

NEW FRONTIERS IN LEARNING SERIES

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LEARNING

TO THINK

STRATEGICALLY



IS ANYBODY BORN WITH THIS KNOW-HOW?

*The Myth of the Chosen Few:
Five Critical Attributes for
Learning to Think Strategically*

*A man, though wise, should never be ashamed of learning more, and must
unbend his mind.*

From Antigone, by Sophocles (442–42 B.C.), Greek philosopher

The Five Critical Attributes

Luckily, and in spite of all the implied messages that are dispersed about strategic thinking as a reserve of the chosen few, strategic thinking is indeed learnable. Is it teachable? Perhaps not directly. But it certainly is learnable.

The temptation to accept a myth about who can learn to think strategically is understandable in a strategic environment that is overloaded with complexities, contradictions, and confusion. A myth, after all, controls the possibility of conflicting evidence—myths help us make meaning of conflict and ambivalence. There are four reasons that propagate the myth of the *chosen few*—those who think strategically.

First, overuse of the term *strategy*, without clear definition about strategic thinking or planning, creates confusion about when we're making it. Because we are unsure when and if we are making it, we assume we really are not making it, and therefore others must be making it.

Second, strategy is generally talked about as something we get to make when we are important; its absence is a well-known, sacrosanct ritual used to prevent people from promotion. And since we tend to know very few people who are truly important, those who make strategy must be among the chosen few.

Third, we recall the capstone strategy courses in most business school curricula and the tip of the triangle in corporate strategy structure. Both imply elitism and illusions of grandeur. Criteria are kept unspoken and mostly vague, so we are left with the impression that whatever it is that is required, we do not have it, which reinforces the myth of the chosen few. In truth, most of what occurs in the strategy meetings of these elite pockets of organizational power is not about strategic thinking—it is about strategic planning. So it's a bottle that hasn't been uncorked, a party that hasn't happened!

Fourth, successful strategy is deceptively simple to see: It either works or it doesn't. This deludes us into believing that making strategy is about the luck or magic of those clever chosen few. The underlying thinking process is mostly ambiguous, invisible, and not understood, so we just chalk it up to the mystical moments of a few. But strategic thinking is an emotionally draining and intellectually challenging process; it is difficult, risky, complex—and learnable.

To dispel this deeply held and widely believed myth of the chosen few is not easy. If, however, we understand the attributes that support the learning process involved in strategic thinking, we can begin to imagine ways to develop our capacity to think strategically.

Part IX comprises three chapters. Chapter 23 discusses five attributes identified by seasoned and successful strategists as being critical to learning to think strategically.

- Having an *Imagination*
- A *Broad Perspective*
- The ability to *Juggle*, or attend to competing, incomplete and inaccurate information all at once
- The ability to deal with things over which you have *No Control*
- An adamant *Desire to Win*

Each of these attributes will be discussed in turn throughout Chapter 23. Chapter 24 describes the interplay among the five attributes. Chapter 25 discusses the notion of adaptation as a strategic expectation.

Something I have noticed across culture, industry, and age is that conceptual, intuitive thinkers often tend to have a natural inclination toward strategic thinking. As with any highly complex and high-stakes endeavor, there are those who have a natural inclination for strategic thinking and those who may be challenged in various ways. It is important, however, to remember that a challenge can be overcome, and a natural inclination is only a "booster shot." By the same token, concrete, linear, analytic thinkers tend to have a natural edge in strategic planning.

Strategic thinking is a highly complex synthesis of the affective and cognitive learning domains that requires extensive use of the deeper, dive level of learning and a high degree of reflective capacity. Personal style preferences need to be respected, and differences must be perceived as complementary to and compatible with the strategic thinking process. In other words, concrete

linear, analytic thinkers can most certainly learn to become more critically reflective, intuitive, and a-rational (though they may squeal from time to time). Conceptual, intuitive thinkers likewise can learn to become more linear, logical, and rational (though they, too, may squawk at times).

Not everyone within an organization needs to be a strategic thinker. The organizational aim is to create a pipeline that is drawn from all levels, locales, and functions within an organization to contribute strategic sustainability. Everyone, however, can improve and informally develop to varying degrees the five essential attributes and critical reflective processes.

It is important to ensure that everyone within an organization has access to resources that support the learning process used for strategic thinking:

- Information about the strategic thinking process
- Opportunities to observe critical dialogue among senior management
- Practice and participation in critical dialogue regarding strategic issues
- Encouragement to engage in artistic and creative endeavors

With such exposure and a learning expectation, some natural strategic thinkers will emerge from the shadows. Skillful planners who wish to strengthen their strategic thinking capacity will also come forth, creating a first link to the pipeline. From here, interest will be generated and others will be attracted and drawn into the pipeline.

Having worked with both accomplished and aspiring strategists, I contend that genuine strategic thinking growth is largely about making sure that they understand what is required for learning to think strategically and allowing them to take the lead in their own learning. This process differs dramatically from one person to another. One strategist may be very confident and adept at linear, analytical, and logical processes and at the same time be lacking in nonlinear, a-rational, and integrative learning, whereas someone else may require emphasizing the reverse.

Once strategists understand how learning to think strategically occurs, I find that executives can and do come up with their own best ideas and approaches to support the development of the five attributes and critical reflective processes. When aspiring strategists lead the learning process, their commitment to breaking old habits, practicing new habits, and taking the risk to trust some informal learning increases considerably.

The aim is not to create a worldwide strategic thinking campaign but, rather, to create a pipeline of strategic thinkers across functions and at all levels within an organization, for competitive purposes.

It is also important to keep in mind that not every person within an organization needs to be a strategic thinker. The aim is not to create a worldwide strategic thinking campaign but, rather, to create a pipeline of strategic thinkers across functions and at all levels within an organization, for competitive purposes. If we want to further our strategic thinking or if our position requires it now or in the future, then there is no need to panic. Rest assured that each of the following attributes can be developed to some degree of mastery with discipline, determination, and practice.

The executives I interviewed for the study underlying this book were asked to describe what they paid attention to when making good strategy and what was the most essential requirement for thinking strategically. Five attributes emerged as critical requisites for successful strategic thinking: imagination, broad perspective, juggle, no control over, and a desire to win.¹ I had expected that the executives' different backgrounds might generate different attributes they considered essential to learning to think strategically. But a surprising finding of the study was that the five attributes were consistently and emphatically mentioned by executives across the various industries, ages, and nationalities of the professionals represented. The five attributes are not arranged in order of importance; they are *all* identified as being equally essential to learning to think strategically.

Imagination

The real voyage of discovery consists not in making new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust (1871–1922), French novelist

The ability to use our imagination is a critical factor for the learning of strategy thinking. Simply dealing with information or linear matter is insufficient. One of the Japanese financial executives in the study stated:

To start, I have an idea or a problem. As I become aware, I usually start to ask questions, and, of course, then my imagination begins to act. (leans forward, talks very quickly and gradually louder) And depending on what I do about it, I can get into trouble (laughter) or have some fun! You know, imagination is, I will say to you, a very, very important part of good strategy making. This is probably the best part, and it is necessary to enjoy it—to spend time with your imagination! (smiles, sits back) I think it's a big mistake not to include imagination [in making strategy]. It is something that happens inside—and can happen anywhere. You know, other people tend to ruin this part, so I do it privately and don't tell anybody it's happening! (laughter)

A Polish senior manufacturing executive, explained the importance of imagination in making strategy: “You must always try to imagine what else or how else things could be. Imagination! This is something nobody talks about in strategy sessions; maybe they think it's not so serious or sophisticated. Or maybe it is that you cannot buy it. (laughter) But it's the jewel nobody expects in the pauper's attic.”

An American executive commented, “A really important part of making good strategy is being able to imagine things. You can't just work with facts and data. Your mind and imagination have to kick in if you're going to be any good.”

The CFO of the technology company concurred with other successful strategists in the study: “Your imagination kicks into high gear, you read everything and talk with everybody—no stone goes unturned; you keep rolling them around.” Strategic thinking requires the cognitive duo of convergent and divergent thinking. Divergent thinking is required when we break habits, see new patterns, and imagine possible connections. Reframing is a divergent exercise that simply summarizes novel connections and new possibilities.

Divergent thinking can also be accelerated through travel as we look at information, trends, and data in new ways or see and configure different patterns through the lens of a different culture. Divergent thinking can also be used to create alternative conclusions to the analysis and synthesis of data. It involves having continuous and meaningful internal conversations that are reflective and having external conversations that are informative and testing—conversations with others that focus on data and insight drawn from both outside and inside the familiar sources available within the company and industry. Critical inquiry and critical dialogue are useful divergent communication techniques.

