

## Strategic Leadership Competencies

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Strategic Leadership has been defined as “the ability to anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think innovatively, and work with others to initiate changes to create a viable future.” Success at fulfilling these responsibilities involves identifying the signs of change, generating new perspectives and responses, and making strategic choices.

Like panes of tinted glass or the mirrors in the funny house at the carnival, our mental models color our view of the world and affect our abilities to successfully see, understand and manage these strategic challenges. Therefore, to avoid being sabotaged in their strategic choices and actions, leaders need a better understanding of mental models. They also need techniques for examining, testing, and, whenever necessary, breaking old mental models and replacing them with more appropriate new ones.

Mental models come in many different shapes, sizes and flavors. According to learning expert Peter Senge, they are “the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world.” Sometimes known as mental or cognitive maps, brain barriers, belief structures, biases, blinders, frames, or paradigms – all essentially just variations on a theme, mental models are our internal, often unconscious, pictures of the world. Though invisible, they determine how and what we see, and they shape our actions, responses, and decisions. For example, if we hold a mental model that people are basically trustworthy, we may talk to new acquaintances far more freely and/or delegate more confidently to team members than we would if our mental model is that most people are not to be trusted.

Our mental models are formed by our prior knowledge, personal experiences, upbringing, functional background, education, and any tacitly held expectations and beliefs about how the world works or how we are supposed to act in that world. They can also be caused by stereotypes, personal biases, groupthink, and ingrained habits, as well as power and ego issues.

A good example of a mental model, built from our personal experiences, is the way those of us in the US looked at the prospect of flying before 9/11 and then after that tragic day. Think about how it used to be: arriving at the airport 30 minutes before your flight, sometimes even 10 minutes, and still making it onto the plane. Now the world has changed, and we have to plan ahead and sometimes even think about dressing accordingly, to ease ourselves through the long lines and screening procedures that have become part of our new mental model around flying.

The current focus on optimism and positive thinking recalls another mental model, this one based on our upbringing and belief systems: Is the glass half-full or is it half-empty? And how does that “mental model” affect our assumptions about the future and our ability to manage into that future?

Mental models explain why two people witnessing an accident, for instance, describe the details so very divergently. Their version of the scene depends heavily on whether they were paying close attention or just happened to glance over and whether they hold any pre-conceived stereotypes of the victim and the perpetrator. These mental models also explain how we can see a colleague who is a potential candidate for our job very differently depending on our own ambitions.

Mental models can be very useful. We need them to function, to filter through the avalanche of information we receive. They help us gather, process, interpret, and organize information and understand new, complicated situations. They help explain how the world operates. They even help us get to work each day (same route, same possible ways to avoid traffic jams, etc.)

As beliefs about ourselves and our abilities, they help us become successful. They give us the “rules of the game.” They guide our behavior as values and deeply-held beliefs, and they keep us safe as personal “standard operating procedures.”

While mental models have many benefits, they also have their drawbacks. Mental models often

bring with them blinders and filters in the form of assumptions and perhaps even inflexible points of view about the world. The movie *Twelve Angry Men* has many good examples of the role stereotypes and assumptions can play in undermining the objectivity of a jury.

Incorrect or flawed mental models can lead us to underestimate the severity of problems and interpret events in a self-serving fashion. They can produce over-confidence and give us an illusion of control. They can cause us to ignore facts and evidence that fly in the face of changing circumstances.

Mental models can limit the range of alternative solutions to a situation or challenge. We can fail to see new routes because we assume that a formula of success that has worked in the past will continue to work for all time. Or our mental models about life as it should be or our sense of family responsibility and security can cause us to avoid risks and stay stuck in the status quo.

Mental models can thus become very dangerous, particularly when, as leaders, we use outdated and defective models to make decisions and plan in an increasingly uncertain world. They can also undermine our ability to bring about strategic change. If leaders fail to grasp the hold that prevailing mental models have on employees in the form of "what is a leader" or "what drives organizational or personal success," they may not be able to effect the change they want. If they fail to see that mental models in customers may have changed, around the environment for instance, all sorts of misunderstandings and mistakes can result.

