

Challenges that may deny the benefits of strategic thinking¹

Have you ever engaged in critical thinking? Or thinking is like a torture for you as it is for many people? Here is a famous quotation from Luther Burbank, "Thinking is the greatest torture in the world for most people". Or you may be among those few who like to think but how frequently do you think is the real question? George Bernard Shaw was quoted as saying, "Few people think more than two or three times a year; I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once a week". From this quote, we can easily see that most people are not benefiting through regular thinking. For that matter, what are the benefits of critical thinking, one may ask?

Answers.com enlisted five benefits of critical thinking:

- You can make a rational decision instead of an emotional one,
- You can find a solution that is more likely to work,
- You can think in "shades of gray" instead of "black and white",
- You are more likely to be able to tell if something is the right thing to do, and
- You are more likely to come up with correct answers and solutions.

These all are impressive lists and who doesn't want to have them? They are worthy of paying the price of sitting down to think critically as frequent as possible. There is a popular saying, "Invest a few moments in thinking. It will pay good interest". We may now appreciate how much thinking critically is very important for individual success but do organizations need to think?

As much as thinking is very important for individual success, it is also equally important for organizations to engage in strategic thinking if they desire to enjoy continual success in this very competitive world. The challenge is resistance to think may also be reflected institutionally and many organizations may not have even the structure- the organizational mind, to think let alone to engage in frequent thinking. However, we may easily recognize, when we see great organizations, that there was critical and smart thinking to form and lead them this far. Albert Einstein said, "The world we have created is a product of our thinking".

Considering this ever changing world we are living in, the future prospect of an organization rests upon whether its leaders' think ahead. Paul Walsh, Chairman and CEO of Pillsbury, thought that leaders on this century would require "More time to reflect and to think provocatively about current and future dynamics" (Cashman, 1998, p. 135). For an organization to move forward and secure its glorious future in the 21st century, it should give strategic thinking a key place in its workings. What is strategic thinking?

Hughes & Beatty (2005) defined strategic thinking as "cognitive processes required for the collection, interpretation, generation, and evaluation of information and ideas that shape an organization's sustainable competitive advantage" (p. 44). Mintzberg *et al.* (1998) used a metaphor of seeing (ahead, behind, down, below, beside, and beyond) to describe the multi-dimensional nature of strategic thinking. Sanders (1998) underscored that strategic thinking is the first and most demanding step in any planning endeavor and "has two major components: insight about the present and foresight about the future" (Sanders, 1998, p. 10). Unfortunately,

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many organizations tend to see in one or two directions and preoccupy themselves with what is going on right now than what lays ahead by engaging foresight about the future.

However, there are some institutions and organizations that are engaging in long term strategic thinking and planning. For instance, some city councils have strategic directives for 50 years in their effort to provide various services (hospitals, parks, roads, energy, etc) for their residents. Some corporations like Toyota, for example, have a 100 years strategic directive (Hagen, Hassan, & Amin, 1998). It is clear that an organization that plans for decades ahead exercises strategic thinking. No wonder corporations like Toyota, which think ahead, are succeeding!

As a founder of a non-profit organization, I recently drafted a 50 year strategic directive for the organization. It was a rewarding exercise. I could be able to appreciate that it is hard to avoid strategic thinking when you launch yourself deep into the future. It required me to analyze and synthesize various data and consider different scenarios to have a clear picture of where the organization would be in the coming 5 decades. It helped me to identify potential opportunities, threats, and many more.

During this process, one of the challenges I have recognized was the temptation of getting overwhelmed with what is going on right now. It is easy to bind oneself with apparent limitations right here and fail to tap into the uncertain future which is full of possibilities and opportunities. I also saw how one may get delusional and undermine the realities at hand and the steps it takes to reach the destination. It is a delicate line to walk. It is both an exciting and at the same time scary thing to venture and navigate through the unknown future filled with many uncertainties. Navigating virtually through uncharted world takes to trust your gut as a lighthouse that helps you march forward until you see the end of the road, your destination.

