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HOW TO BECOME A STRATEGIC LEADER: HELPFUL TIPS

Provided by National University, [Center for Creative Leadership MBA](#)

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Mission focused or operational? Big picture or task oriented? Sometimes we tend to group leaders in one of two buckets: people who've mastered day-to-day process management versus those with a vision. But this either/or analysis is flawed and doesn't tell the whole story of what it takes to be a strategic leader.

In truth, the most strategic leaders know how to do both. In their thoughts and actions, they have the ability to zoom in and out, going from a narrow to large focus at a moment's notice, while always remaining focused on the future. Rather than viewing interruptions as a distraction, they see them as a challenge, and they understand that their organization is interconnected.

For leaders who feel confident in executing either strategy or tasks, here's some good news: you can build the skills required to do both. Read on to learn how to think strategically, influence strategically, and act strategically.

THINK STRATEGICALLY AS YOU GATHER INFORMATION.

In leadership coaching sessions, many mid-level leaders report a lack of time as the primary factor standing between them and strategic leadership. How, they ask, can they scan the industry; focus on where their organization is going; and look at what is really important if they are already in over their heads with work?

In order for these leaders to be strategic, they must learn to lighten their load — either by delegating or by letting go of tasks that are not fundamentally strategic.

Freeing up time is half the battle; the other half is using that time wisely.

To focus on their organization's future, leaders should be aware of their environment. That environment includes the wider industry beyond their single organization, as well as their internal environment. Look for small actions that help expand your mindset. For example, to better understand your external environment, consider setting aside time each day or week to read a financial publication or scan an industry report.

To better understand your internal environment, learn to ask the right questions. When you talk to your supervisors or key stakeholders, discover the following:

- What is our unique value?
- What are a few of our key drivers where we should invest our resources?
- How do we resolve conflicting priorities?
- Do our organizational capabilities allow us to execute our business strategy?
- What are the leadership competencies and behaviors needed to execute our business strategy?



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Then reflect on their answers and keep them front of mind as you continue to be aware of greater industry trends and as you continue to collect information on your own organization. As you collect new information, evaluate it within the context of the insights you gained.

As a strategic leader, you can help your organization differentiate itself from the competition by focusing on those initiatives you need to do well and can do well.

INFLUENCE STRATEGICALLY BY BUILDING A NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS THAT SPAN BOUNDARIES.

Oftentimes, we focus on our functional responsibilities at the expense of paying attention to how the organization's functions connect. Strategic leaders pay attention to how work gets done throughout their organization — and they understand that they play a role. Throughout that network, they build relationships accordingly.

Maybe that means scheduling 30-minute informational interviews with colleagues throughout the organization, or maybe it's a more informal, coffee-break approach. The goal is to build relationships strategically so that you better understand the impact of your decisions on the wider organization.

You can also influence strategically by facilitating problem-solving sessions. Often, senior-level leaders focus on how their function can solve a specific problem without broadening their lens. But working sessions are most effective when they unite different groups of people.

When leading problem-solving sessions, remember to include stakeholders from various stages of their careers. A significant amount of work happens among mid-level leaders, and when they connect to solve problems, they can have a lot of influence.

As you work to achieve long-term objectives, bear in mind that strategic work doesn't always happen quickly. Whereas operational leaders manage day-to-day functions in order to meet short-term objectives, strategic leaders operate with a focus on the future. They understand how to integrate short-term results while maintaining a long-term perspective.

ACT STRATEGICALLY BY CONSIDERING ORGANIZATIONAL INTERDEPENDENCIES.

In the face of ambiguity, complexity, and chaos, acting strategically means taking decisive actions that support the strategic direction of your organization.

Because you're already thinking and influencing strategically, you understand how decisions get deployed within your organization's unique functions. If you're making strategic decisions with an organization-wide impact, you realize that each of these functions has its own set of processes and steps they'll take to make those decisions come to life.

To deploy your organization's mission and vision, you need to have the right culture and the right people in place. Let's say your organization wants to focus on innovation, for example. Does your current culture allow you to change organizational behavior so you can be more innovative?



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While you may not see results immediately, acting strategically involves taking decisive, timely actions. Strategic leaders don't have the luxury of spending months to unlock the ideal digital strategy. Instead, they must act at the speed of change, understanding that they will have an opportunity to re-strategize as they learn new things.

In other words, strategic leaders are learning agile: they pay close attention to the parts of their strategy that work, as well as those that don't work. If their actions do not have the desired impact, they learn from their mistakes and try something different in the future.

Many people believe that strategic leadership means making the right choice at the right time. In reality, however, strategy is most often a discovery process. Only with real-time information are you able to think, act, and influence strategically.

National University has partnered with the Center for Creative Leadership to create a Master of Business Administration that focuses on leadership. This partnership is driven by the 50-year history each institution holds, in both online adult education and leadership upskilling.

This article showcases content from the Strategic Leadership course that is part of the CCL MBA program. To learn more about the CCL MBA, visit <https://nu.edu/cclmba/>.