This is very different from convergent thinking, which is used for decision making and concluding. Convergent thinking is essential much further along the strategy thinking process, and it can actually interfere with the process of thinking strategically if applied too early on. Convergent thinking is used to reframe the possibilities that exist for the organization based on objective criteria and eventually for selecting an approach. Convergent conversations can be internal and external and are used to test strategic ideas against the core competencies and values of the organization and to assess feasibility—playing out probable and improbable scenarios. Discussion and debate are excellent convergent communication techniques.

Occasionally some of my business clients tend to lump creativity and intuition together. These aspiring strategists mistakenly assume that if they focus on developing creativity, they will magically improve their intuitive judgment. Unfortunately, the two don't always function well together. It is interesting to note that creativity, by definition, is not tied to our past experiences. Yet intuition is a product of the patterns we experienced in the past as we developed pattern recognition and framing. Therefore, an intuitive approach to creativity relies on previous experience yet also transcends that experience.²

Creativity comes from combining different, seemingly unrelated, dimensions of experience.

By any measure, management and strategy are typically not regarded as particularly creative fields. It is easy to understand why: Management generally implies belonging to a compliance squad, and strategy is typically understood as planning—exceedingly beige and bland. Creativity, on the other hand, comes from combining different, seemingly unrelated dimensions of experience.

But these limits are only contemporary myths we have come to accept. Organizational myths such as these need to be identified and shattered if strategists have any hope of making innovative, adaptable, and winning strategy. I believe that one way to shatter the myth is to learn from people who are not locked into the frames of traditional management and strategy patterns and practices. We know that successful strategists delight in using their imagination when thinking strategically and that we all have the capability of transferring learning from one context to another.³ This transfer is an essential part of the informal learning process that is so vital to strategic thinking; we need to know it and trust it in order to leverage it for strategic advantage.

Ironically, at a time when innovative strategic thinking is among the most pressing concerns, business schools are upping the ante on analysis, with the serious intent of churning out people who will make innovative strategy.

One of the biggest problems in this regard is that we treat business and creativity as if they don't belong together, though they do. They seem to be strange partners only because we take the frame of polarity and position them as opposites. Within this framework, we have to pick one or the other because we take an either-or mind-set. For businesses to thrive in a competitive global economy, sustainable strategic capability is an imperative. This requires innovative strategic thinking, which draws deep from the wells of creativity. For serious strategists, I suggest looking to the arts as a rich source for developing imagination, a critical attribute to successful strategic thinking.

Ironically, at a time when innovative strategic thinking is among the most pressing concerns, business schools are upping the ante on analysis, with the serious intent of churning out people who will make innovative strategy. In terms of my earlier metaphor, this is like hoping to pluck strawberries from onion plants! I recommend instead that these MBAs be sent to the strawberry patch. If strategic innovation is what business schools wish to cultivate, students would be much better off engaging in photography, painting, design, or perhaps guitar or piano lessons in order to “know” creativity. This will contribute substantially more to their long-term ability to create an innovative strategy simply because they will have firsthand creative experience on which to draw.

At a time when companies say they are desperate to be more creative, what they do through their daily decisions prevents them from moving in that direction. Truly creative people often do not feel they connect to business. Furthermore, within most businesses there is an aversion to the very word *creative* (*innovative* is the preferred term).

Creativity is about combining the original and the new. The resultant tension is what drives many aspiring strategists to cork the creative process and return to their prior habits of mind and same-frame thinking. Our formal education teaches us that when we feel this sort of tension, we frame the situation as a problem and decide we must choose one way or another. By remaining in this traditional frame of problem solving, we stop short of ever

moving forward with the creative process. The tension that is provoked is merely a signal inviting us to move through the situation by using both, rather than either—or thinking.

I find it amusing that although the core business of any company is dependent on the ability to re-create innovative strategy, the creative people in almost every company I know are very rarely part of strategic meetings. They are excluded from a strategic thinking process that requires their greatest corporate asset, creativity, because they are assumed not to know the business side. What would happen if we excluded financial experts from the strategy process because they may not know the creative side of the thinking process?

But how is the business known? It is learned (just as the creative comes to be known). Most business strategies are fragile precisely because successful strategy is always past tense and because senior leadership has no process in place to generate sustainable, adaptive, innovative strategy. This requires including those individuals with very different perspectives and experiences to challenge, test, and refine the underlying frames that support current business strategy; it also requires understanding that shattering and reconfiguring are part of the creative process needed for strategic success.

The challenge for strategists is to analyze and assess creative processes as well as contexts in which creativity might be fostered. Innovative strategy can only come about through the combination of different perspectives and ideas in particular situations and for specific decisions. In order for that to happen, imagination must be acknowledged and appreciated as part of the strategic thinking process.

Broad Perspective

If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear as it truly is, infinite.

William Blake (1757–1827), English poet and artist

The second attribute identified as being critical to learning strategic thinking is the ability to see a situation from a broad perspective. Executives I interviewed maintained that the ability to see things from a wide perspective is an imperative because it allows them to see many things at the same time and to begin to imagine seeing things differently—both as they are and as they might be. In describing how he broadens his perspective, an American technology executive said:

I just talk to people, trying to hear about their experiences . . . all kinds of people. That's what you realize about strategy and why I like making strategy. If you want to develop a big picture or see a big picture, you need to talk to people. I mean everywhere you go, in the market line, at the beach, at the movies—even at my parent's house, flying, you name it. Wherever there are people, somebody's willing to talk. If you listen to all of them and pull back, way back, you start to see things more broadly. You have to look at the picture differently though; when you look at the whole picture, you can figure out how strange things actually fit in—and your options explode.

Interestingly, developing a broad perspective and dialogue were often referred to by the executives in the same thought. They claimed that talking to a vast and diverse range of people helps develop the ability for broad perspective. They also implied that dialogue leads to improved thinking, which leads to a broader perspective, which is necessary for making good strategy.

One of the Japanese executives exclaimed, “You must find a way to be in the highest balloon, because it gives you the very best view. You must talk to everybody all the time, not just a few people during one time of the year. You have to be a big or good listener in order to see the wide perspective.”

A Chinese executive said, “I like to look broadly at things and imagine what they might look like in different arrangements—and this is really important, I believe, for making strategy.” After reflecting on the question about the most essential requirement for thinking strategically, an American financial executive responded, “You know, another thing I guess I'd say is perspective. That's why you've got to get out and talk to people—it broadens your perspective. And that's what strategy, or good strategy, is all about. (pause) The best vantage point is from the highest point—that birds-eye view.”

The technology CFO from Hong Kong explained, “I like to see the big picture—that's why I like making strategy. Even though it is difficult to do, you must make it a habit to talk to many people, about every issue. This is how you get the broad perspective that you need to make successful strategy.”

The CEO of a financial company commented that one of the most important reasons to broaden perspective is “to improve your way of thinking. So get to the highest point, to get the best broad view. That's the best way to improve thinking because you see things differently, and then you have more possibilities for thinking.”

The most important way these successful strategists broadened their perspective was by diversifying and expanding their interactions and contacts with people because it forced them to challenge their frameworks and to see other patterns. All of the executives interviewed attributed their experience of

living and working outside their home country to broadening their perspective in ways that nothing else could.

Social scientists S. Weil and I. McGill maintain that “a person or organisation which knows only their own village will not understand it. It is through dialogue across villages that we are enabled to consider what we intend and what we do from new perspectives.”⁴ This suggests an experiential link to an expanded perspective, the attribute of broad perspective successful strategists claimed as essential to learning to make strategy. While not everyone tasked with making strategy can or will choose to live/work in another country, it is enormously beneficial to live outside one’s comfort zone and to break with the familiar as a means to broadening one’s perspective.

The attribute of broad perspective also helps to maintain a rational thinking base for thinking strategically while simultaneously allowing us to be non-linear and a-rational in the overall process. Rational and a-rational thinking function well together. Although 100% of the executives in the study had advanced educational degrees in science or business (disciplines requiring highly linear and rational thinking), they all seemed to use a broad, nonlinear, a-rational approach to thinking when they made good strategy.

These executives had an extensive capacity to shift between rational thinking and a-rational thinking and an uncanny ability to see connections and create synergies among seemingly unrelated things. This is the essence of creativity and is necessary for taking a broad perspective. Successful strategists also described their thinking in metaphorical terms, relating events and situations to something else; past experiences provided metaphors for new experiences, and the entire strategy thinking process appeared to be connected to life experiences on which they drew.

Juggle

It isn't what we don't know that gives us trouble, it's what we know that ain't so.

