

See the big picture.

NINE STEPS TO BEING STRATEGIC

Bravium 



We consistently hear two things from Executives who invite us in to lead their strategy planning process. “My people are great at what they do, but they are stuck in the weeds” or “I wish my people could see the bigger picture once in a while.”



Has this ever happened to you?

You leave the office feeling satisfied that you made a dent in the pile of emails that flooded in while you were attending meetings all day. But by morning, with your coffee in hand, you see the emails have returned and, like Gremlins, have multiplied. You even left the office feeling great knowing that there were at least thirty minutes open on your schedule tomorrow. Maybe you thought to yourself, “Whew, I might have a chance to get ahead tomorrow,” but now, it’s been filled in by yet another meeting, one that took your sacred thirty minutes and double-booked you for the meeting after it. With this daily onslaught, it’s no wonder that few people regularly see the big picture.

We notice a transformation in leaders that attend our workshops and offsite meetings. About ninety minutes into our session, they’ve completely forgotten about the daily issues and start envisioning a better future for the organization. They begin to take part in a robust dialog about challenges and opportunities at the organizational level. They allow themselves to be creative, and they even begin to laugh and play a bit.

It’s in these moments where we see two themes appear over and over again. First, leaders wish they could show up this way every day. They’re at their best when they are open, calm, and with a sense of clarity and confidence. Second, they don’t have the luxury to spend this much time away from the office in the cocoon we’ve built to protect them from distractions. Leaders regularly admit to us that they don’t exercise these muscles as often as they should. They like how it feels, and they are hungry for more.

With that in mind, we’ve developed nine guideposts to help you think and act strategically every day. It’s a way of thinking and doing things that runs counter to conventional behaviors, but putting these guideposts into practice will allow you to have a more significant impact on your organization.

1

Get on the balcony.

If you're like most people, you're a "get stuff done" kind of person. If you see a problem, you likely have an answer locked and loaded before other people realize it's an issue. Your manager, peers, and employees come to you when they have a problem that needs to be solved now. You've likely built your reputation and career on your excellent judgment, responsiveness, and problem-solving. You've become the go-to person in a crisis. It feels good, doesn't it?

We've got bad news for you. We don't want to offend you, but this constant movement and problem-solving are preventing you from thinking. We're not talking about the rapid response thinking that you do effortlessly every day. We're talking about deep thinking. The kind of thinking that allows you to explore possibilities, learn new things, and raise powerful questions. Cal Newport, in his book *Deep Work*, defines it as "focusing persistently and without distraction on a cognitively demanding and valuable task." When was the last time you did this?

Most of us rarely do it, and the reason is simple. We don't have time for it. We've allowed the emails, meetings, and smartphones to distract us from the value we were meant to create.

So what are we to do about it? William Ury says "Go to the balcony." From the balcony of our lives, relationships, and work, we can see all the moving pieces at their appropriate scale. It allows us to recalibrate our emotions and energy. We can calmly assess and value each situation and circumstance. From here, we can begin to ask questions, which aren't easy to answer without space and depth.

But how do we get on the balcony? It's simple, but it's not easy. What would you do if you woke up tomorrow and were sick? We mean really sick, not the "go to work anyway" sick, but Ebola virus sick. You would call in sick, and the team would ... survive without you. They would figure it out and go about solving problems. They might do it differently than you would have, but it would get done, and life would go on. If this is the case, why couldn't you call in sick a few weeks from now? Schedule a time on your calendar to be out of the office and away from distractions just to think. Bill Gates spends a few weeks a year locked away in a cabin just to read and think. He's a pretty important guy with a lot to do too. If he can do it, why can't you?

Here's what happens if you don't do it. Nothing. Life will go on, and you can be pretty darn successful in your career. However, if you never get up on the balcony, you won't make the meaningful difference that you are destined to make. Sure, you will keep the machine moving, but you won't ever change it for the better. It's a shame because you have potential beyond what even you know. Just try it. The view is much better from the balcony.

2

Everything is a choice.

Strategy is about choices. It's choosing where you want to compete and how you want to win. It's finding the intersection of what the market place needs, what you are good at doing, and how you can profit from it.

Making these choices sounds easy but is challenging to get right in practice. Many leaders fall prey to the "keep all my options on the table" trap. They ask things like, "What if a big customer comes along and wants X?" They think that if they keep their options open, somehow, some big customer is going to come along and make everything better. "Trying to be all things to all people" is officially the worst strategy of all time.

