

Improve How You Learn

Strategic Thinking

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Overview

In this Module you will be taken through the 10 steps to effective learning as they apply to your desire to improve the way you learn **Strategic Thinking**. Steps 1 to 3 are designed to increase your **motivation**. The remaining steps are designed to help you **succeed** in achieving your learning goals.

1. Be clear about what it is you want to learn

This step helps you clarify and define exactly what it is you are trying to learn and to what level of competence

2. Be clear about why you want to learn

This step helps you fully understand your reasons and the likely benefits to you of improving how you learn Strategic Thinking.

3. Envision the end-point

This step helps you imagine and visualise as concretely as possible having succeeded in achieving your learning goals.

4. Create learning targets

This step helps you formulate your learning goals in a practical way.

5. Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

This step introduces you to the different approaches to learning that you can adopt (learning styles) and the different kinds of learning involved in learning to improve your learning.

6. Explore Learning Tools, Tactics, and Techniques

This step sets out the pros and cons of different methods of learning available to improve your **Strategic Thinking**. It introduces you to 10 powerful Learning Tools, Tactics and Techniques you can use to improve the way you learn. The exercises will help to *think* and deepen your understanding of the area you want to improve and actually suggests specific tasks you can *do* at your computer and away from it (in your work and life environment), to dramatically improve your capability.

7. Create a Personal Learning Plan

This step introduces you to a structured planning process to help ensure that you are clear about what you want to do and by when. The plan promotes commitment and the monitoring of progress.

8. Get going

This step helps you with the practicalities of starting to carry out your plan.

9. Keep going

This step helps you with the practicalities of keeping going especially in the face of disappointment, frustration, setbacks and pressure from other sources.

10. Celebrate success

This step encourages you to mark not only completion of the plan but key stages along the way. The message is simple. Give yourself the treat you promised yourself!

1 Be clear about what it is you want to learn



Possible Objectives.

Tick the ones most appropriate to you.

I want to understand what strategic thinking is	
I want to be more strategic in the way I think and act	

I want to be able to participate in strategy discussions at work	
I want to be strategic in the decisions I make about my personal life; where I live, how I spend my money, my health.	
I want to be strategic about my career planning	
I want to understand strategic alliances	
I want to be strategic in general and not just reactive	
Are there other aspects of your Strategic Thinking you wish to improve?	

Now we need to be clear. What exactly is strategic thinking?

Does your employer already have a definition of strategic thinking? For example, in a management competency model or framework.

If so, insert the definition here

Are there Positive and Negative Behaviour Indicators to support the definition of strategic thinking?

If so, copy then into the box below

My employer's Indicators for strategic thinking	
Positive Indicators	Negative Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

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If you do not have access to a company definition of strategic thinking you can do a number of things. First look up a definition of strategy in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic>

It may help to look at the difference between strategic thinking and strategic planning http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_thinking

Insert the definition here
Or alternatively consider using this one
Strategic thinking is the ability to routinely take the longer-term view and see the bigger picture, leading to examination of options, before deciding on action to be taken

Now you need to write your own Positive and Negative Behaviour Indicators. They are very important as they give meaning and concreteness to the definition and personalise it to your needs.

Guidance on writing personal Positive and Negative Indicators is provided in [10 Steps to Improve Your Learning](#)

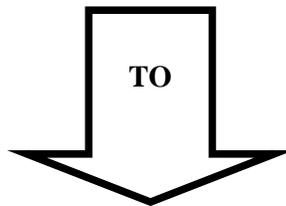
Some examples are provided below to get you started. Only use them if you think they apply to you.

Positive and Negative Indicators for Strategic thinking	
Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thinks about the bigger picture• Thinks beyond immediate needs• Looks at issues from different perspectives• Actively considers alternatives• Looks to the longer term• Appreciates the wider business context	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Looks for short term solutions• Considers immediate impact only• Agues the same case even when circumstances have changed• Does not consider viewpoints or experience of others

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sees wider implications of proposed actions• Sees opportunities <u>and</u> evaluates them• Balances long term benefits against short term needs• Focuses on overall impact• Focuses on what is important in the longer term	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sees the future solely in terms of the past or the present• Reacts to immediate rather than long range problems• Tries to decide based solely on past experience• Focuses on the most pressing task• Focuses on what is urgent in the short term
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Re-phrase your overall goals in terms of the change you would like to see in yourself by moving from negative indicators towards positive indicators.