Will Rogers (1879–1935), American actor and humorist

The third essential attribute mentioned was the importance of having the ability to pay attention to many things all at once, specifically being able to deal with incomplete and inconsistent information, inaccurate data, and constantly changing information. This is no doubt one of the biggest challenges for global strategists.

The ability to see and to work with opposing relations and paradoxes is indeed an attribute identified by effective strategists as a requirement for strategic thinking—as opposed to planning, where the ability to eliminate paradoxes and ambivalence is required.

A technology executive in the study responded to the question about what he pays attention to and what is essential for learning to think strategically by exclaiming, “Learn to juggle! [You’re] bombarded with tons of information, especially about economics and political processes . . . and it changes all the time. [You] need to start thinking about how everything effects everything else. You juggle in your mind—that’s how you’re able to deal with so many unknowns and unpredictable things.”

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The Polish manufacturing CEO quipped, “You cannot just think about the obvious. It is very easy to gather information. Most of it is of no use—or it is not true—it is incomplete always! (pause) You must know this and treat it [information] like you carry hot potatoes!”

A technology company executive emphatically stated:

The importance of filtering and figuring out ways to use tons and tons of information, most of it incomplete and inconsistent, is a must. If you can't work with a lot of incomplete or contradictory information, you'll never be a good strategist. If you can and you enjoy it, and you're driven, then you have a chance.

In describing what he pays particular attention to when making strategy, one of the Japanese financial executives said:

I pay attention to everything all at once. (laughter) It's not good to separate or categorize things when you make strategy—everything must be included and you must figure out a way to think like this if you want to win. If you practice, at first it will look [like] a blur. Then you must

keep step[ping] back until you either see something you recognize, or maybe you will see the whole as a new idea. (pause followed by a big breath) That is how to make sense of too much information! And you must never trust it.

A country manager of a pharmaceutical division covering a remote area of southeast Asia smiled as he read his job description aloud: “responsible for corporate compliance and making strategy.” Laughing, he described it as “inhaling and exhaling at the same time!” And he’s right. On the one hand he is responsible for enforcing compliance with myriad corporate, industry, and country regulations, rules, and meticulous procedures—tasks requiring extreme convergent thinking. On the other hand he is expected to come up with a successful, sustainable, adaptable, and innovative strategy in an unbelievably competitive market—a charge requiring divergent and intuitive thinking is necessary. An ability to juggle the competing strategic demands is a reality of thinking in a global business strategy environment.

It is an everyday strategic challenge to be responsible for compliance (where the role is to ensure that others remain within the existing framework) and also to be responsible for strategic thinking (where the role is to move beyond the current framework). This is one of the great juggling challenges for global executives because they require very different mind-sets and ability sets.

No Control Over

Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm.

Maxim 358, by Publicius Syrus (first century B.C.)

The fourth attribute that executives identified as being critical to making good strategy was the ability to deal with things over which we have no control. A Japanese financial executive explained:

I’d say always prepare for the unexpected—you never know. But you’d better plan for a lot of them—things you never expected—they’ll be there! (moves forward, talks faster) And I’d say to pay attention to what you can’t control. (sits back in chair, talks louder, and gestures with hands) This is backwards from what they teach you in all these courses and books, but it’s what I think from my own experience.

The American financial company executive reminded us of the following:

The world is full of the unpredictable, and these are the things that make or break business strategy. You need to be on top of these unpredictable things, get comfortable thinking about them. (moves forward, puts both hands on tabletop) When you’re talking about developing a good strategy in this kind of a merger-and-acquisition environment, you can’t waste your time on things you can control—you’d better spend it thinking about what you can’t control.

One of the Polish executives put it another way: “We must think about what we don’t know and expect the worst always. And it’s no use having a party about what you now control, because you don’t know tomorrow. Control is only in our imagination. If you think in this way, you will ask good questions.”

This was supported by a German manufacturing company executive, who explained, “We need to think about everything, especially the things we don’t have any power over. These are the things we must include in good strategy thinking.”

A Japanese executive commented, “Thinking about strategy is not so predictable—and it is pain[ful]. I must work mostly with unknown information, many missing pieces . . . but always think about the big picture.”

To underscore the importance of being able to deal with things you can’t control when making strategy, an American executive declared, “You’re driven to find ways to overcome the unpredictable and changing obstacles and disasters, things you’re totally dependent on yet have absolutely no control over.”

Contrary to what is taught in many formal strategy-planning courses, the executives in this study overwhelmingly indicated that it was critical to pay attention to what they could not control, rather than to what they could control, in order to make a winning strategy. This appears to have been a result of their personal experience.

Interestingly, the executives used the attribute of no control as a kind of risk-leverage tool. The elements of risk and fear were referred to throughout the interviews by all of the executives as an emotional motivator for learning to make strategy. Risk and fear also contributed to their incidental learning, particularly about not trusting sources of data, which conversely led them to trust themselves. They learned to reframe situations to enable them to see new opportunities and to think and trust a-rational and intuitive thinking in situations over which they had no control.

I believe this helps explain why these successful strategists thrive on a high level of challenge and why they identified the ability to deal with things over which they have no control as being one of the five essential attributes for making strategy. The ability to deal with things over which they had no control appealed to and tested their competitive drive and strengthened their desire to win. Things over which they had no control offered challenge, which in turn offered meaningful learning, which eventually led to successful strategy thinking. The factor of fear was a motivator, and they incidentally learned to value negative experiences as being important to the learning process. This experience allowed them to take risks with decisions over which they had no control. Through their experience, they learned that negative factors were really just challenges for them to overcome in order to win.

In tough situations, successful strategists act as if they have already won, because they do not believe they can lose—akin to what poet Rainer Maria Rilke penned: “Follow your fear.” These strategists experienced the great power that comes in releasing themselves of the very thing that shamed them, and they made the old fear their source of pride.

This attribute of no control appeared to be closely related to the last attribute, desire to win. Fear of losing requires taking risks, and dealing with things over which they have no control creates risk, which means they could lose. These successful strategists have an uncompromising desire to win.

The element of risk appeared to be an enticement to these executives, for it apparently played on their competitive nature. Learning to deal with things over which they have no control seemed to give them a competitive advantage: If everyone has access to the same data, paying attention to what they can't control requires that the executives use imagination to devise a winning outcome. It seemed to appeal to their need for a game, which fed into their intense desire to win.

Desire to Win

What counts is not necessarily the size of the dog in the fight—it's the size of the fight in the dog.

Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890–1969), American general and thirty-fourth president of the United States

The fifth and final critical attribute mentioned by all of the executives interviewed was a strong desire to win. The passion and conviction necessary for

driving strategic thinking is connected to this attribute. The element of competition was a critical factor influencing their ability to learn to think strategically. In response to the question “What has allowed you to be successful in making strategy when others have not been?” the CFO of a financial company instantaneously replied, “I like to be ahead of everybody else. If you don't have that drive, you're not the one to make strategy—it won't be strong or good enough.”

The Polish manufacturing COO emphasized that in order to be successful in making strategy, “You must be determined to win, have a fighting spirit.” He explained, “Making good strategy—it's about figuring out how to win—this compelling need to get things right, perfect, or win. It's mandatory to good strategy making. Without it, you're simply making plans.”

New strategies emerge from both competition and confrontation, necessities for learning to think strategically. Without competition and confrontation, strategy will not proceed. Dialogue, discussion, and debate are all required communication techniques the successful strategists used for leveraging competitive and confrontational situations.

In response to a question about what has allowed him to be successful in making strategy when others have not been, the American CEO of the technology company exclaimed:

The stakes are too high to not win. You've got to win. You'd better be able to take risks, be extremely well informed, and always build in backups. (pause) And you'd better win. (grin) Sometimes it doesn't seem like work—it's more like a game (laughter)—and we want to win. We must win!

The German manufacturing executive succinctly stated, “I like to win. I like the challenge of the game. And when you run one of the world's best textile companies, you must win, or you lose. It's simple.”

A Japanese financial executive sheepishly confessed, “I am very stubborn, (laughter) or at least everyone says this about me—so maybe it's true. It must be this way if I want to make good strategy. I don't lose!”

A compelling desire to win can reframe reality. This made Lady Macbeth the most powerful woman of Scotland. She created the future because she alone demonstrated the greatest desire, and everyone in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* followed her agenda before their own.

Desire to win was a strong undercurrent in the successful strategists' descriptions of learning to think strategically. This was one area where they seemed to make a definitive case for black or white—either they win or they

lose. I could argue that having an intense desire to win allowed these executives to gravitate toward a highly competitive environment and even to contribute and perpetuate its competitiveness; it may also have enabled them to excel and thrive in a competitive environment. The desire to win was perceived by the executives as a motivator. It tied all of the other attributes together by becoming the reason for learning—to make a winning strategy.

