

# THE FUTURE IS NOT PREDICTABLE

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The pace of change today is dizzying. New product life cycles span a few short months, while global competition expands the sources of change every day. Mergers and acquisitions change the competitive landscape overnight, and strategic alliances develop even among companies that traditionally are competitors.

Planning and thinking strategically in the midst of increasingly rapid and dynamic change is mission critical for companies large and small.

## **Mission Critical**

Strategic planning and thinking are not synonymous, and the value of each is increased when the two are directly linked. Strategic planning is rooted in a process and discipline, while strategic thinking grows out of competence and creativity.

Strategic planning is about analysis, breaking down a goal into steps, designing how those steps may be implemented and estimating the possible consequences of each step. Strategic thinking is more about synthesis, about using intuition and creativity to form an integrated and dynamic perspective of where the business is and should be heading.

Strategic thinking is the ability to think systemically. It includes a whole systems perspective, which often goes beyond what the business currently is engaged in doing. Strategic thinking relies on an ability to make sense of large amounts of complex and often

ambiguous information. It also involves discerning what is truly important, the ability to think over the longer time horizon, to postulate, hypothesize and explore different perspectives.

From a vertical perspective, strategic thinking sees the linkages in the system from multiple angles and understands the relationships among the corporate, business and functional levels to the external world. From a horizontal perspective, strategic thinking includes an understanding of the connections across departments and functions, and between suppliers and buyers.

While strategic planning focuses on the rigor of defining how to get from Point A to Point B, strategic thinking focuses on getting there without falling off the cliff along the way.

## **Clearly Define Your Destination**

Strategic thinking starts with accurately identifying your objective, your ultimate destination. A chess player, for example, thinks strategically about the best ways to capture the opponent's King (Point B).

A computer on every desk in every home was Point B for Bill Gates and Paul Allen when they started Microsoft. The Microsoft strategy included developing software to make computers fun and easy to use.

A common mistake companies make in identifying their Point B is they think primarily about the success of the immediate products

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and services. They fail to go deeper and understand the fundamental reason why their products and services exist.

If the employees of a company that makes pens follow a strategic plan based primarily on finding the best way to make pens, they may be missing their true Point B. This company may benefit from thinking strategically about helping people communicate and express themselves, because communication is the fundamental reason why pens exist.

### **Realistically Identify Your Current Position**

Strategic thinking also helps to realistically identify the business's current position, or Point A. If you don't know where you are on a regular basis, it's a lot harder to get to your destination. Realistically assessing your current position requires objectivity and helps calibrate how far you need to travel.

While we can't predict, we can influence the future. We can envision desirable future states. We can empower employees to influence it, but we have no control over "uncertainties." That's why they are called uncertainties.

### **Anticipate Shifts**

We can, however, think strategically about alternative possibilities. We can analyze historical data, study trends, observe customer behaviors and study alternative competitive moves.

We do think in order to act, but sometimes we also act in order to think. We experiment. Thinking strategically is the essence of learning as we act. And learning

inevitably plays a major role in the creation of the future.

Strategic thinking can help a business move beyond predicting outcomes and toward a better understanding of the forces that compel the desired outcomes. The focus moves beyond "what will happen" to "what we will do if it happens." This insight leads to a clearer understanding of what we need to do now and going forward so that the business is optimally poised to take advantage of change.

### **Continuity and Future Direction**

Strategic thinking connects the past, present and future. In this way, it uses both an institution's memory and its broad historical context as critical inputs into the creation of its future.

We need both a sense of continuity with our past and sense of direction for our future to maintain a feeling of control in the midst of change. From this perspective, we can move beyond the important question of what does the future we are trying to create look like. Having seen the future that we want to create, we can ask what must we keep from the past, lose from the past and create in our present to get there.

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