

## Developing Strategic Thinking

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### ABSTRACT

Strategic thinking is vital to all organizations yet it is barely understood, rarely recognized and unfairly quashed. To recognize and understand it, people are driven to create models of it, but unfortunately strategic thinking is one thing which cannot adequately be modeled because as soon as it is it loses its very essence – the struggle, the complexity, the paradox and the intuitive elements. This article elaborates a new conceptual framework for Strategic thinking through introduction action learning as four dimension strategic thinking model.

This study which has been made with a qualitative approach, investigates different thinker's ideas and theories regarding strategic thinking and its main dimensions and elements in the organization. Based on these analyses our investigation model is formed, which introduces: System thinking, Creativity, View and Action learning as main ingredients of strategic thinking.

The primitive model of this research is based on that of Bonn's in 2005. Finding of this research acquired by Meta-analysis Method, signify the importance of the four mentioned elements as main elements of strategic thinking. Developing strategic thinking has created a new horizon in the realm of strategic management and is used as a central issue in today's complex business.

**KEY WORDS:** Strategic Thinking, System Thinking, Creativity, View, Action Learning.

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### INTRODUCTION

For the past 25 years, studies have identified top leaders' absence of strategic thinking as a major detractor of organizational performance. Strategic thinking is considered to be an approach to improve decision makings in companies and to provide them with constructive great values (Goldman, 2012). Building on earlier work on strategic decision-making and strategic thinking, this paper aims to contribute to our understanding of strategic thinking by proposing a multilevel approach that aims to better integrate the construct strategic thinking with existing theories of organizations. Bonn (2001) states "there is no agreement in the literature on what strategic thinking is. A number of authors have used the term interchangeably with strategic planning or strategic management." Abraham (2005), in his article *Stretching Strategic Thinking*, defines strategic thinking as "the process of finding alternative ways of competing and providing customer value." Therefore, Strategic thinking could be a foreword to the organization's future designing (Pellegrino and carbo, 2001).

Although we found no single dictionary definition for the term "strategic thinking," the Merriam Webster Dictionary defines each component:

- "Strategy" is defined as (1) "a careful plan or method: a clever stratagem; (2) the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal. (3) an adaptation or complex of adaptations....that serves or appears to serve an important function in achieving evolutionary success."
- "Thinking" as "the action of using one's mind to produce thoughts."

### Strategic thinking

The phrase "strategic thinking" has been wrongly used many times to refer to "strategic planning " or " strategic management" (Liedtka, 1998). In Mintzberg's opinion, Strategic thinking is a mental synthesis process which can create a solid appearance for the business through creativity and observation (Mintzberg, 1994). Bonn defines the strategic thinking as a process through which managers view the crises and daily management process holistically and acquires different approach toward the organization and its variable atmosphere (Bonn, 2001). Heracleous thinks of strategic thinking as a creative divergent process and believes

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that strategic thinking is in relation to the prospects and horizons designed by organization leaders. To achieve this it's necessary that managers be more knowledgeable about daily operations so as to focus upon the aim for intended business strategy (Heracleous, 1998). In another study, Mintzberg defines strategic thinking as a thinking which has got some prerequisites such as:

Inductive thinking, intuition, creativity and especially lateral thinking (Mintzberg, 1994). Regarding strategic thinking in an article, Zabriskie and Huellmantel state that senior managers who utilize strategic think first: visualize the organizational situation as it is and later revise resource usage procedures to earn a competitive market in the future. Strategic thinking gives the manager the ability to evaluate the risk, profit and the costs induced by their decisions. Strategic thinking also answers those questions that are posed when planning strategically. Applying Strategic thinking one could gain a favorite model both logically and systematically through strategic planning. These models can occasionally lead to superb improvements. strategic thinking is a continuous process (Bonn, 2005, Abraham, 2005) which tries to clarify a complex atmosphere and this makes the organization members fully understand the ties and complexities among micro systems of the organization (Bonn, 2005).

