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The 5 Steps to Strategic Thinking That Really Matter

Instead of barreling through a to-do list, especially when we're short on time already, try re-framing the way in which you approach the execution of your goal.



By [Joelle K. Jay@JoelleKJay](mailto:JoelleKJay)



IMAGE: Getty Images

I've been having an ongoing conversation with two or three executives lately that struck me as somewhat surprising. As an executive coach, I am also tasked with helping executives be more strategic. But finally this week someone asked me straight up: "What *is* strategic thinking?"

This executive happens to be a C-level leader, so I knew he *was* strategic in the eyes of the company, but what he didn't know was how to *cultivate* a strategic mindset. What does it look like to be more strategic? What does it sound like? What does one *do*?

Whether you're a small business owner, an entrepreneur, or a CEO at a Fortune 500 company, strategic thinking is a skill that matters, even though getting into the practice of changing your way of thinking might seem daunting.

Strategic thinking is really about aligning to the ultimate vision of the company's goal, or of a personal goal. That requires good old fashioned *thought*. The way you go about connecting vision and goals will vary based on your personal preferences: the way you think, the way you process, the way you learn.

If you're ready to start thinking more strategically, consider the following five steps for getting in the right frame of mind, where the ideas can flow and your brilliance comes alive.

Align to your vision. When you're clear about what you want, you're able to describe it in vivid detail. You know a little something about what it will take to get there and how it will feel to arrive. You connect to an inner source of inspiration that will call you forth and compel you to achieve a powerful new vision. As a leader or entrepreneur, thinking of the "big picture" allows you to pick out meaningful trends from your surroundings and hone in on what your potential is and how that potential aligns with your ultimate vision.

Ask questions. Now that you've connected with what your vision or goal is, it's time to start asking yourself the right questions. "What is my vision or goal? What do I have to do to get there?"

Give it some thought. There are three approaches to this. The first is the *analytical approach*. Write the answers down to the questions you asked yourself in step two, and be as detailed as possible. This approach serves those who are thinkers and need clarity. The second approach is the *collaborative approach*. For those who are more socially minded and thrive on brainstorming, set up a meeting and get others involved in discussing matters of strategy. You invite many coworkers with varied areas of expertise and ask whatever your big questions are, like, how to become more visible in the marketplace, or how to transform your business model to be lighter and leaner, and so on. The last approach is a *meditative approach*. This helps individuals who are not trying to "figure things out," necessarily, but rather want to clear some space and become quiet enough to hear their intuition. One of the busiest executives I know, who works in the frenetic pace of high-tech Silicon Valley, gets his breakthrough insights sitting quietly on the back deck at sunrise. Any of these approaches can work--the main thing is that you carve out the time to think, however that ends up looking for you.

Plan. Creating your "plan" means identifying your action items, both short-term and long-term, that will help you reach your goal. For you, it might take the form of something as complex and involved as a company-wide strategic plan, something smaller scale like a project plan, or simply just a checklist for you get things done. In planning, you use the clarity and focus you've gained in step one and put it into a practical course of action..

Diagram. There's one more important step you can take when you are engaging in strategic thinking, and that's to think *without* words. Diagramming, mindmapping, brainstorming, drawing pictures, mocking up graphs and charts--all of these forms of "thinking" stimulate your creativity and can break you out of the box. For visual thinkers and creative thinkers, this step can make

the planning part of the process less painful. For more linear and analytical types, this approach can really shake loose the ideas when you get stuck.

Strategy is a plan of action or policy designed to achieve a major or overall aim. When we're talking about strategic thinking we're really talking about what we need to achieve, and how to do it. Instead of barreling through a to-do list, especially when we're short on time already, try re-framing the way in which you approach the execution of your goal.

Ready to start? Choose a time to devote exclusively to strategic thinking. Make it within a week or two, at a time and place where you won't be interrupted. Give yourself the chance to daydream about the future you're trying to create, and then implement one or two of these approaches to strategic thinking. Then watch for the breakthrough. You may be only one or two hours away from the that makes you not just more strategic, but more successful.

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Joelle K. Jay, Ph. D., is an executive coach specializing in leadership development. She strategizes with business leaders to enhance their performance and maximize business results. Her clients include presidents, vice presidents, and C-level executives in Fortune 500 companies such as Microsoft, Google, and Adobe. She is the author of *The Inner Edge: The 10 Practices of Personal Leadership*. For a free summary, go to www.TheInnerEdge.com or email Info@TheInnerEdge.com.