

# ***Development Suggestions for Strategic Thinking***

## **Suggested Readings**

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author/Publisher</b>
Enlightened Leadership	Oakley, Ed and Doug Krug/ 1991/ Simon & Schuster
Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change	William Bridges / 2003 / Perseus Publishing
Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap....and Others Don't	Jim Collins/ 2001/ Harper Business
Reframing Organization: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership	Bolman, Lee G. and Terrence E. Deal/ 2003/ Jossey-Bass
Govleaders.org	<a href="http://govleaders.org/index.html">http://govleaders.org/index.html</a>

## **Activities**

### **→Leading Strategically**

#### **Get regular updates on organizational changes.**

Even if you discover a change that won't impact you within the next few months, think how it may eventually affect your job or work unit, and start planning how to minimize any potential negative repercussions from the change.

**Conduct a Gap Analysis** to help you determine where you want to be in the future, how that picture is different from where you are now, and how to get there.

**Track the impact on your organization when implementing a new system or process.** Consider the following questions:

- Who will be involved in tracking the systems impact?
- What resources, training, or other support will they need?
- Who are the best sources of information on the systems impacts?
- How can I include those who already resist the change?
- How will coordination and communication be managed?
- What method of tracking will be used?
- How will I develop solutions to issues and follow through on actions?

**Keep your mission in your messages.**

Review recent memos, presentations, or e-mail messages that you have responded to or shared with others. How often does your message reinforce the mission and goals of the agency? Every communication opportunity is an opportunity to reinforce the agency's strategy and objectives. Make it a goal to include a mission reinforcement statement in every communication that goes to others.

**Involve your management team.**

A management team must have a good understanding of the organizational strategies outlined by senior leaders before they can develop action plans. Take every opportunity to discuss the organization's strategies and immediate goals with your management team. Ask them to explicitly link the planned activities of their units to the larger strategy of your organization.

**Provide timely guidance.**

Discuss the impact of strategic changes, which impact your own work group as soon as possible after the changes have been communicated to you. Don't wait until things are set in stone before you begin discussing what needs to be done, and how to go about doing it in your own organization.

**Align your actions with the vision.**

Your duties should take place within the context of a well-defined strategy that is aligned with the vision of the organization. Ensure that you have a clear understanding of your organizational strategies, and be sure to set aside time for establishing specific goals and objectives within the context of that strategy. Generate a list of major goals and objectives you would like to accomplish in the next year and identify the intermediate objectives you will have to meet to attain the major goals.

**Create a matrix that helps you determine the degree to which projects and/or key areas align with your organization's strategies.** Use the following process:

- a. List the projects or key areas in the left column of the matrix.
- b. List your organization's strategic initiatives across the top of the matrix.
- c. Use a pre-determined rating scale (e.g., +/-, high to low, 1 to 5) and rate the degree of alignment and relation of the projects/key areas to the initiatives.
- d. Identify the projects/key areas that are directly aligned and support each initiative, those that are somewhat aligned, and those that are not aligned or related to a strategic initiative.

Of those projects/key areas you've identified as somewhat or not related to an initiative, determine which offer you the greatest opportunity to increase alignment.

**Position your actions within a strategic organizational context.**

Remember that subordinates must be provided with a clear sense of the direction in which they should be moving. Clearly articulated organizational strategies help leaders to provide this needed direction by establishing the context within which those who will carry out the plan will operate. This must be done in a way that allows the managers below these individuals to turn organizational priorities into well-articulated and concrete action plans.

**Personalize the message.**

Talk one-on-one with your staff members and then ask questions that challenge their assumptions and help them translate the broader agency and work unit objectives into personal concrete actions which they can use to support these objectives.

**→Managing Tasks, Time and Staff Delegation, Planning and Prioritizing**

**Encourage your managers to delegate.**

Help them identify what tasks and responsibilities would be good development experiences for their employees. Talk with them about how to monitor and support their employees as they carry out the new tasks. Make sure you personally monitor the actions of your managers to ensure the delegation efforts are successful.

**Coach managers to debrief performance.**

If their division or unit is not functioning effectively, suggest taking some time out to facilitate a “How are we doing?” session. With the members of the group, suggest that they identify areas where changes could be made to improve processes, clarify roles, and increase collaboration. Help develop norms, and operating guidelines to ensure smooth and collaborative work dynamics. Tailor these norms for use at meetings and day-to-day interactions.

**Expect your employees to plan for the long term.**

Challenge them to think and plan for two or more *steps ahead of the next step* when approaching a project or assignment. Ask them questions like, “What will you do after that?” or “How will you approach the next step?” They will develop the habit of planning longer term.

**Provide the reality test.**

Offer to help your employees think through their plans for handling a particularly challenging project or assignment. Focus attention on the planning process as well as the content of the plan.

**Give clear directions.**

Provide proper instructions and direction when assigning tasks to your staff. If a subordinate receives *inadequate or unclear instructions*, he or she and his or her unit will likely produce results that are different from the desired and expected outcome. Try writing a clear statement of the purpose and objective(s) of your instructions. Include important timelines, and make clear whether or not you are expecting interim progress reports.