### **Some models to establish strategic thinking**

Different samples have been suggested by the thinkers of strategic management so as to model the concept of strategic thinking. Each one of these models and common concepts is discussed later. Before dealing with Bonn's model of elements in strategic thinking (2005) one should be familiar with its elements: Here are some of them: System thinking, creativity and having a View (Bonn, 2005). He also scrutinizes strategic thinking in 3 levels individual, group and organization. In individual level, he also deduces that competent strategic thinking decision makers have got more various visualizing system in comparison to those who lack this ability.

Bonn (2005) defines the elements of strategic thinking in this level group: Heterogeneity and Conflict. He also introduces these specifications for strategic thinking in organizational level: organizational culture, organizational structure and Reward and compensation system (Bonn, 2005). Graetz (2002) believes that elements of thinking which are found in the right hemisphere are: creativity, exploring, work creating, strategy designing ingredients or in other words strategy thinking. He also believes that the role of strategic thinking is to try to innovation and to visualize a new different future for the organization that may result into redefining main or industrial strategies of the company. Henry Mintzberg has used the metaphor of "Seeing" to describe the complexity of strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994, 1998).

In his opinion, most of the people believe the same as "Looking forward". But we can't preview unless we've got the ability to "Look behind us", because any kind of prospect which is designed for the future is based on understanding the past time. Another group claim that strategic thinking is the same as "Over viewing" while it is an analytic thinking. therefore over viewing should be supported by "scrutinizing". Now we can look forward, look backward, overview, and also scrutinize but we're not a strategic thinker because it needs creativity. In comparison with others, strategic thinkers see differently. To complete the view Mintzberg believes that the strategic thinking is a combination of looking backward, over viewing, looking around and completing the view, because he believes that a real strategic thinker is a person who can connect all the view, together and visualize their cooperation in his mind. In Kaufman's opinion (2003) "strategic thinking is nothing but responding to daily problems. Strategic thinking focuses on the creation of a better future through future making and also on increasing value goals in the society through gaining profitable outcomes". Kaufman outlines six essential factors as success factors drawing strategic thinking. Here are the factors: first essential factor suggests to change current paradigms (rest range) and to define new broad borders for thinking, planning, activity, evaluation and continuous improvement (Kaufman, 2003). He defines the second factor as differentiation between our goal and the way to catch it. Kaufman defines the third factor as below: one should connect Mega, Macro and Micro levels of planning together. In the fourth factor: the entire goal is defined and the future is rebuilt.

The fifth factor is to use an appropriate view and in the sixth factor the requirements are defined as chasms between available results and the expected ones, not the chasm perceived to be between the data's and the processes (Kaufman, 2003). Jean Liedtka has developed Mintzberg's artistic view about strategic thinking into a conceptual model. In this Model, she defines the strategic thinking as a specific way of thinking with tangible characteristics. In this model, 5 elements are suggested for strategic thinking, here they are: system thinking, Intent-focused, intelligent opportunism, Thinking in Time and Hypothesis-driven. He also says that even though strategic thinking originates from people, they need an organizational setting that supports strategic thinking and talking (Liedtka, 1998).

Napier and Albert have also suggested 3 aspects for strategic thinking:

A: The extension of person's focused domain while thinking of organizational issues.

B: The horizon of time in decisions.

C: Key persons who are able to think strategically and the extent of their appointment in formal planning systems (Napier and Albert, 1990). Dividing the planning process into 3 complement categories, Georgel Morrisy has devised a model to analyze strategic thinking. He has investigated strategic thinking in 2 levels, individual and organizational. In his opinion individual strategic thinking is using an empirical judgment to clarify the way to the future of the organization. He also mentions that in organizational level it is the coordination of creative minds about a common view point that makes the organization be able to devise and to arrange a procedure to please all the beneficiaries. Strategic thinking unifies value, existentialism, prospects and the strategy of the organization and is more or less based on evidences rather than data analysis (Morrisy, 1996).

Based on some elements like awareness of industry and opponents and self-criticism, Acur and Englist define strategic thinking as awareness of major problem of company and learning based on past experiences (Acur and Englist, 2006).