Interplay of the Five Attributes

The combination of this particular set of five attributes supports critical reflection, which is the central process of dive learning that is required in the informal strategic learning model presented in Part III. The three-stage informal learning model, consisting of preparation, experience, and reevaluation stages, and the five attributes are connected. Different combinations of the five attributes, in a simultaneous interplay, are used during each of the three stages: preparation, experience, and reevaluation.

I would argue that the set of five attributes establishes a mental precondition conducive to engaging in reflective processes or that the routine use of the reflective process model fosters the set of five attributes. I might also deduce that in response to certain strategic thinking tasks, challenges, or undertakings—a particular set of attributes is, in fact, required for strategic thinking. Because so much of strategic thinking occurs informally, I argue that all of the foregoing may well contribute to developing strategic thinking.

Paying attention to and developing the combination of the five attributes is as important as the informal process we use in learning to think strategically. A compelling and fierce desire to win propels the reflective process. A vivid and active imagination generates curiosity and creativity in the reflective process. The quest for broad perspective is enhanced by both a desire to win and imagination, offering the individual a perpetual array of new possibilities that requires continuous testing. The ability to juggle, to constructively deal with many conflicting things at once, invites challenge and tension to the reflective process, especially when it is combined with the ability to constructively deal with things one has no control over. Although the specific combination of these attributes is different for each person and each strategic thinking circumstance, they are all essential to learning to think strategically.

In a surprising way, the five attributes can be both a source of challenge in the strategic thinking process and a venue to overcome challenge. As a source of challenge, this combination of five attributes presents the potential for feeling obsessed and overwhelmed.

For example, the Japanese financial CEO explained that in his quest to achieve a broader perspective, he felt overwhelmed and desperate by having to attend to so many things over which he had no control. He expressed tremendous feelings of angst when attempting to balance competing feelings of trying, on the one hand, to unleash his creativity and at the same time to rein in his imagination. He expressed distress at having to monitor his nearly compulsive desire to win. Yet he ascribed not a negative connotation to the descriptors he used (i.e., “frustration,” “overwhelmed,” “distressed”) but, instead, a positive connotation—he became animated and energized as he recalled numerous such experiences.

Instead of his succumbing to the pressure, the interplay among these attributes created motivation and challenge that, in fact, propelled him forward in the pursuit of making strategy. The executives regarded situations that could easily have been considered detrimental to making strategy as an opportunity to exercise imagination. They frequently used reflection in action to reframe the circumstance as an opportunity for a win. In this sense, being able to engage the attribute of imagination functioned as a motivator because the executives could create options and alternatives to gain a competitive advantage. According to their descriptions, the executives regarded having their imagination challenged as a kind of sport or game that was fueled by their desire to win.

In a discussion about learning within a challenging context, M. W. McCall, M. M. Lombardo, and A. M. Morrison of the Center for Creative Leadership note: “Development occurs to some degree in even the most hostile environments, so the issue is one of channeling, controlling, and enhancing whatever positive is already happening.”⁵

Communication Techniques for Attribute Integration

The deeper-level, or dive, learning domain is used extensively to connect the attributes to one another. Storytelling, dialogue, and debate were communicative learning techniques favored by the successful strategists, not only to inspire creativity and to stimulate their imagination, but to build, sustain, and connect the other attributes. Storytelling created a means by which they could deal with things over which they had no control and provided a reference

point for the testing of subsequent experiences and as a means of sharing information. Interestingly, stories in the form of parables and analogies were commonly described as a way of transferring strategic learning across contexts.

Their storytelling was reflective in nature, so, instead of just exchanging facts, the strategists indicated that they received more knowledge by putting the information into a context—a story. They tended to use this technique to challenge their assumptions and reflect both in and on action. This is congruent with a comment by informal learning experts Victoria Marsick and Marie Volpe: “Informal learning often depends on chance encounters and random events and circumstances. Only afterward do people construct a logical story to explain their learning to themselves and others.”⁶

Stories may serve as an impetus to gathering and testing data. For example, a small factual detail is brought to light in the telling of a story, making the listener realize that this detail could be crucial. This prompts an inquiry for more information from a variety of sources. Or a story may serve to broaden and deepen the data by providing context. A German manufacturing executive noted, “We just like to come together and talk about what we read—it seems we all read different things—and of course we also read the same publications. And we tell stories, a lot of stories about different scenarios.—It’s better than just talking all the time. I think storytelling elevates my thinking.”

Curiously, storytelling was also used as a kind of testing tool by the strategists. They noticed that stories change with the telling, although the facts of the circumstances on which the story is based may remain constant. Have you ever noticed how the story of a major success your business had changes depending on when the story is told (within minutes of an announcement, six months later, or 12 years later), who the audience is (your kids, a recruiter, a new hire, your rival), how often it has been told (the more it is told, the more it is tested), and who told it? The first telling of any story is likely to be quite different in its description of details, the sequence, the pace, and so on than subsequent versions of the same story.

This ability to continually add layers of context is an inherent strength of storytelling, and because stories change all the time, it allows the strategists to continually use their imagination to combine information and try out various scenarios with colleagues. The hypothetical scenarios served to engage them in reflection in action. As executives presented a story, they got a flurry of reactions, questions, and new data that challenged the original story. Reflection occurred, followed by revisions to the story; subsequently, either part of the story was retold or a brand new story was shared. More questioning

occurred, followed by still more information and data and eventually more reflection and revisions.

Storytelling also appeared to be used continually to refine the executives' thinking about strategy making. By drawing on each other's thinking and hearing their stories, the executives were able to frame and reframe situations by putting things into a broader perspective and therefore view situations, variables, and options differently. In this sense, they appeared to use what L. G. Bolman and T. Deal call a *symbolic frame*,⁷ which is effective in ambiguous or uncertain circumstances where roles, relationships, and goals are unclear.

The executives in the study were acutely aware that they were tasked with making global strategy within a chaotic environment, and storytelling seemed to allow them to create symbols to diminish the unpredictability. As Columbia University professors Victoria Marsick and Marie Volpe explain, "The symbolic frame considers the roles of myths, symbols, stories, . . . actors, rituals, ceremonies, humor, play, and metaphors in organizational life."⁸ The strategists in this study perceived a disorderly and confused environment as a challenge to advance their strategic agenda, and storytelling served as an effective communication technique for clarification and unification to this end.

In conclusion, the combination of the five attributes is as important as the informal process we use in learning to think strategically. A compelling and fierce *desire to win* propels the reflective process. A vivid and active *imagination* generates curiosity and creativity in the reflective process. The quest for *broad perspective* is enhanced by both a desire to win and imagination, offering the individual a perpetual array of new possibilities that require continuous testing. And the ability to *juggle*, to constructively deal with many things at once, invites challenge and tension to the reflective process when it is combined with the ability to constructively deal with things one has *no control* over. The specific combination of attributes involved is not the same every time, but the interplay of these attributes is consistently used when we engage in strategic thinking.

While I believe that companies interested in developing a pipeline, of human infrastructure, of strategic thinkers should be a learning organization, the question is, learning to what end? The end is not the learning itself, nor is it in the innovative strategy alone; the end is in the full realization of the strategic idea. While execution is essential, execution is not the end of the strategic value chain process.

Adaptation as a Strategic Expectation

If the aim of good strategic thinking is to create a strategy that is sustainable, innovative, and competitive, by definition it also needs to be adaptive. Therefore, any development initiative must be focused on strengthening our intuitive ability to be aware of our intuition repertoire, identify our patterns and frames, and build a habit of critical reflection. This builds adaptive capacity on which we can draw over and over.

Strategic adaptation is most often about recovery or trying to survive a crisis that has suddenly appeared and threatens the strategy.

The idea of adaptability is not news. As noted in Chapter 2, complexity theory sees strategic thinking as being first and foremost about adaptation. And if we recall the ancient Greek notion of strategy, it also made implicit reference to the need for adaptive and flexible capability in order to deal with polarities, uncertainties, complexities, and contradictions inherent in strategy.

Strategic adaptation consists of building on what has been established before while exploring new possibilities in the present. Strategic adaptation, unfortunately, is not all about creative fun. Research shows that strategic adaptation is most often about recovery or trying to survive a crisis that has suddenly appeared and threatens the strategy. This is consistent with

transformative learning in the deepest level of the dive domain (see Part IV).

In reference to the start of strategic thinking, a Japanese executive explained: "To start, you must have a purpose. Sometimes I start because I'm afraid of something, many times I suppose it's this (laughter). And you understand that being afraid is a problem. So in some sense perhaps I start with a problem, and then I just move to different places to look at the problem."