I would like to change from



2 Be clear about why you want to improve your Strategic Thinking

Why do you wish to improve your strategic thinking? Here are some common reasons.

Select the three that most apply to you

- Increased confidence at work
- Greater self esteem
- Admiration/respect from others
- Overcoming frustration
- Holding back my career
- Holding back my job performance
- I am getting things wrong
- I feel I don't understand things
- I have been told by my colleagues I need to improve
- I have been told by my boss I need to improve
- I just feel I want/need to improve



3 Envision the end-point

This is a crucial stage, which is often missed.

Not envisioning the end-point can deprive you of early pleasure of clear progress and it can also undermine weaken your motivation when the going gets tough.

Imagine you have succeeded in your overall aim.

First of all what is the aim?

Think about these questions

- Picture yourself performing at the desired level.
- Where will this be?
- Who will be involved?
- Exactly what would you be doing, what would you be saying
- What will others be doing and saying?
- How will you feel?



If it is enough to merely imagine the end-point, that's fine. If you can right it down then do so.

Where and when?	
Who else is involved?	
What are you doing/saying?	
What are others doing/saying?	
How will you feel?	

One effect of envisioning the end point in as much practical detail as possible is that it helps to energise you, to get going and keep going, and to maintain effort especially in the face of set-backs and difficulties.

Keep a record and keep it where you will see it regularly. Add images and graphics. Personalise it.



Make yourself a Change Shield

Another more concrete way to envision the end-point is to make yourself a shield of change.

If you are that way inclined draw a picture of yourself being strategic. Be creative, have fun with it. Try and capture the changes you want to see in yourself.

Create a Change Shield for yourself or better still with friends or colleagues at work. For guidance see [10 Steps to Improve Your Learning](#)



4 Create learning targets

Learning targets are derived from the overall objectives and create



- Greater precision

- A sense of being in control and managing the process
- The ability to monitor your own progress
- The satisfaction of seeing progress
- Knowing when you have arrived

I will know that I have improved from one level to the next because of
Things I know
Things I can say or do
How I will feel
I know I will be making progress if...



5 Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed

Learning styles

In order to learn well you need to

- Have varied experiences and plenty of them
- Review and reflect on that experience
- Draw lessons and insights from the experience
- Plan to gain new experiences that result in improved performance

Most of us have strong preferences for one or more of four styles of learning. From your knowledge of yourself, do you know which your preferred learning styles are?

Activist	This is me Not really sure No idea
Reflector	This is me Not really sure No idea
Pragmatist	This is me Not really sure No idea
Theorist	This is me Not really sure No idea

Different kinds of learning

It is by understanding that different kinds of learning are involved in improving persuasion and influencing that appropriate tools tactic and process can be consciously adopted to improve the power of how you learn.

The types of learning involved in improving your **Strategic Thinking** are

Practical Skills requiring practice and feedback to get right
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prepare strategic position in advance of a meeting/encounter• Developing strategic argument in meetings• Developing strategic argument in writing
Feelings, attitudes you need to get right
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A positive approach to things outside your realm of experience• Being curious about the wider context• Taking your head out of the 'operational bucket'
Understanding of concepts and theory

- The nature of strategic thinking (defined by the Positive and Negative Indicators)
- Different concepts of strategic thinking
- Models of strategic thinking, showing strategy as a cyclical process
- Understand why it is important to be strategic

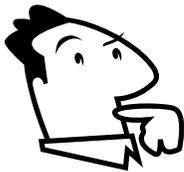
Knowledge of Facts

- Those relevant to the argument
- Current affairs awareness
- Background on the organisation or industry within which you work

It is by understanding that different kinds of learning are involved in improving strategic thinking that appropriate tools tactic and process can be consciously adopted to improve how you learn to improve your strategic thinking.

6 Explore tactics, tools, and techniques for learning Strategic Thinking

You should choose according to



- Your preferred learning styles
- Feasibility
- Time available
- Cost implications
- Accessibility

Ten things you can do to improve how you learn Strategic Thinking.