### The developed model of strategic thinking

Based on previous discussed issues one can deduce that key elements of strategic thinking are : System thinking , creativity and having a View point (Morrisy , 1996 ,Mintzberg ,1998 , Kaufman , 2003 , Bonn , 2005). In this section, we're about to discuss the effects of these elements on strategic thinking. This research has investigated the different models of strategic thinking and finally has tried to represent a developed model regarding strategic thinking:

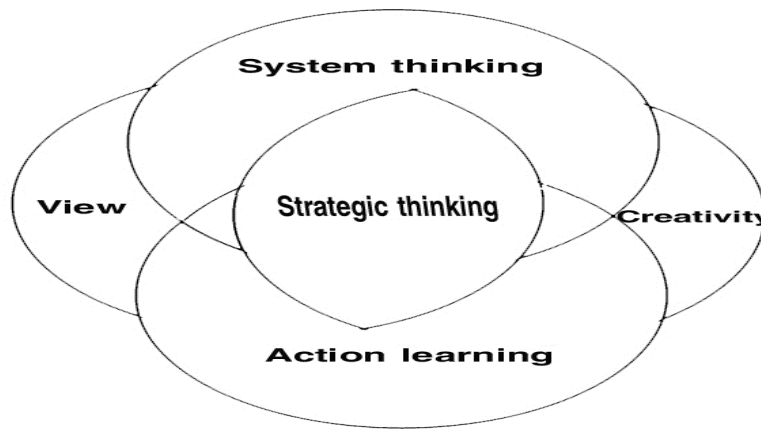


Figure 1: The developed model of strategic thinking

#### P1: System thinking is one of important parts of strategic thinking.

System is a totality that has got at least two properties: first each one of its parts affects the mechanism or properties of the whole system and second the fact that none of those parts can affect independently on the whole system (Sengupta, Ackoff, 1965). In strategic thinking, system thinking is to change your view point regarding the organization (Marquardt, 1996, Kaufman, 2003). Thinking systematically is a way to see holistically. The main element of system thinking is to change the view point. In other words, system thinking creates a conceptual framework to represent clearer models and makes clear how they are changed effectively. Strategic thinking is formed based on system view point. A strategic thinker should always have in mind complete model of value creating factors and well understand their cooperation (Marquardt, 1996, Liedtka, 1998). System thinking sees a problem or an opportunity as a part of the whole situation or system. (Senge, 1990, Liedtka, 1998, Bonn, 2005). These issues require that people deviate from paying attention to daily affairs (Graetz , 2002) and paying attention to the fact that how different issues are connected to each other , how they can affect each other and how a solution in one of the organizational parts affects the other parts (Liedtka , 1998 , Bonn , 2005) .

Strategic thinker connects together the vertical links and multiple different views that exist in a system. It should also understand the internal cooperation among business parts which consists of the mutual understanding of internal and external factors. Discussing about the appropriateness of company's strategy business. Strategy and operational strategy of the company are also of high importance (Liedtka, 1998, Graetz, 2002, Bonn, 2005).

## **P2: Creativity, another important element of strategic thinking.**

creative skills are : devising several alternative solutions for a problem developing and identifying connection or anomalous models that many people's believe to be an essential key element in developing strategies and unique plans (Rose and Lin , 1984 , Howard , 1989 , Anthony et al ,1991 , Mintzberg , 1994 , Herman , 1998 , Amabile, 1998 ) . Creativity is considered to be an essential principle of strategic thinking (Howard,1989,Mintzberg , 1994) .

Creative thinking has also been defined as a source of national and organizational enterprise (Raimond, 1996) .Therefore while there may be some controversies regarding strategic planning and strategic thinking in strategic management of an organization, creativity seems to be indispensable part for both of them.

It is also true even if there's no agreeable definition about strategic thinking, because creativity is always considered an element of strategic thinking. Anthony et al (1991) also recommended that strategic planners be chosen according to their mental creativities and creativity techniques be taught to the strategists. Different techniques have been developed to improve creative thinking. When creative minds are cultivated well, acquire positive result(Torrance,1972, Rose and Lin,1984, Anthony et al, 1991). Teaching creativity often emphasizes upon the importance of production and paying attention to different solution that are inclined to increase the quality of our final solution (Raimond , 1996) . In every one's being, creativity is a combination of three components specialty, creative thinking skills and motivation. Can managers affect these components? Definitely so managers and strategic thinkers have positive or negative affect through actions or the condition of working environment (Amabile, 1998). Strategic thinker should seek new views to create competitive advantage. One of creativity conditions is to question common concept. Another way is to connect together the subjects that seem to be irrelevant.