And the technology company COO explicitly stated:

I think I learn as much from things that hurt me as from things that help me—probably more if I take the time to think. It's like you have a net you drag through life. You bring along all your "collectibles," your experiences, with you. And there are times when they'll help you and times when they'll get in your way. Those are the times you can learn the most from. They're your experiences, and it's up to you what you do with them.

The inclusion of reflection in action and reflection on action had become a conscious habit over the years for many of the executives I interviewed—something they learned and valued from their experience. They seemed to be aware of, expect, and trust the chaos, tension, and unexpected elements and did not feel compelled to control the disorder. Instead, they seemed to accept the anxiety as part of the challenge and expressed both satisfaction and motivation in using reflection in action. Through their experience they found it to be part of the successful process of learning to think strategically.

The executives in the study, as so many in my practice, have the ability and confidence to turn an obstacle into a challenge and a challenge into a win. They have learned to facilitate their own learning by reflecting and reframing a challenge until it becomes a strategic opportunity for them. I continue to be fascinated by accounts of this adaptive process from executives engaged in strategic thinking—a continuous and dynamic interplay of the five attributes and the three-stage informal learning process at work.

For example, all three of the executives from a Polish manufacturing company mentioned government interference as a contextual hindrance. They referred with disdain to the degree of involvement of the government, the bureaucracy, the perception that the government's intention was to provide interference rather than support for businesses, the slow pace at which the government moved, and their past experience with governmental punitive powers.

All three of the Polish executives also indicated that the government was an "unknown" element, a "factor beyond their control," and an impassioned "source of fire" that appeared to fuel their sense of determination, which suggested that they learned incidentally to transform the negative factor of government into an element of challenge. At first, the government appeared to be an impediment to their strategic thinking, but it actually served as a motivator by creating a sense of challenge, which was an incentive to their learning. Although the government activities were cited as a negative factor, the executives seemed to regard it as something they could not control and, therefore, a challenge, rather than a real impediment to learning.

The Hong Kong technology executive explained factors that contribute to his being a successful strategy maker: "I think it's a combination of who I am and my luck, honestly. I'm basically a very driven and hardworking guy. I need to really like or be fascinated by what I'm doing—even as a kid I never just did what somebody told me. (laughter) And I like to pretend different things inside my mind. I don't give up easily. (laughter) That's probably a good trait, at least most of the time."

An adaptive strategist is able to respond rapidly and effectively to unexpected events and can quickly shift from a planned sequence of actions to an alternative that is more appropriate.⁹

Something I have noticed from my own practice that was supported by the findings of the study underlying this book is that successful strategists do not explicitly mention "mistakes" as being part of their learning. Nor do they respond to probes about the role of "mistakes" in their learning to think strategically. Surprising at first, a closer look revealed that the strategists in the study acknowledged their mistakes, but they didn't call them mistakes *per se* or distinguish mistakes from experimentation or trial and error. Their descriptions implied that they incorporated learning from these experiences into their continuous cycle of critical reflective processes. In other words, they automatically included, reflected on, and revised mistakes during the experience and reevaluation stages of the informal learning process. They also used dialogue and storytelling as techniques to test and to preempt mistakes and to adapt in order to move forward.

One of the financial executives brushed aside the word *mistake* yet went on to explain:

I don't really think about mistakes, or I'd just get stuck . . . gotta move forward. It's more like I'm adjusting to things all the time. When things don't work out, that moment becomes part of the new future. It's

strange. When this happens we look again at the data and then we pull apart the analysis. This is the part I really like because I think in a different way. It's the tough part, but I always learn from it. We imagine all these possibilities and make up a lot of stories. Telling stories is good, you know, because they help you understand what went wrong. And we talk about all kinds of things we have to try. This kind of thing happens all the time; it's just part of learning to make adjustments and it's hard to explain. There are lots of these adjustments that need to be made to strategy, lots of things go wrong. But they're not really mistakes—they're just part of the process.

I notice that successful strategists with whom I work invariably have a strong sense of self-reliance. They don't dwell on negatives or obstacles—they expect them and perceive them as challenges and as learning initiatives. Mistakes allow them to refocus their attention and force them to see things differently.

An overreliance on detailed plans and regimented procedures crowds out adaptive potential.

Adaptation is similar in some respects to improvisation. We cannot plan an improvisation—we assess the situation and react. Intuition is essential for improvisation. In strategy making, we rely on intuition to decide when to adapt and to determine the degree to which a situation is deteriorating. We rely on our intuition to decide how to adapt, which routine or action script we should use to adjust. Furthermore, we need intuition to decide whether or not to trust our adaptation, because the changes we want to make may result in subsequent, worse problems.

Details Can Doom Adaptation

In my practice, I frequently find that, although country and regional business heads are tasked with strategic responsibilities and are highly committed to developing local strategic thinkers, they nonetheless tend to cancel opportunities for strategic adaptation by creating an overreliance on excruciatingly detailed plans and procedures among their senior managers. Research has

shown that an overreliance on detailed plans and regimented procedures crowds out adaptive potential.¹⁰ An overdependence on plans and procedures becomes an impediment and runs counter to developing strategic thinking.

In contrast to strategic thinkers, strategic planners often aim to specify every specific detail, leaving nothing to chance. Unfortunately, the more details there are, the harder it is to adapt and the more fragile the plans become. Such a strategic plan becomes susceptible to actually diverging or derailing from the anticipated outcome.

In their book *Managing the Unexpected*, Karl Weick and Kathleen Sutcliffe discuss three ways that detailed plans can stifle adaptability.¹¹ First, plans make us insensitive to the anomalies that tell us it is time to adapt, because plans describe what is relevant and what is not. Anything that is irrelevant to the plan doesn't get much attention. Second, plans may include contingency actions for coping with difficulties, but these contingencies were drawn up in advance and are usually void of context, the constraints, and any new opportunities that tend to crop up the moment the plan is being implemented. And third, plans are designed to have us repeat "optimized" patterns of activity. But high-reliability organizations cope with unexpected events by adapting to circumstances rather than by depending on plans.

Adaptation is not simply building a new strategic plan to replace an old one. Rather, it means modifying a plan that is in progress via a strategic thinking process—it's difficult to catch a bird in flight. The plans we develop most often need to be improved and modified as we learn in action, because businesses compete in a grossly complex, constantly changing, uncertain global context that is saturated with incomplete and inaccurate information. Adapting strategy is much more difficult than planning strategy because there are innumerable variables, both known and unknown. We need to be strategically adaptive to deal with such a chaotic and unpredictable environment.

In my practice, I notice that executives often stumble over the paradox that the greater the uncertainty we face when making strategy, the more advantage there is to managing that uncertainty by planning to adapt. In other words, paying attention to our hunches, or our common sense, is what is needed. We tend to know intuitively that the more uncertain and unpredictable our strategic environment, the more useless our detailed plans tend to be. At the same time, prudent security measures require that we have extraordinarily detailed and well-rehearsed plans that can be executed in a nearly automatic manner; for this, we need to practice technical drills without error and to understand information. Strategic thinking is not about the creation of a static plan but,

rather, about setting a dynamic thinking process in motion. An important part of facilitating strategic thinking capacity is to create the expectation of adaptation.

Strategic planning is not the antithesis of strategic thinking; rather, it is complementary to it and needs to be balanced within the overall strategy-making process.

The idea of *bounded rationality* was first introduced by Herbert Simon, who won a Nobel prize in 1978 for his work on decision making and problem solving. His idea is that there are too many facts and too many combinations of facts for us to make any important decision by simply gathering and analyzing all the facts.¹² He found that the more complex the decision, the faster the complications add up and the more it becomes necessary to “know” how to make a decision in ways other than through cognitive sequential analysis.

We need a method that allows us to make effective decisions in these all-too-familiar strategic situations. Technical analysis and computer models can help, but only by providing a sophisticated synopsis or consolidated information. Given that most global strategy is created under these complex circumstances, the decisions we make are connected to many conditions that lack metrics yet weigh heavily on the overall strategic risk quotient. Therefore, when we consider learning to think strategically, we must pay attention to honing our intuitive skills in order to balance our analytical skills.

Strategic planning is not the antithesis of strategic thinking; rather, it is complementary to it and needs to be balanced within the overall strategy-making process. Meticulous planning is an imperative to the implementation phase of strategy. Instead of a pointless debate about which is right—intuition or analysis—we can see that both are necessary. The real challenge is not whether to trust intuition, but how to strengthen it to make it more trustworthy. One way to support the development of strategic thinking is to offer strategists tools and exercises for enhanced intuitive decision making. Furthermore, if we expect to adapt our strategy, we tacitly accept the unpredictability of it and openly try to work with it, instead of trying to outplan it.