1. Brainstorm the concept: strategic thinking



Spend a few minutes writing down words and short phrases that come to mind in response to these questions.

What are the potential benefits of being strategic?

Here are some additional thoughts

- All the facts, past, present and future are taken into consideration when making decisions today
- Preparing for the future
- Provides flexibility within a framework.
- Long-term thinking creates a Vision
- Cohesive integrated plan
- Clarifies targets and goals
- Unifies people around a common vision/goal

What are the consequences of failing to be strategic?

Here are some additional thoughts

- Key opportunities can be missed because a short-term view is taken
- Ad hoc planning
- 'Not seeing the wood for the trees'
- Getting lost in the detail
- Parts of an organisation (or your personal life) are in conflict
- Risk of duplication and re-inventing the wheel
- Everyone is doing their own thing, going in different directions

What are the differences between being tactical and being strategic?

Here are some additional thoughts on tactical thinking

- Thinking well on your feet
- Reacting well
- Focus on the immediate, the here and now
- Dealing with what is urgent
- Crisis management
- Fire fighting

Here are some additional thoughts on strategic thinking

- Looking at the big picture
- Thinking through all the implications of a challenge
- A clear path or plan
- Focus on direction
- Being proactive
- Dealing with what is important

2. Observing, shadowing, visiting



Identify people in your organisation who you think are already good at strategic thinking. If possible select two or three.

Watch what they do. Notice what they say.

At the time or shortly after write down what you think it is they do that makes them strategic. Write down exact examples. She said... He did...

Apply the same process to people you see and hear on the radio or on TV.

If you cannot observe them in the normal course of your work ask for opportunities to shadow, especially in contexts where their strategic behaviour is likely to be needed, e.g. certain planning meetings or policy review meetings.

Ask to go on visits to partners, suppliers or alliance members where strategic issues are more likely to be dealt with.

3. Ask and seek explanations



Asking and seeking explanations is one of the most powerful yet under-utilised forms of personal learning and development.

Having identified a number of colleagues, including people who are higher in the hierarchy, ask for half an hour of their time, explain your reasons, and ask them the following questions:

- What do you understand by the term strategic thinking?
- Give me some examples.
- What is the difference between strategic and tactical? Can you give me examples of what you mean?
- What do you personally do to ensure that you are being strategic?
- How do you keep abreast of current affairs, industry trends, what is going on generally?

Compare the answers from the different people and your own brainstormed thoughts

4. Modelling



Having observed and questioned people whom you regard as good at strategic thinking set yourself small goals to emulate or copy their behaviour. It will not always work at first. Be modest with your goals but gradually you will become more confident, especially if you also do some of the exercises below. You could consider role-playing at home or in another supportive or safe contexts before you go for real. It is only by doing it that you will improve.

5. Projects, syndicate work, getting involved



There is no substitute for experience when you are trying to develop your strategic thinking. If your work does not offer rich opportunities for strategic thinking then seek projects and assignments that allow you to get involved with people from other contexts, departments or even companies. Social groups like sports clubs or alumni bodies also require strategic input. You could practise there first. Policy-formulation and long term planning tasks, especially if multi-functional, multi-disciplinary or cross-company in focus will provide rich learning opportunities.

6. Form or join alliances and networks or support groups



Form your own networks of people with similar needs/interests to your

own, especially in terms of seeking to improve strategic thinking. If possible widen the network to people outside the organisation. In this you will be exposed to completely different viewpoints and perspectives. The networks can be people-based or electronic. See [Learning From Networks](#)

7. Read and listen regularly to current affairs bulletins



Read free digests of business and current affairs such as that provided by www.economist.com and many newspapers, e.g. www.ft.com. Subscribe (usually free) to e-mail alert services.

Listen to business and political news bulletins routinely. It is difficult to be strategic in your thinking if you are not routinely exposed to the stimulation of newspapers, trade journals (paper or electronic) or news broadcasts.

Keep a log of the key issues that arise that impact on you and your work/industry/field of interest.

8. Discuss and summarise strategic issues regularly



Following a discussion that you have been involved in, write down a summary of the strategic issues that were raised. Also write down the strategic implications of what was actually discussed and/or decided. Show your list to someone you trust and seek feedback. Do this several times until you feel more confident. Instead of leaving it until after the meeting, begin to raise the points in the meeting itself.