Petersengesays:"mental models are those deep mental hypotheses that affect our view of the world. These models are often covert and thus lower our level of awareness and consciousness.They also have got a great influence over the staff's organizational behavior. Through implementation, the new views confront with failure, because they're in contrast with mental models and those internal imaginations that limit us through known thinking and acting procedures (Senge, 1990,Bonn, 2005).

In the rapidly-changing competitive world of business, strategy and creativity are not haphazard phenomenon. It is said to be some necessities regarding remaining in these competitive edge. Many organizations seek ways to find new views and thinking's about products,market, challenges and opponents. To understand this way of thinking, it is necessary to combine creativity and the process of strategic thinking which allows the staff and organizations benefit more effectively and make use of the power of their minds in the best way (Mintzberg, 1994,Herrmann, 1998, Bonn, 2005).

## **P3: Having a "View" is the third part of strategic thinking.**

Regarding the importance of " View ", it is enough to say that the most recent theories in the realm of leadership emphasize upon the roles of leaders in arranging a view, choosing its content, based on the needs of the government and its followers and also the need for inspiring and enlightening them to follow and to implement the view (Collins and Porras, 1989, Foster and Akdere, 2007).The view of organization defines its way and direction which helps the organization heighten its success. The concept of "View "requires use to be familiar with the learner organization. In learner organizations view is a guide to organization actions; it also motivates the staff and guarantees that organizational processes are in accordance with its view. Therefore view is considered to be a common goal that makes the staff united and unanimous (Watkins and Marsick,1992). "View" signifies the existence of knowledge and a forethought based on imagination and visualizing the future (Kouzes and Posner , 1987 , Conger , 1989 , Senge , 1990 , Kaufman , 2003 , Bonn ,2005) . In other definitions, "View" has been referred to as:

1:"Idealistic way of stating organizational goals and aims (Yukl, 2001).

2: A plan to achieve future goals of the organization (Howell, 1988).

3. An imagination of the future that consists of values and goals (Boal and Bryson, 1988).

"View" is the explicit stating of the fate toward which the organization should move. It's a future which is more successful and more favorable than its current situation in considerable ways (Kouzes and Posner , 1987 , Howell , 1988 , Boal and Bryson , 1988 , Conger , 1989 , Yukl , 2001 ) . Some believe that view is created while the others believe that it exists but should be discovered. In any case, organizational view consists of the process of creation (Collins and Porras, 1989). When there's an idealistic imagination for the future of successful member and successful organization, members will try and learn not because of obligation but because they, themselves want to learn (Senge, 1990).

Strategic thinking should be accompanied with a powerful understanding of the final goal and a favorable view of the organization's future. A factual view directs well the organization and paves the way to concentrate upon all of the activities inside the organization (Mintzberg, 1994,Herrmann, 1998, Bonn, 2005).

Mintzberg believes that a qualified strategic thinker is a person who can connect together all views and visualize their cooperation in his mind (Mintzberg, 1998). A good view should be a combination of different view to depict and visualize the future in a favorable way (Mintzberg, 1994, Herrmann, 1998, Kaufman, 2003, Bonn, 2005). The combination of these views makes us be dominant in the case of cognition behavior, management and feeling (Mintzberg, 1998). In his article, Hines introduces the benefit of view as: prioritizing the decisions and better decision makings (Hines, 2008) and Having a view is a basis for creation of comprehensive strategies in the future (Mintzberg, 1994, Herrmann, 1998, Kaufman, 2003, Bonn, 2005, Hines, 2008).

#### **P4: Action learning is the fourth element of strategic thinking.**

Learning is a process through which group members capacities are developed in a way that the outcomes will be what everyone really likes (Senge, 1990). Learning is an ongoing process which is used strategically and grows continuously (Watkins and Marsick, 1999).