Strategic adaptation, however, is not always a good idea, and improvisation is not inherently beneficial to strategic thinking. A well-developed intuition allows us to “know” when to change a plan and when to leave it alone. Our intuition functions as our internal red flag, giving us a sense of the benefits from taking action and alerting us to the unintended consequences that arise from making adaptations. Our ability to adapt is only as good as our intuition, which is based on our experience.



WHAT CAN WE DO TO IMPROVE STRATEGIC THINKING?

*Engaging in Informal Learning
Approaches: Strengthening the
Five Attributes and Critical
Reflective Processes*

I have never let my schooling interfere with my education.

Mark Twain (1835–1910), American author

Developing the Five Essential Attributes

This part does not include a list of how-to exercises and activities. Rather, I am recommending things that work for clients in my consulting practice to support the long-term sustainable development of strategic thinking, things that are heavily reliant on informal learning yet easily adaptable to formal workshops and lectures that are more structured. I invite readers to use the information in this book as a source to create their own developmental ideas, to experiment, and to modify current approaches.

The overall recommendations I put forth in this part focus on strengthening the five essential attributes discussed in Part IX (imagination, broad perspective, juggle, no control over, and desire to win) and on developing critical reflection as discussed in Parts IV, V, and VI. These recommendations enable rigorous practice of the combined five attributes and critical reflection, thus allowing strategists to link learning in their expanded life experience to a global business strategy context.

Chapter 26 discusses the role the arts can play in developing strategic thinking. Chapter 27 describes three practical ways to address development of critical reflective processes: “and” thinking, action learning, and lateral thinking. Chapter 28 presents a list of suggestions for individuals, learning facilitators, business schools, and organizations.

If we assume, as many organizations do, that human capital is the only true competitive global strategic advantage, and if we also assume that the global reality, in which we make strategy, promises only to become more complex and challenging, then common sense dictates that we address strengthening and expanding the strategic thinking capacity within organizations as a long-

term business development investment. The technical rational approach to strategic planning addresses only the analytical aspect of the matter, leaving strategic thinking open to chance and interpretation.

If businesses are to remain largely technical operations, most organizations are fairly well equipped with excellent resources for strategic planning. But if organizations are expected to be competitive within the realm of growing complexities, contradictions, and change, and if business schools are to be perceived as something more than just expensive technical schools, most are far from being prepared.

With regard to strategy, organizations are beginning to recognize the gap between what they need (strategic thinkers) and what many are continuing to develop by default (strategic planners). If businesses are to remain largely technical operations, most organizations are fairly well equipped with excellent resources for strategic planning. But if organizations are expected to be competitive within the realm of growing complexities, contradictions, and change, and if business schools are to be perceived as something more than just expensive technical schools, most are far from being prepared. If this situation is to change for the better, businesses and business schools need to engage in some significant frame shattering and reframing regarding their approach toward strategy development.

While there are many things that can be done to strengthen strategic thinking, I recommend a somewhat unconventional approach of emphasizing experience in the arts and humanities as well as critical reflective processes in the strategy development approaches used by organizations and for business school curricula. This, in combination with the continued emphasis on analysis, logic, and linear thinking, can offer a potentially comprehensive and practical approach to addressing strategic thinking needs of an organization.

This first subsection explores the basic theme of participation in artistic endeavors as a recommendation for learning to think strategically. Odd as it may sound on the surface, such participation can support learning to think strategically, because the arts offer infinite scope and depth, are descriptive rather than prescriptive in nature, are inclusive of all five of the critical attributes,

require the use of critical reflection, and allow endless application of strategic thinking, depending on time and circumstance.

The Arts to the Rescue

So what does participation and experience in artistic endeavors bring to the development of strategic thinking? It has nothing to do with artistic talent *per se*; the aim is not to achieve fame and fortune as an artistic master but, rather, to develop the five attributes and critical reflective processes necessary for strategic thinking. An arts experience “opens the doors of perception,” as poet William Blake wrote in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

While an expansive life experience may include a multitude of activities that broaden our horizon and open new vistas, one of the most comprehensive and powerful strategic thinking influences I have experienced in my own business life and in working with clients is through extensive participation in the arts. Learning to think strategically is strengthened not merely from participating in an art; it must be linked with critical reflection in order to be beneficial.

Traditionally, strategy development has focused primarily on economics, finance, and analytical thinking. Emotion, imagination, intuition, and reflective processes have largely been invisible to strategy development, yet they are essential to creating and adapting the making of meaning within the strategic thinking process. When clients are focused on learning to think strategically, I highly recommend active participation in any of the arts because it contributes to the development of all five attributes (imagination, broad perspective, juggle, no control, and desire to win), requires critical reflective processes, and broadens their experience repertoire.

We can acquire firsthand learning through the experience of doing photography, painting, writing, singing, dancing, playing an instrument, and so on. We can also learn through secondhand experience—what the early 20th century philosopher William James called “knowledge about” the arts and humanities, for example, by listening to an orchestra, watching a dance, reading a novel, or seeing a play. Naturally, what we read, hear, see, and feel about the play, novel, painting, or dance performance contributes to our “knowledge about,” which often triggers our deeply held beliefs. We find ourselves taking sides with a particular character and passionately defending or vilifying the actions of another. Experiencing the arts is a great way to surface the assumptions and become aware of the convictions on which we take strategic action and make decisions.

When either first- or secondhand artistic experience is coupled with critical reflection components such as critical inquiry, reflection, and dialogue (which can unfold nicely in a bar over drinks), personal interpretations and assumptions can be tested and new alternatives brought to light. This is what happens as we create alternative endings when we disagree or are disappointed with an unsatisfactory ending. Through critical reflection we test and challenge our assumptions and try to imagine other possibilities.

Nonlinear, a-rational thinking, divergent and convergent thinking, critical dialogue, and critical reflection—all come into play when we become engaged in an arts experience. With drama, a novel, or a film, there is often a visceral feeling that compels us to take a particular position. Engaging in critical reflection and critical dialogue about the assumptions we hold regarding these incidents is a great way to build analogies and to facilitate the transfer the learning of such an experience to strategy problems. The content of the drama or novel need not be business related, because it is the process reflection and premise reflection and metaphoric conversion that are essential to transferring the artistic experience across contexts.

*An arts encounter can become a metaphor
for a business strategy experience (and vice
versa) if critical reflection and critical
dialogue follow it.*

Participation in an art form not only exposes us to new patterns through heightened sensory stimulation and imagination, but it experientially engages both the affective and cognitive learning dimensions that are needed to think strategically. Experiencing the arts (either in “doing” or in “knowledge about”) requires us to use both the surface and the deeper learning domains. These artistic experiences allow us to practice essential aspects of strategic thinking without really “thinking” about it. Mental agility and imagination are strengthened as we look for parallels and patterns within a business context.

Furthermore, we learn to deal with paradox and contradiction as inherent features of the arts and are nudged into using critical inquiry and critical reflective processes as a way of making meaning. Our feelings lead to questions that require a cognitive response, and soon an iterative pattern between the cognitive and affective is set in motion.

An arts encounter can become a metaphor for a business strategy experience (and vice versa) if critical reflection and critical dialogue follow it. It is

through critical reflective processes that the learning acquired from participation in the arts transfers to strategic thinking. Believe it or not, I find that my clients generally “get it” very quickly. The practice of transfer of learning from one context to another presents us with one of the most compelling learning experiences—it develops strategic innovation, sustainability, and adaptability like nothing else!

Benefits of Engaging in the Arts

Based on work with corporate executives in my consulting practice, I find there are innumerable strategic thinking benefits that come from actively engaging in the arts or other creative endeavors on a continual basis. Through engagement in the arts, we experience and practice broadening our perspective, making connections, seeing unusual relations, and thinking in new ways—precisely what is needed for learning to think strategically! Participation in the arts supports the development of the five attributes (imagination, broad perspective, juggle, no control, desire to win) by providing opportunities to do the following.

■ Expand perspective

We see, hear, feel different interpretations of the same data; balance individual and group roles; experience the impact of elemental changes in structure, form, texture, dynamics, distortion, diminution, and exaggeration; experience historical and cultural contexts on the interpretation of data. For example, although the musical notes printed on a page are fixed, they can be interpreted in many different ways. We recognize a tune, yet it is different each time because of the instrumentation, the tempo, the acoustics, our mood, and so forth. The smile of Mona Lisa remains the same, beautiful and fixed over the centuries; yet it changes with each viewing.