At the end of that exercise, it became clear to me how strategic thinking takes unique kinds of personality. This led me to question what kind of leaders organizations should attract for successful and sustainable strategic thinking? By taking Bill Gates and Peter Jackson as exemplary strategic thinkers, Hughes & Beatty (2005) attributed three characteristics of such persons. They both are visionary; scan their environment to anticipate what lay beyond the horizon; and possess the ability to deal with complex problems. It is challenging to find many leaders that have these and similar attributes all together. There are many compounding factors that deny leaders to become effective strategic thinkers.

There may be many visionary leaders but they may depend on vision too much and fail to define reality. Quoting Bill Easum, president of Easum, Bandy and Associates, Maxwell (2008) wrote, "Realistic leaders are objective enough to minimize illusions. They understand that self-deception can cost them their vision" (p. 68). Defining reality has a big role as leaders exercise strategic thinking. Jack Welch, the CEO of GE remembered, "When I became CEO, I inherited a lot of great things, but facing reality was not one of the company's strong points" (Welch & Byrne, 2001, p. 104). He dedicated one chapter [7] to explain how he transformed GE as a competitive company by defining reality.

There are also many leaders who over-depend on statistical analysis to make key decisions and plan for the future. Such leaders trust data, more than their intuition, as they engage in strategic

planning. Sanders (1998) pointed out that “most planning approaches are still based primarily on quantitative analysis and deterministic forecasting models...when what we really need is a way to see the big picture context as it really is (p. 137-38).

Cultural and personal beliefs may also undermine the use of strategic thinking to explore the future. According to Whitfield (2009), there is a wide cultural gap when it comes to the sense of time between Indonesians and their counterparts from Western culture. He wrote, “While Western cultures look to the future, the Indonesian culture is generally past-oriented”. The author observed that Indonesians consider their past as colorful and glorious, and should guide their future. Comparing these two cultures and endorse the one that favors success in life is beyond the scope of this article but one can easily appreciate how it is hard, for a leader influenced by a culture that glorifies the past, to engage in strategic thinking into the deepest of the future.

In some African cultures- both Christians and Muslims, many people tend to shy away from thinking and talking about the future. You may even find people refraining from making decisions about simple things like having a cup of coffee tomorrow morning with a friend. It is normal to hear Insha'Allah or if God willing for such requests. I am not questioning the sincerity of people who seek God's will in every simple thing they do in the future but it is not hard to imagine how hard it may be for such individuals to believe that they have shared responsibilities to prepare for the future and maximize the benefits attached with their future. Think about it. If someone believes that he doesn't have much role to decide whether he should have a duty to decide and plan to have a cup of coffee tomorrow with a friend, how can he get motivated to take accountability and think into the future like for 50 or 100 years?

Another factor that should draw our attention as a challenge that denies many benefits from strategic thinking maybe is the school system. According to the Funderstanding.com (2010), schools in general “tend to favor left-brain modes of thinking, while downplaying the right-brain ones”. Reiman (1998) wrote, “Most of us were taught to memorize...” (p. 61). Schools are producing graduates who are highly dependent on logic and systematic thinking, which are the dominant functions of the left-brain. Students are rewarded only when they give objective, accurate, and measureable answers. However, strategic thinking is “a creative, dynamic, responsive, and often intuitive, process within the framework of a largely unpredictable environment” (Graetz, 2002, p. 456). The latter functionalities engage the right-brain.

In conclusion, it is apparent that strategic thinking is critical for long term organizational success and organizations should be serious when they select their strategic thinkers. They should make sure that members of this team have the potential it takes to carryout this task. They should also mentor their team to continually improve their intuition and creativity. Since schools are not contributing towards developing the faculties of right-brain, it is up to organizations themselves to pay closer attention to this flaw and find ways to develop the attributes of strategic thinking onto their strategic thinkers. Organizations should also heed to Alan Alda encouraging words, “Begin challenging your own assumptions. Your assumptions are your windows on the world. Scrub them off every once in awhile, or the light won't come in”. That means, allow your team to challenge status quo and prevailing assumptions in their effort to come up with new and fresh insights. Last but not least, consciously build a diverse team that influence and challenge one another's thinking and perspective.

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