Here's the secret to being strategic: You must choose. Take a look at your organization's strategy and ask yourself, "What choices are we making?"

Even better, ask, "What are we not doing, or who are we not serving?" If a painful decision isn't evident, or you're not saying no to some group of potential customers, then you don't have a strategy that can beat the odds.

Not making a choice is a choice to rely on the trends of your market to achieve success. It's counting on your customers not to be discerning, and your competition not to show up. It's possible, but not probable. Being strategic is making choices that differentiate you from the competition. If you don't make deliberate choices, then you're choosing to lose.

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3

Loosen your grip.

A strategy is merely a plan to get from here to there. It's making a set of choices you think will get you where you want to be most efficiently and effectively. Traditionally, a great deal of time, effort and energy goes into developing a strategic plan. Some leaders will even brag about how thick a binder they've created from their process or how long it took to produce. They have a great deal of confidence in their details, figures, and hockey-stick projections.

However, all of this rigor can lead to something called "escalating commitment bias," a term for when leaders have put so much effort into something they "continue to dedicate resources, including time and money, to a failing course of action." Imagine how hard it might be to abandon a strategy when you've dedicated the last six months developing it.

The key to thinking strategically is to stop thinking about it like a process that happens at a particular time of the year. Start thinking about it as something you do all the time, so it feels more like a habit rather than an investment. We call this transition "loosening your grip."

It's our way of reminding ourselves that having a robust plan is essential, but so is a willingness to abandon it when you see the signs that it isn't working. There's a Mike Tyson quote that sums up nicely the reason why: "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." You can't predict the future. Even with the best planning, you're going to get punched in the mouth once in a while. Go ahead and hold an unwavering commitment to reaching your goals, but remember to loosen your grip on how you get there.

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THE MOUTH ONCE IN A WHILE.*

4

Know your customer.

Customers are why we're in business. (Even if you work internally, you still have customers.) There would be no reason to come to work without them. Seems obvious, right? How much do you know about your customers?

You likely know if they're male or female, their age, the products or services they buy from you, and what region of the country they may live. But if someone said they know you're a 42-year-old female who buys coffee and lives in the Midwest, would you think they "know" you? Why not? It's because the person they are describing could be anyone. It doesn't come close to knowing you, not the way a friend knows you. It doesn't say anything about what makes you unique and special. It doesn't even tell us if you like cream or sugar in your coffee, or that you like it from that local little coffee shop with the friendly baristas who know your name.

Knowing your customer is one of the most strategic acts a person can make and it's something lacking in many organizations. What motivates your customer? What jobs do they need to be done? What's most valuable to them, enough for them to pay you for it? What is an 8-star experience to them? What are their fears, hopes, and dreams? How might you help them be their best? Why do they buy the competition? What would it take to get them to switch to you instead?

Answering these questions will require work, lots of work. It means you can't make assumptions or ask your spouse and kids what they think. It means you need to talk to your customers, observe them in action, and be where they are so you can experience their life. You can't trust everything they say in a survey; you need to see it for yourself. Do it long enough, and you just may know your customer better than they know themselves.

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5



Eat your own dog food.



When was the last time you took a cold hard look at the product or service you provide your customers? We mean experience it. Not when you first got on the business and had fresh eyes, but after you've grown accustomed to how things are.

After a while, we tend to become less sensitive and no longer notice things like a stain on the carpet, that light out on the sign, or how we've stopped preparing agendas for conference calls.

We come from the food industry, and it's easy to fall into the trap that a pot pie still tastes like the pot pie you ate two years ago. To combat this, we had a saying that we borrowed from Microsoft: "Eat your own dog food." It means use your product or service. Try to experience every aspect of it as if it were the very first time. Never allow yourself to assume that you know how others experience it; things may have changed since last month. Wouldn't you rather be the one to catch it than to disappoint a customer?

If you have an 800 number, how long does it take to speak to a human being? If you run a finance and accounting team, how easy is it for decision makers to read and understand your reports? If you're in IT, how many steps does a person have to take to fix their computer?

Jeff once had a manager who was strict when it came to the way financial reports were designed, printed, and stapled. Having the numbers right was never good enough; something he said stuck with him, "print is never the last step," which was meant to remind us that we need to experience it as if we were the customer and ask ourselves, "is this as good as it could be?" That's "eating your own dog food."

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6

Prove yourself wrong.

Let's talk about confirmation bias for a moment. It's defined as "the tendency to interpret new evidence as confirmation of one's existing beliefs or theories." Said more simply, it's looking for proof we are right. Being right is a satisfying feeling, but it's not very helpful when it comes to thinking and acting strategically.

