

How to Identify Strategic Thinkers

By Linda D. Henman, Ph.D.

Aardvarks are really good at one thing: eating bugs—sometimes 50,000 in one night! No other creature on the planet can match their appetites. Star performers in their own corner of the jungle, when they tuck a napkin under their aardvark chins, they produce impressive results, just like your hard-working employees can in their jobs. Too often, however, in an attempt to do the aardvark and the organization a favor, a decision maker will insist the aardvark fly. There are no flying aardvarks. You can certainly throw an aardvark out of an airplane midair, but you won't end up with a flying aardvark; you will just have a very unhappy aardvark. The damage to the splattered aardvark cannot be underrepresented, but destruction to the organization can be notable too. Being splattered doesn't motivate your employees, not the one who just failed or those who witnessed the crash. Pretty soon you have neither productive aardvarks nor soaring eagles.

But how do you know the difference? Psychologists continue to rage about the role of the nature / nurture relationship in the development of cognitive talents. Are we born with the ability to think analytically, for example, or do we inherit it? Can you develop it over time with experience? (For the purpose of this discussion, the words “strategic” “analytical” and “critical” are synonymous).

My work with thousands of individuals suggests that by the time you retire, you will have the same strategic abilities you brought with you on your first day. Education and experience can polish them up, provide some new and useful information, and bring previously unused talent to the fore, but nothing can create what isn't there. Aardvarks cannot fly, just as some employees cannot soar beyond certain capabilities. However, many leaders with fervent hope fail to grasp this reality. Decision makers often conclude that coaching, mentoring, and experience can recast an aardvark into an eagle's mold. It doesn't happen. What you see is what you get. Your job as the decision maker is to ensure that the newly-vaulted has the wings to venture into unknown realms.

What does it take to be an eagle in the organization? Strategy work is not for the fainthearted or the tactical thinker. It demands courage, experience, innate abilities, and discipline. Only those who possess these traits can ensure aspirations are not guillotined by limitations.

But how can you recognize those who can and will engage in this critical but difficult work? Whether making a hiring or promotion decision, based on the individual's proven record of success, ask yourself the following:

- Does this person understand how to separate strategy from tactics, the “what” from the “how”? Can he or she keep the strategy clearly in focus while executing only those tactics that are relevant?

- Can this person keep a global perspective? Or does she or he become mired in the details and tactics? “Analysis paralysis” has caused more than one otherwise top performer to allow opportunity to slip away.
- Do obstacles stop this person? Or do they represent challenges, not threats? The ability to bounce back from setbacks and disappointments frequently separates the strong strategist from the effective tactician.
- Can he or she create order during chaos? Top strategists don’t manufacture catastrophes. Instead they keep problems in perspective and realize that very few things are truly as dire as they first seem.
- Does this person have the ability to see patterns, make logical connections, resolve contradictions, and anticipate consequences? Or is she or he unaware of trends?
- What success has this person had with multi-tasking? Often the ability to handle a number of things at once implies good prioritizing and flexibility.
- Can this person think on his / her feet? Or does this person miss opportunities because of an inability to respond? Quickness, however, does not guarantee effective critical thinking skills. Some people rush to make mistakes; others take their time and then err. Look at the overall track record.
- Can this person prioritize seemingly conflicting goals? Zero in on the critical few and put aside the trivial many when allocating time and resources?
- When facing a complicated or unfamiliar problem, can this individual get to the core of the issue and immediately begin to formulate possible solutions? Or is he or she distracted by inconsequential factors or ones that are immaterial to your mission and vision?
- Is this person future oriented and able to paint credible pictures of possibilities and likelihoods? Can he / she interpret past experiences from new vantage points? Creativity and analytical reasoning don’t always go hand in hand, but when they do, a top strategist is often at the controls. Strong strategic thinkers are concrete and practical, but agile. The key question remains, “Can this person solve complicated, unfamiliar problems?”
- How do unexpected and unpleasant changes affect this person’s performance? If their analytical reasoning is well-honed, organized, systematic decision makers can respond favorably to change, even if they don’t like to.
- When in a position of leadership, does this person serve as a source of advice and wisdom? Can she or he act as an effective sounding board to others who struggle with complex issues?

The core competencies that drive a particular organization may differ, but the ability to think analytically and dispassionately remains constant. The overarching question is this: “When acting in a strategic role, has this person typically performed as needed?” If the answer is “yes,” the person probably has the innate talent to be a strategic thinker and will just need to improve requisite skills to support the talent. If the answer is “no,” don’t gamble by putting this person in a more demanding position. As valuable as the aardvarks of the organization can be, virtually all organizations need more eagles, strong critical thinkers who can learn from mistakes and make bold decisions. Only then can you succeed and be ready to launch a strategy initiative.

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