Revans (1997), who is the founder of action learning, believes that since the concept of action learning is simple, one cannot have a certain unique definition for it. McGill and Beaty (1995) describe action learning as: A continuous learning process, a reflection and a support by academic centers aiming to do affairs. Similarly, Inglis (1994) defines action learning as "the process of contemplating together for finding solutions and the action afterwards for developing members and organizational skills. In Torset's opinion (2001), to develop strategic thinking members should have inclination, knowledge and the capacity of thinking in a strategic way. These factors depend on individual psychological, organizational and strategic aspects of the members.

An action learning plan conducts strategic thinking in all organizational level. The result of action learning process includes: new growth strategies, increasing the level of strategic thinking, leading the change and forming work team in the company, realization of strategic innovation, developing senior manager's views and finally how to develop and to reinforcement the staff's creativity (Kuhn and Marsick, 2005, Martha and Marsick, 2007).

Action learning solves the problem through: Asking a clear question about problems and identify problems and defining strategies and actions to solve them (Marquardt, 2004, Kuhn and Marsick, 2005). Martha and Marsick (2007) have also said that: organizations should develop their main abilities (Searching and making use of knowledge to confront environmental change) and match more and effectively their inclinations and strategies to the environment. They state that how organizations can utilize learning to match strategic challenges in the environment (Martha and Marsick, 2007).

Garry Hamel (1994) believes that an organization should pay attention more to "learning" rather than "acquire information" of environment business. One of important aspects of this learning is to learn from the customer. The study of market to know customer's behavior and paying attention to its complaints regarding the deep understanding of value creating wants are considered as common processes of learning from customer. The result of these studies makes known strategies' focus to offer novel successful strategies. Beside customers, supplier, and opponents can also give rise to valuable concepts of the market. Experience is also an important tool for learning from the business environment. To do so, each organization should do necessary actions to plan and to fulfill minor low-risk actions. Gradually it makes a complete understanding of business factors and their effects be formed in strategist's mind. This understanding is considered to be one of important bases in the formation of strategic thinking (Hamel, 1994). Handford also enumerates strategic thinking characteristics as: Learn ability, reflectively toward action and practicality (Handford, 1995). Kaplan and Norton (1996) have also suggested four key factors to implement the strategic successfully, one of them is "feedback" and its role in strategic learning. Kuhn and Marsick have used a model of action learning for speeding up strategic innovation in developed organizations. In this model, the focus is upon developing a collection of cognitive capabilities of strategic innovation that includes: sensemaking, strategic thinking, critical thinking, divergent thinking, cognitive capabilities and malleable learning orientation. Regarding strategic innovation, action learning project consists of two stages: First stage is the creation of strategy by using action learning and the second stage is utilizing action learning to the strategy implementation. Action learning scrutinizes the strategic capabilities of the organization in individual, group and organizational level (Kuhn and Marsick, 2005).



Figure 2. The model of action learning project  
Source: (Kuhn and Marsick, 2005).

Action learning projects are also tools for breeding and transferring individual, group and organizational learning (Kuhn and Marsick, 2005). Morgan (1986) and Grantham (1993) also say that: through encouraging one to discuss, should investigate different views about each one of the issues and show to the staff productive learning skills through seeking creative response.

## Conclusion

In this research, we tried to represent a clear understanding and a new view for strategic thinking. Investigations showed that strategic thinking was paid attention to from different angles. Represented definitions cover a broad area that signifies the territory and the effect range of strategic thinking in organization. As an example, strategic thinking has been used in some realms like the creation of value, creativity and innovation, the creation of competitive merit and discovering the needs which have not been met. The represented model of this survey is the developed form of Boon's model that includes these four elements: system thinking, creativity, view and action learning. These are four main elements of strategic thinking. Scrutinizing the opinions by Peter senge (1990), Handford (1995) and Kuhn and Marsick (2005) showed that developing strategic thinking depends on developing the capacity of action learning for organization members.

Based on this survey, one can introduce action learning as the fourth element of strategic thinking model. The aim of representing this model is to provide the future studies with the required backgrounds to achieve a comprehensive theory in the realm of strategic thinking.

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