Actively seeking proof that we are right is like using a laser to find your way in the dark. You will only see details that support your current paradigm. When we focus our attention on these little proof points, we fail to see the broader context surrounding those points.

Our job as strategic thinkers is to look for proof that we are wrong. We must set up an early detection siren that blares, "Hey, look at this over here! You might be approaching this all wrong!"

Doing this is easier than you might think. It comes down to a simple question we learned from AJ Lafley and Roger Martin and their book *Playing to*

Win: "What has to be true?" Posing This powerful question, when making strategic choices, allows you to make a list of critical elements that must be true for you to proceed with the strategy at any given time.

Strategic thinkers return to the "what has to be true?" question regularly to look for evidence that what has to be true is no longer true. They are working against their early selves to prove themselves wrong. This behavior helps them preserve the "Stockdale Paradox" from Jim Collins book *Good to Great*, which is to "Retain faith that you will prevail in the end AND at the same time confront the most brutal facts of your current reality." Master this one skill, and you're already more strategic than most leaders.

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7

Disagree and commit.

Strategic people are wise enough not to trust their judgment, experiences or current perspective because they've been around enough, and are humble enough, to know they don't have it all figured out. They're smart enough to know that they need help to see the whole picture and to make the best choices. They are open to any and all perspectives and actively seek out disagreement. I remember a story of a chairman in a meeting who says "Can I assume that we all agree about what to do next?" The boardroom nods in collective affirmation. To which the Chairman says, "Then let's all go home and come back tomorrow when we can disagree."

It can be hard to disagree because the larger the organization, the less we make decisions on our own. We work in teams and make recommendations to leaders who give us the "green light." It's in these situations that a prevailing perspective or shared opinion on a matter can do the most damage. The higher the stakes, the less likely we are willing to challenge leadership or the group when making a decision. It just pays to be quiet and go with the flow. Better to keep your head down than to have it cut off.

Our instincts are to be agreeable, but this interferes with making strategic choices. Making choices is inherently hard work because it means saying "No" to something certain in order to say "Yes" to something hopeful. This is the perfect moment to find someone to disagree with you. Find people who will challenge your thinking, even if you can't stand them. Doing so will improve your confidence in any decision you make because you've done the proper due diligence.

Want to stack the odds in your favor? Set yourself a rule that you must consider at least three options when making a choice. Chip and Dan Heath suggest, in their book *Decisive*, to "distrust whether or not decisions." A perfect way to do that is to find people with passion equal to yours and a completely different approach. Keep going until you have at least three options. And as Jeff Bezos says, "disagree and commit."

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8

Nothing is certain... except this.

People are naturally driven to seek certainty. It makes them feel safe. That's why they invest so much time and rigor into budgeting and planning projects and initiatives. They fool themselves into thinking that if they plan for every detail, they can somehow control the outcome. This is where we give you more "bad news." There are way too many variables and permutations for any person or team to possibly prepare and plan for. Nothing in life, business or our careers, are certain, well, except these three things:

1. **The work will never be done.** You're fooling yourself if you think "if I just get these five things done, things are going to get a lot easier, and then I'll have time to think and rest. Ha! What evidence do you have of that ever happening? As soon as you get done with those projects, you will be rewarded with more responsibilities. Good work leads to more work, does it not? You (and your manager) will always seek new and better ways of doing work. It's a good thing. Keep doing it. But you should stop kidding yourself that the work will ever be done.
2. **You will never be ready.** Another lie we tell ourselves is that "As soon we are ready, we'll take action." Life and work don't wait
3. **Things will never stop changing.** How many times have you thought, "When things just slow down," it will be better? Change does not slow down; it speeds up! Technology is accelerating the rate of change, and strategic people embrace it. They're not waiting for a break to merge into traffic; they anticipate where a gap is going to be and go for it. Being strategic is about making a choice; it often is a bold choice, and it is always about moving forward. As they say in the movie *Days of Thunder*, "rubbing racing." Stop waiting for things to "slow down." Merge in and trade some paint with the other strategic drivers.

9

Remember rule number six.

Here's the thing about being strategic; we tend to think that we need to dial up the analytical and serious side of ourselves.

Strategy is serious business, but trying to be more logical and linear will do you more harm than good. Being strategic is about seeing what isn't there; it's about creating new possibilities. Calculations and data have their place, but not when you're envisioning a new future and exploring choices.