An example of a poorly-held set of mental models is the framework through which US carmaker General Motors looked at the marketplace in the 1950's through the 1970's. Despite changing consumer preferences, governmental regulations, and increasing competition from Japanese carmakers, GM's managers -- because of years of success and market share dominance -- continued to believe in their mental model regarding consumer behavior. Cars in their view of the world were primarily status symbols to customers. They failed to see the shift in consumer behavior to a concern for the environment and mounting gas prices. And despite years of falling market

share, GM's leaders continue to cling to what appear to be outdated mental models.

Because mental models can filter out certain data and can cause reliance on decision making rules that are no longer appropriate, successful strategic leaders need to develop the ability to recognize, challenge, and break through these mental models. Several practices enable leaders to do this. Among these practices are reflection and self-awareness, reframing, and systems thinking.<sup>1</sup>

### **Reflection and Self-Awareness**

According to Senge, the first step in breaking mental models is becoming aware of them. Recognition comes through reflection and assessment.

Reflection is a practice that first involves careful gathering and examination of information about our behavior, experience, perceptions, and beliefs. We use this new knowledge to deepen our self-awareness. We are then able to more easily bring mental models to the surface.

Reflection is not simply "mulling things over." Reflection is a disciplined, active "meaning making" process that requires commitment to personal emotional and intellectual growth. It creates a deeper understanding of relationships and connections among experiences and ideas. It includes learning new practices and unlearning old, outdated ones.

Reflection first requires an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, leadership, communication, and learning styles, and our own personal mental models. Educator John Dewey explains:

"Reflective thinking requires the continual evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses against existing data and against other plausible interpretations of the data. The resulting judgments are offered as reasonable integrations or syntheses of opposing points of

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<sup>1</sup> The following discussion borrows from "Developing the Leader's Strategic Mindset: Establishing the Measures," by John Pisapia, Daniel Reyes-Guerra, and Eleni Coukos-Semmel, in *Leadership Review*, Spring 2005; *Leading Strategic Change*, by Stewart Black and Hal Gregersen (2005); and "The Hidden Traps in Decision Making," by John S. Hammon, Ralph L. Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, *Harvard Business Review*, September-October, 1998.

view. Because they involve ongoing verification and evaluation, judgments based on reflective thinking are more likely to be valid and insightful than are beliefs derived from authority, emotional commitment, or narrow reasoning.”

Along with self-assessment of personal strengths and areas of development, reflection involves stepping back and objectively examining the unconscious mental models and taken-for-granted values and goals that guide our behavior. In reflection, we try to step back from the situation, observe what is happening, and ask, “Why am I seeing the situation the way I am?” “What assumptions am I making?” And “What other factors could explain what happened?”

Reflection is not something leaders just do “on their time off” or when they have time to think about things. It is something they do on a regular basis and not always alone. For researcher Robert Kegan reflection is facilitated by creating an internal conversation (e.g., “What is this telling me?” “How could I have handled it better?” “What will I do next time?”) balanced with conversations with respected colleagues or friends to share questions, bounce ideas around, generate insights, and provide new direction.

There are various tools and instruments that can aid leaders in this assessment process, in addition to personal examination and conversations with colleagues. The Jungian model of eight psychological types, the Myers Briggs Type Indicator®(MBTI®), and the Eight Creative Talents Profile can be very helpful, to structure our self-awareness journey. Emotional Intelligence assessments and 360-degree or other such formal instruments of feedback from others can also help identify blindspots.

Finally, leaders can also take time off from the problem. Sitting quietly in a museum, botanical garden, or some other reflective spot can help us break mental models and gain new insights and see the situation in a new light.

## **Reframing**

By reflecting on both successes and failures, we begin to unpack the assumptions and values that lie beneath our mental models in our work and everyday life. Once we have brought

mental models to the surface through reflection and self-examination, put in perspective by conversations with others and formal feedback, we need to do something with them. Reframing is one technique leaders can use to challenge mental models and develop multiple perspectives and alternative ways of viewing the world.

The goal of reframing is to help leaders generate new insights and options for actions when trying to understand unfamiliar, complicated events or situations from new perspectives. Properly conducted, reframing enables leaders to define and interpret critical issues, create multiple alternatives, and communicate more effectively

Reframing requires leaders to stay open and flexible, suspending judgment until a more comprehensive and more accurate view of the situation emerges. It also requires them to be honest about their motives and ask, “Am I really gathering information to help make a smart choice, or to just look for evidence confirming what I know I would like to do?”

