for direction would be that of a more direct approach, one of lesser steps with greater impact. Gestalt psychology identifies this concept as the law of continuity, where we prefer continuous, direct approaches as opposed to alternatives, more indirect options.

Returning to the Canadian trip example: once you have mapped out a strategy for travel, you are now seeing the bigger picture that includes many options. Any of them may prove useful as you travel toward the Canadian border, with several options as to which way to go. Currently the most direct route seems the best; however, you have created alternative options as well. When developing a change strategy for your organization, think about the key players in your strategy and what is necessary to promote organizational change. Envision the most direct strategy and remain equipped with potential changes of that thought, identifying which processes are most important to meeting the organization's needs. Maintaining its energies and resources is paramount in order to execute change<sup>9</sup>. This may require utilizing less direct options to gain the greater opportunities for change.

### **Recalculating: Trial and Error**

Strategic responses tend to evolve from a process of experimentation, trial and error. As you attempt to work thinking into planning, continue to use visualization to determine what may work. Additionally, begin to implement parts of that vision into strategic reality to reveal what may not work as well. What if the route we chose was not the correct one? What happens when the original idea doesn't work? How do we redirect our options so that it works for us?

The psychological concept of trial-and-error learning, discovered by Edward Thorndike, involves the process of learning via several trials and correcting the errors along the way in order to

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<sup>7</sup> Zimbardo, P.G., Johnson, R.L., & Weber, A.L. (2006). *Psychology: Core Concepts*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Allyn and Bacon, p. 213.

<sup>8</sup> West, A. (2008). Being strategic in HE management. *Perspectives*, 12(3), p. 73.

<sup>9</sup> deKluyver, C.A. & Pearce, J.A. (2009). *Strategy: A View from the Top*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc, p. 33.

problem solve<sup>10</sup>. The learning process provides the potential to explore and solve complex organizational problems, which includes developing an effective business strategy<sup>11</sup>. Sometimes it may take situations of trial and error for leaders to determine what strategy will work best for change. This allows the leader to realize that strategic thinking is not concrete, not stable, and is potentially ever changing.

The cyclical approach to strategic thinking includes: 1) having a thought, 2) envisioning how the strategy would work, 3) giving it a try, and 4a) determining if it will work as a plan or 4b) reworking the strategic option because it did not work initially. Gradually, on succeeding trials, erroneous responses are eliminated and effective responses are “stamped in”. Thorndike called this the law of effect<sup>12</sup>. Options 4a and 4b may occur repetitively until a final plan of action is put into place<sup>13</sup>.

### **Finalizing the Trip**

Now that you are well on your way in the strategic thought process, as previously mentioned, you can follow the route to determining an initial plan. Determine the best options to take and what will bring about successful change in your organization. Experience performing the work of corporate strategic planning has proved beneficial for change<sup>14</sup>. As you finalize your trip, determine what resources and team members are necessary to help make the vision of the strategic thought turn into the actions of the strategic plan. As you continue to determine your options for strategy, keep in mind that your idea for a plan may change since the strategic thinking process can potentially change. A leader and change agent must be flexible enough to make changes to the bigger picture, especially if it works in the best interest of the organization. The leader must prepare for potential roadblocks that will take the leader’s ideas off course. However, this change of thought should not affect the bigger picture, which is the plan for

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<sup>10</sup> Zimbardo, P.G., Johnson, R.L., & Weber, A.L. (2006). *Psychology: Core Concepts*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Allyn and Bacon, p. 237.

<sup>11</sup> Oliver, J. (2008). Action learning enabled strategy making. *Action Learning: Research and Practice*, 5(2), p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Zimbardo, P.G., Johnson, R.L., & Weber, A.L. (2006). *Psychology: Core Concepts*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. New York: Allyn and Bacon, p. 236.

<sup>13</sup> Heracleous, L. (1998). Strategic thinking or strategic planning? *Long Range Planning*, 31(3), 481-487.

<sup>14</sup> Goldman, E.F. (2008). The Power of Work Experiences: Characteristics Critical to Developing Expertise in Strategic Thinking. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, 19(3), p. 218.

organizational change. The destination still remains regardless of the changes that occur in the midst of travel.

Conclusion:

In order to fine-tune your Leadership GPS, a leader should:

- 1) envision the direction in which the organization should go
- 2) through cognitive mapping, determine how the vision will affect the organization globally
- 3) identify the resources necessary to maintain the desired direction
- 4) with trial and error learning, work to problem solve issues that affect road-blocks
- 5) finalize the appropriate, successful route that will a) benefit the organization and b) take the strategic process to the levels of planning and implementation.

Also, leaders must be mindful that strategies change with time. Just as one needs to update their GPS with the necessary software, the leader or leadership team must realize that potential changes may occur and be diligent with providing updates as that strategic process progresses. In your travel for change, depend on your leadership GPS to guide your way to corporate change that is beneficial.

Stay aware of the potential roadblocks, bumps in the road, and potholes that can potentially affect your direct route. Don't be afraid to lose your way sometimes; getting back on track is most important. Sometimes the path may be changed altogether. Where you, as the leader, may feel inclined to follow one particular path, the strategic map offers a greater picture with multiple directional options. Be willing to try different ways to approach the strategy by being open to change, being open-minded and keeping your strategic options open. No matter the thoughts developed, the path chosen or the plan created, the outcome is for sustainable corporate change.

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