**Follow up.**

Discuss your directions with staff to make sure that they understand them and to address any additional needs for information that arise. If your staff are frequently coming to you to seek clarification after you have assigned responsibilities to them, or if you have often staff submitting finished products that are not what you wanted, you may need to improve the quality of the directions you provide.

**Plan proactively.**

Attempt, whenever possible, to integrate preventative remedies into your plans. This requires first identifying sources of risk, and then modifying your plans to include contingencies to respond to these risks. In the early stages of planning, identify all major tasks and critical decision points, and examine these elements individually for sources of risk. Categorize foreseeable problems as high or low risk, and target high risk areas by introducing contingency plans or buffer mechanisms. The latter might be as simple as maintaining more direct involvement and closer monitoring of high risk components of a plan, or may involve the allocation of greater resources or more time to circumvent or offset the potential impact of more serious risks.

**Be decisive.**

An essential component of effective strategic thinking is decisiveness. Remember that many difficult decisions must be made in the face of incomplete or ambiguous information. If you tend to avoid or delay making important decisions, set specific deadlines by which individual decisions should be made, and commit yourself to honoring them. Make a habit of dealing with minor decisions immediately. Avoid simply “uploading” problem issues to your superiors; present them with alternatives and recommendations, rather than problems to be solved.

**Choose your battles carefully.**

You and your organization cannot do everything. Set priorities and identify the course of action that will have the greatest probability of success while providing the largest payoff for your organization. Evaluate potential courses of action against the mission of your organization and its vision for the future. Give high priority to issues that either further the realization of, or serve as potential roadblocks to, the direction in which you wish to take your organization.

**Conduct a quarterly assessment of how strategically you are spending your time.**

For example, are there regular job tasks or activities that you could delegate to a subordinate, potentially as a developmental assignment? Identify and keep your focus on the critical few activities or decisions where your involvement will have the greatest impact.

**→Learning on the Job**

**Meet with your direct supervisor.**

Create a work plan that relates your daily work activities to the goals, measures, milestones, and strategic plans for your area.

**Get information from senior management.**

Seek and take advantage of opportunities to discuss the agencies long-term goals with senior management. Explain the direction of plans of your organization and ask for feedback. Share what you learn with your employees and be specific about what the implications are on your organization.

**Train others to think about long-term goals.**

Ask coworkers or employees to describe how their short-term actions or recommendations contribute to the long-term goals of the agency, the division or office. Ask on a regular basis so that they come to expect the question and become accustomed to include considerations in their work and suggestions.

**Share strategic organization plans with your managers.**

Ask them how they think those plans may impact their own work group. Have them describe what steps of actions they can take now and from 3 to 6 months out to contribute to the accomplishment of the strategic plans.

**Encourage employees to think things through ahead of time,**

Whenever reviewing a work plan or decision by a staff member, ask the person how others *will reach and the likely consequences* of the plan or implementation of the decision. If you do this on a regular basis, employees will expect the question and always prepare to answer it.

## **Strategic Thinking Quick Tips**

1. Encourage employees and subordinate managers to identify low hanging fruit (those changes or products that can be achieved in the short term with fewer obstacles) from high hanging fruit (those that might take longer and include more obstacles) and plan timeline accordingly
2. Develop a set of annual goals for your team; set interim goals and due dates. Each month, revisit the goals to check accomplishments. Post accomplishments for team members to see.
3. Obtain and analyze the organization's strategic plan, goals, and mission before you formulate any plans for your department. Make sure they are aligned.
4. Use the group's core values in making decisions and clarifying choices.
5. Talk to your employees about what they can do to achieve the organization's mission and goals.
6. Analyze the organization's strategic plan and the organizational team's strategic goals and mission before you formulate any plans for your department. Make sure they are aligned.
7. Read to stay abreast of sociopolitical, economic, and technological trends that may affect the future direction the company will take in responding to society's needs. Share this information with colleagues.
8. Learn what values and principles are behind your organization's rules, policies, and procedures. This knowledge will guide you in knowing when to be flexible regarding a rule, policy, or procedure in order to get the desired results, but still align you with the organization's value system.
9. Develop multiple contingency plans so you are not locked into any single course of action.
10. Consider using a team approach to problem solving. Use the team to structure or define the problem and to brainstorm solutions.
11. Create a climate for change by demonstrating a willingness to experiment with new ideas and avoid behaviors that stifle departures from the status quo.

12. Before making a decision, establish checkpoints that will be used to assess the continuing success of the decision, the downside risks at each point, and potential alternative strategies. This way, if the downside risks materialize, an alternative strategy can be adopted relatively early.
13. Hold feedback meetings to allow employees to express their feelings about how change is going.
14. Develop multiple contingency plans so that you are not locked into any single course of action.
15. Be alert for signs that would indicate the need for a change in strategy. Create feedback measures to evaluate progress.