9. Find yourself a mentor



Mentoring is an excellent way to improve strategic thinking, especially if the mentor especially if the mentor is at a higher level, with more experience, in the organisation or in another organisation. The mentor will encourage you to seek and take different perspectives, and will challenge you to think about the assumptions that you consciously or unconsciously make and which as a result influence your interpretations and actions.

10. Search the Internet



The Internet is ideally suited to finding and reading about strategic issues and trends that are right up to date, usually backed by data and research evidence.

It also a good way to find organisations that have relevant interests.

Use well-known search engines such as <http://www.google.ie/> and try putting the following phrases into the search box:

“Industry implications AND (insert words for your industry)”
“Global trends AND (insert words for your industry)”
“Strategic issues AND (insert words for your industry)”

Other good phrases are:

“National, international, global trends”

Visits to the web sites of major media organisations such as not only give current information but also have searchable archives.

BBC <http://news.bbc.co.uk/>

ITN <http://www.itn.co.uk/>

CNN <http://www.cnn.com/>

Reuters <http://today.reuters.com/news/home.aspx>

SkyNews <http://news.sky.com/skynews/home>

Useful sites are

The Economist <http://www.economist.com/index.html>

US Library of Congress <http://www.loc.gov/index.html>

British Library <http://www.bl.uk/>



Create a Personal Learning Contract to improve your learning of Strategic Thinking

Your personal learning contract is a statement of commitment to yourself and is also a means to monitoring progress.



The contract can be as detailed and as structured as you see fit (this varies greatly from person to person) but it should at least contain statements of

Why do you want to improve how you learn Strategic Thinking?		
Why?		
The level you are starting out at (as precisely as possible)		
The level you wish to achieve (as precisely as possible)		
The specific actions you are going to take including the tools, tactics and techniques you are going to use		
This week		
Next week		
By the end of month one		
Month two		
Month three		
Month six		
Beyond six months		

How you will know you are making progress?

How you will know you have succeeded?

Keep a record and look at it from time to time. If you can involve others in your commitment you will increase your chances of success.

8 Get going



If you have got this far you are already going, but the critical thing is to take action that enables you to feel you are actually improving. There are several ways to do this.

- Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen in a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim.
- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Aim for early success. It reduces the risk of giving up early on.
- Remind yourself of the expected benefits and potential rewards. Look back at your envisioning exercise or your Change Shield.

9 Keep going



Getting going is hard enough, but to keep going is often harder still.

- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Recognise that guilt and anxiety about progress is inevitable
- Re-adjust goals and timescales to be more realistic in the light of experience.

- List early warning signs that may block you progress and think about responses that would help

Danger signs	Responses
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Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen for a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim

Identify your personal reinforcers that will help you to keep going regardless of

- Set-backs
- Disappointments
- Frustrations
- Unexpected problems

What might they be?

- Pressures from other sources

What might they be?

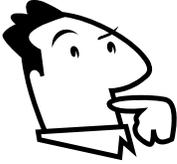
Reinforcers are REWARDS you can give yourself (treats) that you would not otherwise have had but for the progress you have made. They include a meal out, chocolates, an outing, champagne, a weekend away, etc or whatever takes your fancy.

Equally reinforcers can be PUNISHMENT that you inflict on yourself for lack of progress that you had committed to. This can be denial of the promised treats or something stronger like paying out to a charity. On balance rewards work better than punishments.

What support do I need and what can I put in place?

My REINFORCERS are

10 Celebrate success



Finally don't forget to mark the achievement of having moved from one level of performance to another. It is always a satisfying feeling to know that you have done it, but there is also the intrinsic satisfaction of performing at a higher level than previously.

Some forms of learning are acknowledged through accreditation and certificates, but vast amounts of personal learning and growth are not recognised in this way. Much of the most important learning (tolerance and understanding, effective parenting, leadership, teamwork) is not recognised in this way.

Try to find ways of expressing the pleasure of the learning you have achieved.

If I achieve my overall goals my overall REWARD will be

Ultimately, the best way is simply to think and act in new ways and feel the benefit for you and for others, and then commit yourself to further learning.