The first step in reframing is to identify, surface, and understand the mental models that are being used to frame a problem, situation or issue in ourselves and others. This step involves open discussion and rigorous inquiry. In this step leaders explore the underlying assumptions that are working on the team. They step back and analyze what mental models are being used to frame this particular situation, not just from a personal point of view, but from a collective perspective to get to a mutual understanding of the situation.

The next step involves defining the right problem. Too often our assumptions and current mental models unconsciously frame a situation, and we end up solving the wrong problem. To avoid this situation, leaders must take the problem apart and examine it from a variety of angles before proceeding to solve it.

Once assumptions, mental models, and the real problem are identified, there are several techniques that leaders can use to reframe the challenge at hand.

\* Leaders can use the technique of appreciative inquiry to reframe the challenge and ask questions such as, “What would be

the ideal situation?” “What’s possible?” Such questions can broaden the scope of the challenge, set our curiosity in motion and provide inspiration for new possibilities.

- \* Leaders can also step back and think about the about the future in terms of alternative views of how the world might unfold. In what is known as scenario planning or scenario thinking, leaders switch their approach from trying to find one best answer to a strategic question or one best way to deal with a single uncertainty. Instead, they learn to consider multiple possibilities and multiple uncertainties. Scenario thinking is thus particularly useful in situations where leaders need to break mental models about the future.
- \* Another technique that can help to reframe problems is through what authors Stewart Black and Hal Gregersen call “inescapable experiences,” experiences that make it hard to mentally sidestep, ignore, or physically walk away from the situation. Such experiences must actively involve as many of the senses of touching, smelling, seeing, hearing, and tasting as possible. An example of such an inescapable experience takes place when leaders and their teams act as customers in their own places of business or in those of their competitors.

Since mental models often cause us to see data that confirms our beliefs, it is important to seek out contradictory data about alternative solutions to the problem and examine all data with equal rigor. There are also several techniques to challenge and reframe the data.

- \* Leaders can actively and deliberately look for differences in opinion and data that challenge prevailing mindsets. If advisers, friends, or colleagues always seem to support their point of view, they find new colleagues and advisers to play devil’s advocate. Or they build their own counterarguments, by asking “What’s a good reason to do something else? All answers need to be considered with an open mind.
- \* Leaders can also develop a set of tools to break out of traditional perspectives and structures and create new possibilities. Breakthrough Creativity’s Eight Creative Talents and other creativity tools, such as

brainstorming or idea boxes, can be used to generate alternatives. Leaders also ask idea-generating questions, such as “How would different stakeholders see the problem we are addressing?”

Leaders who master the ability to reframe a challenge report that they are better able to develop unique alternatives and novel solutions. They are attuned to the people and events around them. Using techniques such as those described above, they are less often startled by organizational perversity. Instead, they learn to anticipate the turbulent twists and turns of organizational life.

### **Systems Thinking**

In addition to reframing, another practice that can help challenge mental models that have surfaced through reflection and discussion is Systems Thinking. Systems thinking is the ability to see systems holistically by understanding the properties, forces, patterns and interrelationships that shape the behaviors of the system.

Systems thinking rests on the notion that the “whole is greater than the parts” and relies on seeing patterns rather than static snapshots. The focus is on the complete system, as opposed to the focus on parts that accompanies so much linear, cause-and-effect type thinking.

To think systemically and holistically, leaders need to first understand the properties of a system. A system involves interactions and interdependencies among its parts. Changes in one part of a system often affect, and are affected by, changes in other parts of a system. This focus on connectedness creates a mindshift from “analysis” to “context,” and from “structure” to “process.” Change, for example, is not an event within a system. It is a process that evolves over time, often with a beginning, middle and end.

Based on an understanding of this interrelatedness within and without a system, leaders anticipate that a change in one part of the system will produce changes in other system components. The more interdependent the system is with its parts and/or another system, the more interaction leaders can expect to occur.

Another tenet of systems thinking describes systems as in a constant state of dynamic equilibrium. Dynamic equilibrium refers to a continual state of adaptation that allows the system to grow and change in a relatively stable way. While many changes in a system do result from forces in the external environment, there are also cyclical and evolutionary changes which are not just a reaction to the environment. Think about the way our bodies function, sometimes reacting to changes in temperature caused by the outside and sometimes to changes that are happening internally.