That's why we love "Rule Number Six." It's something we learned from the Conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, Benjamin Zander, in his book, *The Art of Possibility*.

Zander tells the story like this: "Two prime ministers are sitting in a room discussing affairs of state. Suddenly, a man bursts in, apoplectic with fury, shouting and stamping and banging his fist on the desk. The resident prime minister admonishes him: "Peter," he says, "kindly remember Rule Number 6," whereupon Peter is instantly restored to complete calm, apologizes, and withdraws. The politicians return to their conversation, only to be interrupted yet again

twenty minutes later by a hysterical woman gesticulating wildly, her hair flying. Again, the intruder is greeted with the words: "Marie, please remember Rule Number 6."

Complete calm descends once more, and she too withdraws with a bow and an apology. When the scene is repeated for the third time, the visiting prime minister addresses his colleague: "My dear friend, I've seen many things in my life, but never anything as remarkable as this. Would you be willing to share with me the secret of Rule Number 6?"

"Very simple," replies the resident prime minister. "Rule Number 6 is 'Don't take yourself so g—damn seriously.'" "Ah," says his visitor, "that is a fine rule."

After a moment of pondering, he inquires, "And what, may I ask, are the other rules?"

"There aren't any."

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BEING STRATEGIC IS ABOUT SEEING WHAT ISN'T THERE; IT'S ABOUT CREATING NEW POSSIBILITIES.

See the big picture.

By now you see that none of this is rocket science. No secrets, talents, or technology will give you a leg up in seeing the big picture. It's a skill that can only be developed by practice. It requires slowing down and opting out of the urgency of what seems relevant right now. It's finding the courage to say "No" to solving these daily problems created by the system so that you can design a better system. It's investing your resources to work on what's most significant.

Not sure how to recognize what's most significant? In his book *The One Thing*, Gary Keller offers a question that might help; "What's the ONE thing I can do such that by doing it everything else will be easier or unnecessary?" Begin asking that question, and you already see the big picture.

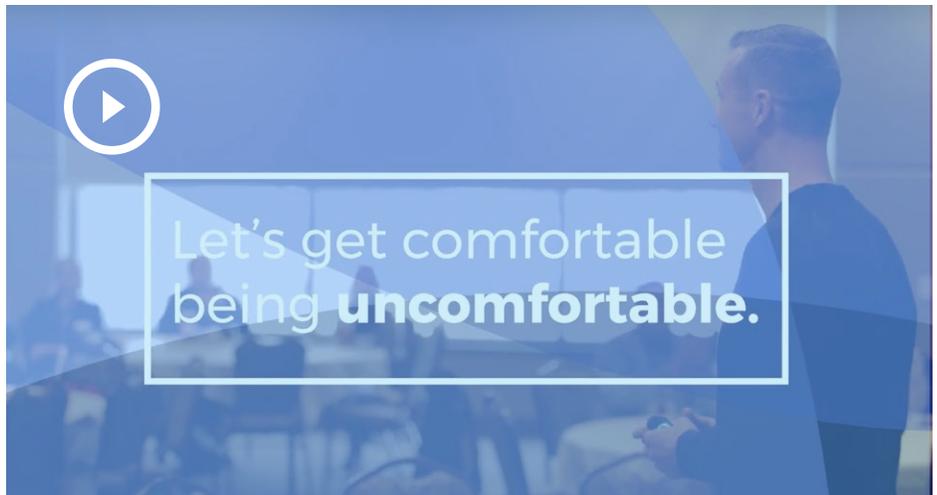
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Nicole is an accomplished facilitator, speaker, and certified coach with over twenty years of business experience. Before starting her practice, she was a human resources and operations executive with Conagra Brands and Markel Insurance. The focus of her work is enabling organizations and leaders to accelerate and sustain change. Nicole proudly serves on the board of directors for Partnership 4 Kids & American Cancer Society.



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Jeff is an experienced leader, teacher, and storyteller with a track record for getting results and building team culture. He is a former Brand Director at Conagra Brands, where he led the Banquet Frozen Meals business. He also proudly serves as a board member, ambassador, and speaker for the Special Olympics Nebraska.

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MOST BUSINESS LEADERS TODAY ARE BETTER AT BEING EXPERTS IN THEIR FUNCTION THAN BEING STRATEGIC AND BUILDING CULTURE, SO WE GIVE THEM A FRAMEWORK TO DEVELOP THEIR SKILLS, CREATE A PLAN AND TRANSFORM THEIR ORGANIZATIONS.



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