

Developing Strategic Thinking

The Balancing Act

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Developing strategic thinking that balances both analytic and synthetic thinking and is focused on formulating an integrated organization-level strategy is still in its infancy. Creative and innovative thinking continue to be treated as individual competencies, rather than as systematically integrated and indispensable components of the same strategic management process. The challenge is to develop and establish team based skills required to use a balanced approach to strategic thinking.

To build a balanced approach to strategic thinking that is both creative *and* analytic, consider the following:

- **Become familiar with the tools and concepts which have been developed** to stimulate and improve individual and team creative and innovative thinking. Even a cursory search of the Internet using key words will immediately yield articles, books, and exercises. (See below)
- **Build on your current capabilities to do creative and intuitive thinking.** Most managers already rely on these capabilities on a daily basis in their decision making and problem solving activities yet there often is the reluctance to use this type of thinking in an organized manner with other managers.
- **Have executive management identify, develop, and implement at least one innovative initiative in every strategic plan.** The purpose of this exercise is to facilitate awareness and development of creativity and innovation throughout the strategic management process. In short, completing the entire sequence of activities required to complete the project/process--but with this caveat: **All activities must be done under the constant direction and involvement of top management.**
- **Ensure that being creative and intuitive becomes a recognized and accepted thinking mode** that is natural and accepted by all members of the strategic management team.
- **Use both creative and analytic tools and concepts in approaching a new situation or challenging problem.** Do this in all phases of the strategic management process. What ultimately gets used depends on the nature of the problem and the required/desired outcome.
- **Establish a culture of creativity** by challenging current mental models and outmoded assumptions--especially those long-held by top management (the key inhibitor to organization-wide creativity); and that promotes, recognizes and rewards creativity throughout the organization.

- **Identify and *listen* to in-house champions of new, different, challenging products, services and processes** that are put forward as potential opportunities for growth and development. Creative and novel suggestions can come from all levels and functions in an open environment that encourages all employees to join in growing and developing the organization.
- **Check Websites!** There is a wealth of information out there. Search for advice, ideas, exercises, courses, and seminars on how to become more creative, both as an individual and as an organization. Use key words such as: developing a culture of creativity, creativity, imagination, intuition, lateral thinking, divergent thinking, and heuristics.
- **Develop relationships** with suppliers and customers and stakeholders (including potential customers) **that stimulate the search for new and promising opportunities.**
- **Recognize, reward, and celebrate** the creative achievements of individuals, teams, groups, or work units that use creative approaches and novel thinking that contributes to the organization's strategic vision and mission.
- **Engage your core strategy team to explore and use these techniques** within a strategic management process:
 - **Scan the environment** (external and internal) proactively to look for opportunities to move the organization into new and uncharted areas, albeit with risk, but with major possibilities for growth and expansion assuming new competencies/capabilities may be required.
 - **Create and formally state the strategic direction of the organization.** This is an integrative process that requires creative thinking. The establishment of a well-conceived strategic direction is the basis for formulating specific strategies, aligning, balancing, and deploying them at all levels and in all functions of the organization.
 - **Generate a set of strategic alternatives** for analysis, evaluation, and assessment within the strategic direction. The integrative thrust used in strategic direction formulation is maintained here to blend creative with innovative thinking. Analytic thinking is essential here as different options are examined and combined to realistically fall in line with budgetary and resource constraints.
 - **Develop an organization structure and support system** that reinforces the development of creative and intuitive thinking. This process requires a team effort that engages all areas and all levels of the organization. The objectives are to break down "silos", hierarchies, and bureaucratic thinking and, in their place, establish cross-functional processes, flatter organization "team" interaction, and lateral thinking--focused on and aligned with the strategic direction of the organization.