The capacity of a system to self-correct by adjusting to feedback is another key element in systems thinking. Positive feedback enables a system to maintain its behavior, while negative feedback prompts the system to adapt. (The body's immune system is a good example.)

In organizations, feedback is received from the external environment in the form of consumer concerns or needs, profit margins and internal and external audits. Leaders who understand that it is normal for systems to adjust to feedback will monitor the "noise" in the system to make adjustments before the noise becomes overwhelming and causes organizations to become disrupted or to implode. As systems researchers have noted, leaders who do not move to adapt their organizations, or do it too late, cannot survive.

Leaders also recognize that it is impractical to isolate the organization from its environment. They recognize that systems have permeable and impermeable boundaries that affect the ability of an organization to manage stress. If the boundary of their organization is too permeable (i.e., is open to too much environmental stress), the organization will lose its focus and explode. On the other hand, if a boundary is too impermeable or impenetrable, the organization can become rigid and may soon implode and collapse. Therefore, leaders using systems thinking actively work to establish and/or loosen boundaries in order to regulate stress on the system. They also ensure proper placement and functioning of team roles across boundaries to manage interrelationships and interactions.

Systems thinking can alter perspectives by shifting us from linear mental models dominated

by events to mental models that recognize interdependencies and longer-term patterns of changes. The process allows leaders to open up their horizons, break existing mental models, and see the world differently.

## Summary

Successful strategic leaders integrate knowledge of mental models and techniques such as reflection, reframing, and systems thinking into their strategic decision-making, change management, and personal development processes.

Before starting to make decisions for the future, successful strategic leaders take the time to ask, "What are my mental models?" "What about those of my team?" "What do I/we believe about the competition, customers, and the impact of emerging global competitors?" "What possible blinders could those beliefs and assumptions be causing us?"

Through awareness of these mental models, successful strategic leaders are more capable of taking perspectives of others and resolving conflicts more constructively and creatively. Instead of clinging to a single point of view, their fluency in mental models allows them to see conflicts from many different points of view and to then find more creative solutions.

An appreciation for the role mental models play not only helps with decision making and conflict management. It can also help leaders better understand how to bring about change.

Frequently, new ideas and badly needed changes fail to achieve traction because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works, engrained images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting. People often do not see even obvious threats and opportunities because they are blinded by the light of what they already see or know.

Successful strategic leaders recognize the incredible hold of existing mental models that have worked in the past, no matter how flawed they originally were and no matter how inaccurate or incomplete they have now become. Leaders use this knowledge in their change strategies to convince employees that these mental models are no longer workable.

They can then implant new models to take the place of old meanings and understandings. When old stories and mental models are no longer relevant and do not provide proper guidance, leaders must find ways to reframe the situation and find new meaning and stories for moving forward. That's not an easy or quick task, but it is an extremely important one for success.

Understanding mental models must be part of a successful strategic leader's personal

development plan as well. In the process of identifying existing mental models and examining them for relevance, leaders may have to throw out mental models that are personally no longer valid and useful. New mental models have to be found to take the place of outworn ones. Continuing examination of the viability and relevance of mental models and mastery of the techniques to challenge existing ones and build new ones allow leaders to deal more effectively with ambiguity and change – in themselves and their organizations.

#### **For more information:**

On Scenario Planning: See the June, 2006 article in the "Practical Innovator," available on [www.breakthroughcreativity.com/newsletters.html](http://www.breakthroughcreativity.com/newsletters.html). Additional information on Scenario Planning is also available on [www.breakthroughcreativity.com/tools.html](http://www.breakthroughcreativity.com/tools.html)

On Appreciative Inquiry: See the June, 2006 article in the "Practical Innovator," available on [www.breakthroughcreativity.com](http://www.breakthroughcreativity.com). One very useful book is "*Appreciative Inquiry: Change at the Speed of Imagination*," by Jane Magruder Watkins and Bernard J. Mohr, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer, 2001." Additional information on Appreciative Inquiry is also available on [www.breakthroughcreativity.com/tools.html](http://www.breakthroughcreativity.com/tools.html)

On Systems Thinking: see Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (1991).

On Breakthrough Creativity's Eight Creative Talents: see <http://www.breakthroughcreativity.com/8talents.html>