■ Deal with many competing things at once

We pay attention to the mastery of technique and simultaneously focus on the overall form, the structure of a piece, changing emotions, and creativity. We learn to juggle many things at once, focusing and shifting our attention with ease.

■ Engage imagination

The arts foster creativity and infinite possibilities. We see new relationships and connections between things and as a result of our decisions, actions, and responses.

- Experience tension

An affective dimension is inherent in the arts. We have a feeling that generates an intense reaction that requires a release. Pride or humility accompanies an awareness of our habits, performance, or creations.

- Pay attention to things we can't control

We understand that we can't control every specific aspect of the final movement of an orchestral performance—only our part. We can't control the physical properties of clay—they are what they are. Nor can we control the rotational capacity of the human hip or ankle. Yet we pay close attention to these things over which we have no control in order to work with them.

- Develop emotional awareness

We experience a wide range of emotions when viewing a photograph or listening to a brass quintet—from disgust, revulsion, pain, aggression, and sadness to happiness, pleasure, eroticism, and ecstasy.

- Deal with paradox

We deal with the finished and the incomplete; repetition and free form; continuity and deviation; prescription and creation; structure and experimentation; sameness and surprise.

- Accept incomplete information

A creation is never truly a completed work. Just as successful strategy is always past tense, a successful performance is only a moment in time passed and is never finished.

- Take a risk

Learning something new requires commitment and risk. We place ourselves in the vulnerable position of being a nonexpert, a novice, and possibly being judged incompetent.

- Learn discipline

Regular practice is required for improvement. Practice requires discipline, sacrifice, precision, sequence, repetition, drill, and consistency. Discipline is required to balance technique versus feelings, which is required for artistic mastery.

- Appreciate practice

Practice requires feedback and determination. We learn to appreciate a distinct sense of time (no shortcuts), movement toward something we strongly desire, nonlinear progress, and a combination of thinking and feeling.

- Learn the creative process through technique

Creation doesn't just happen; learning the technical rudiments is necessary to create.

Although I am a big proponent of fostering informal learning, I also adamantly support the intermittent use of highly structured formal learning as a means of supporting informal learning. For example, formal learning from workshops, presentations, and provocative lectures can focus on “learning about” artistic information (e.g., topics such as form exaggeration and figure distortion in abstract painting). Strategists may eventually then transfer the learning across contexts and identify parallels and metaphors in their respective strategic environment. The emphasis is not on artistic perfection, but on strengthening strategic thinking ability.

Likewise, formal learning sessions on “learning about” critical reflective processes (e.g., critical inquiry or the role of intuition) can be another very useful step to fostering informal learning to think strategically. Formal skills practice sessions can effectively focus on “doing” critical processing techniques, such as drilling critical questions or practicing listening techniques.

Developing Critical Reflective Processes

The skillful use of critical reflective processing (critical reflection, critical dialogue, and critical inquiry) is another way to address the development of the five attributes that are necessary for learning to think strategically: imagination, broad perspective, juggle, no control, and desire to win. I want to underscore that critical reflection does not necessarily lead to strategic thinking, but it is an essential component. In other words, the approaches suggested here may foster critical reflection, but they do not necessarily lead to changed perspectives in practice.

This chapter comprises three sections. The first discusses how reflective processes strengthen the five attributes. The second section explores “and” thinking. The third section presents a brief overview of two learning process approaches—action learning and lateral thinking—as ways to support the development of critical reflective processes and, in turn, the five attributes.

Critical Reflective Processes Strengthen the Five Attributes

As we have seen throughout the book, the five attributes overlap and are interdependent. Rather than addressing each of the five attributes separately, I find it more practical and realistic to look at how critical reflective processes can strengthen the combination of the five attributes.

How do critical reflective processes strengthen the five attributes? Active participation in any creative and artistic pursuit requires the use of critical reflective processes in order to make a meaningful connection to strategic

thinking. Therefore, when we incorporate critical reflective processes in our arts experience, the combination of the five attributes naturally gets strengthened through the following.

- **Macro–Micro connection**

We constantly vacillate between macro- and microperceptions, experiencing the relationship between the part and the whole. We also experience the consequences of having a single perspective and the benefits of taking a broad perspective.

- **Focus**

We practice concentration when the focal point continually changes. We also learn to pay attention to different cues and signals, such as the use of amplification and minimization, accents, or silence, to gain or refocus attention. Additionally, we learn to focus on the appropriate domain of learning required at a given moment. The instrumental, surf domain requires a skills response, while the deeper, dive domain requires a more intuitive feeling level—practicing focus enables us eventually to make this a tacit ability.

- **Reflection in action**

Through practice and repetition, we refine reflection and reaction. There is no endpoint in an artistic endeavor because reflection and experience are continually at work. We constantly ask, How else? What else? When else? Who else?

- **Surprise**

We experience surprise as a means of shifting our focus. Our pattern recognition is altered and we shift or divert our attention. Our affective learning dimension is heightened—we laugh, gasp, gulp, or cringe as a response to a dance movement, a costume, or a line in a play.

- **Intuition**

We learn to trust our intuition through using it and reflecting on it. This happens naturally in the arts—as we acquire experience through practice, feedback, and repetition, we develop our intuition and become confident at using it.

- **Affective awareness**

We experience the subtleties and variances of emotions and the impact emotion has on an arts experience or performance. We also become aware of feelings attached to reactions that an artistic experience invokes.

- **Integration**

We synthesize and integrate the affective domain with the cognitive domain, the analytic with the intuitive, and the instrumental with the deeper learning domain.

- **Systems thinking**

We figure out the influence and impact of the relationships between performer, audience, technicians, media, the business operations, teachers, the composer, and so on.

- **Learning transfer**

We transfer this artistic learning to strategic thinking—one experience becomes a metaphor for the other, which facilitates pattern recognition, framing, shattering, and reframing.

As we see from this list, the use of critical reflective processes (critical reflection, inquiry, and dialogue) supports the development of the five attributes necessary for learning to think strategically. Another way to do this is through the creation of scenarios, possibilities, and alternatives to problems. Surprisingly, we often resist examining strategic alternatives thoroughly because it can lead to confusion or ambivalence. Asking questions about alternatives seems like common sense, but it is rarely done in a disciplined and open manner at traditional strategy meetings because political expediency and same-frame thinking tend to get in the way.

Critical reflection, inquiry, and dialogue also develop the five attributes, in that they sharpen reflection in action and reflection on action. Critical reflective processing also helps bring in diverse perspectives and divergent opinions on strategic issues. When reflection in and on action is repeated enough times and the results are successful, it becomes second nature, and we ultimately trust the intuitive judgment that comes from our frequent experience—a huge advantage for learning to think strategically.

“And” Thinking

Critical reflection, inquiry, and dialogue are also useful to improve our ability to make sense of opposites, contradictions, polarities, and paradoxes in a way that generates new ideas and new possibilities. I call this ability, quite appropriately, “and” thinking—making new meaning of this *and* that. As we know, much of global strategy making requires an ability to deal with contradictory information and paradoxes. Making strategy that is adaptive does not afford us the time for a long process of elimination until we finally get it down to just “this” and eliminate “that.”

“And” thinking requires making meaning of “both.”

"And" thinking is part of our contemporary strategy-making reality. It is a major variance to the technical rational "this-or-that" approach to problem solving and decision making that is traditionally taught in strategy courses. "And" thinking can be an especially difficult way of thinking, because it runs counter to the notion of technical rationality that relies on a scientific process of elimination. While the aim of the scientific process is to reduce to a single best, strategic thinking opts for a process that is adaptive and generative. "And" thinking requires making meaning of "both." It requires that we temporarily suspend judgment and invite new possibilities that may seem exaggerated and ridiculous. I find that once executives begin to practice "and" thinking, they invariably report that their confidence in creating new possibilities for solutions improves considerably.

Most often I find American strategists would rather take a risk of being wrong all the way than to live with the tension of ambivalence that is inherent in "and" thinking.

Curiously, in my work with strategists in many countries, I have noticed that Americans in particular often prefer extremes to ambivalence when it comes to strategic thinking. My American clients often insist on a this-or-that decision very early in the strategy-making process. Some of the common underlying assumptions that begin to surface through inquiry and dialogue include: fence-riding is bad, wrong, and weak; good strategists can or should be able to control everything; and, there is only one best way.

I have noticed that Americans like the expedience that comes with being definitive in the moment: pick or choose, this or that, either-or. Most often I find American strategists would rather take a risk of being wrong all the way than to live with the tension of ambivalence that is inherent in "and" thinking. However, what is required for global strategic thinking is being comfortable with the inherent tension of dealing with complex circumstances that include opposites, contradictions, and paradoxes in order to be able to shatter and reframe.

We are making strategy in an increasingly paradoxical and uncertain world, and the business world therefore should be thought of as a paradoxical network of global *and* local, general *and* specific, modern *and* postmodern environments. It also consists of fragmentation *and* globalization, hetero-

geneity *and* uniformity, passive consumption *and* active customization, individualism *and* tribalism, and the old *and* the new. Furthermore, we need to understand, acknowledge, and pay attention to developing both affective *and* cognitive, rationality *and* intuition, dialogue *and* debate, inquiry *and* reflection, and convergence *and* divergence. Strategic thinking requires cooperation and competition, collaboration and confrontation as different approaches to the same means of challenge and testing.

A word of clarification here. I do not want to suggest the use of "and" thinking as a compromise, because compromise weakens the strategic decision on both sides. Rather, we want to strengthen the strategic decision by looking at new connections that are forced through the use of "and" thinking.

The very idea of forcing two opposing or contradictory ideas or opinions into a single thought or concept can create tremendous tension and imbalance—to the point of outbursts and mental shutdowns. "And" thinking can also lead to innovative breakthroughs because of the rich and deep reflection, critical inquiry, and critical dialogue that work with the tension.

Chaos theory warns that the closer we get to thinking we understand a pattern and believing we can control it, the more likely we are to be surprised and frustrated when it turns out to be quite different from what we imagined. For strategists it is imperative to practice thinking that facilitates dealing with contradictions. Daily life regularly reminds us that our minds and our businesses are not always systems in balance. If we allow our mind to play regularly with highly unlikely possibilities in relation to some current pattern or trend, then the future will not come as a devastating surprise. We will have a large repertoire of experience with such possibilities, which increases the likelihood of adapting.

"And" thinking is about making seemingly unrelated connections with the intent of generating new possibilities. The very idea of forcing two opposing or contradictory ideas or opinions into a single thought or concept can create tremendous tension and imbalance—to the point of outbursts and mental shutdowns. "And" thinking can also lead to innovative breakthroughs because of the opportunity for rich and deep reflection, critical inquiry, and critical

dialogue that work with the tension. It is imperative that we learn this kind of “and” thinking if we want innovative and adaptive strategic thinking. An ability to deal with incomplete information teaches us to trust our instincts, intuition, and self-confidence.

As emphasized throughout the book, thinking strategically requires a very different learning process than planning strategically. The two can be complementary — strategic planning and strategic thinking need to be framed not as opposing either-or choices but, rather, as a new frame.

Two Learning Processes: Action Learning and Lateral Thinking

Two learning processes that I encourage anyone interested in strategic thinking to use to develop critical reflective processes are action learning and lateral thinking. I recommend these in particular because they develop critical reflective processes, they are flexible and integrative, and they can be either highly structured and formal or very informal.

Action Learning

Action learning (AL) is essentially an approach that consists of learning and action. While AL programs vary considerably, according to action learning expert Michael Marquardt of George Washington University they all comprise six components: problem, group, questions, action, learning, and coach.¹

Strategic development programs in corporations and universities are intended to assist managers and executives in making better strategy. Although a few programs may help achieve this goal, most do not. Learning to think strategically is not something learned overnight or through listening to strategy gurus. It requires emotional (affective) and intellectual (cognitive) learning, the inclusion of life experiences, the sum of the five attributes, and being adept at using critical reflective processes. In an effort to change strategic thinking, feedback, confrontation, and reflection are imperatives. This can sometimes be overwhelming, unwitting, or frightening.

Reg Revans introduced the concept of action learning in the 1940s in the United Kingdom.² Since then, there have been many interpretations and variations of its application. In a nutshell, AL is a systematic and structured approach to developing cognitive and affective discipline, skills, and thinking habits — essentials for learning to think strategically, because it assists with learning transfer across contexts.

With regard to strategic thinking, AL integrates informal and formal learning and is an excellent way to establish individual and organizational use of the deeper learning domain for strategic problem solving and decision making. Once initial problems are formulated, there is ample room for uncovering patterns of thinking, inferences, and so on. Though the strategic thinking process is complex and dynamic, its components can be structured to a certain extent. AL encourages participants to experiment and make discoveries about their own learning as they embark on solving strategy problems. Furthermore, it also develops a cadre of people who have the capacity to use reflective processes in strategic thinking.

Linear and logical critical thinking can be included as a structured part of an AL process as a means of balancing the nonlinear and creative nature of the five essential attributes. Critical thinking establishes a logical chain of reasoning that is useful to unravel assumptions and to test new frames and ways of thinking. In critical thinking a pattern of reasoning, starting with the basic construct of a reason → conclusion, is established and elaborated on. The process moves toward complexities, such as the construction and deconstruction of an argument, developing and testing hypotheses, analyzing assumptions, evaluating inferences and causal explanations. Fluency and confidence in using critical thinking are necessary for shifting back and forth between dialogue, discussion, and debate as well as for testing rational validity of ideas generated using a-rational thinking.

The implementation of AL can vary significantly depending on a company's specific goals, time frames, and individuals involved. What is important is that strategic imperatives be translated into business initiatives that drive action learning.

Lateral Thinking

Lateral thinking (LT) is an approach to strengthening the strategic thinking attributes of imagination, broad perspective, and juggling. According to the originator of lateral thinking, Edward De Bono, “Lateral thinking is both an attitude and a method of using information.”³ LT is a kind of nonlinear, a-rational thinking that is concerned with changing patterns. Instead of taking a pattern and then developing it, as happens with vertical thinking, LT aims to restructure the pattern by putting things together in a different way. By its very nature, it is compatible with and supportive of developing adaptive, innovative, and sustainable strategy.

De Bono further notes that in using lateral thinking “one acknowledges the usefulness of a pattern, but instead of regarding it as inevitable, one regards

it as only one way of putting things together. This attitude challenges the assumption that what is a convenient pattern at the moment is the only possible pattern.”⁴ Since successful strategy is always past tense, LT is enormously relevant and important for learning to think strategically because it emphasizes movement and future.

De Bono contrasts two terms: *vertical thinking* and *lateral thinking*. While acknowledging that lateral and vertical thinking are complementary, he differentiates the two by noting that vertical thinking is selective, meaning that it excludes other ways of thinking about accomplishing tasks. This vertical method is a derivative of technical rationality. By contrast, lateral thinking is generative and openly seeks to include other ways of approaching things. With vertical thinking we select the most promising approach to a problem. The intent of LT is to generate as many alternative approaches as possible. This supports the kind of mental process needed for strategic thinking.

*Lateral thinking enhances the effectiveness
of vertical thinking by offering it more to
select from.*

In his well-known book *Lateral Thinking*, De Bono explains the necessity of withholding judgment when using lateral thinking as being threefold: “to arrange information in a way which would never have come about in the normal course of events; to hold an arrangement of information without judging it; and to protect from dismissal an arrangement of information which has already been judged as impossible.”⁵ The ability to suspend judgment is one of the most basic principles of LT, and it is also one of the fundamental points of difference from vertical thinking.

With regard to strategic thinking, LT is useful for generating ideas, while vertical thinking is useful for developing and implementing ideas. Lateral thinking enhances the effectiveness of vertical thinking by offering it more to select from. The implications for using LT to strengthen the five attributes are obvious, but it is necessary for strategists and facilitators of learning to clarify whether the situation calls for developing strategic planning or strategic thinking—that is, vertical or lateral thinking.

Suggestions for Learning to Think Strategically

This final chapter consists of four subsections, each focusing on suggestions for a particular group: individuals, learning facilitators, business schools, and businesses.

Suggestions for Individuals

There are several things that individuals can do to support the development of strategic thinking. First and foremost, participate in any creative art form, even if you’re not “that type.” It is not about whether you take up piano lessons or painting, carpentry or cooking, but that you are doing it. Enjoy whatever creative endeavor you choose. It is also beneficial to partner with a good coach or mentor who can guide you through reflective processes (critical dialogue, critical inquiry, critical reflection) until it becomes a habit; this supports the transfer of learning to a strategy context.

Additionally, keep a journal about your experience—your progress, reactions, observations, what you are doing and your feelings, what is easy, what is a struggle, what are you noticing about yourself and your progress. I also suggest that you use the five attributes as a guide for your journal reflections and questions. Draw parallels (literally and figuratively) about what you are noticing and experiencing in your artistic pursuit and about what you observe and think about strategy. Dialogue about your journal notes with colleagues, a coach, friends, or a teacher. Last, switch art forms (e.g., from photography to playing guitar), and pay attention to similarities across the arts and creative pursuits as a way to build a repertoire of metaphoric learning.