

THE THINKING STRATEGIST

Unleashing the Power of
Strategic Management to Identify,
Explore and Solve Problems

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Unleashing the Power of Strategic
Management to Identify, Explore
and Solve Problems

By

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University of Georgia, USA



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wrote this book to disseminate business knowledge and to promote high levels of achievement among leaders with disciplined minds who seek to change the world. First, I express my sincere appreciation to my highly engaged students, faculty, and colleagues at the University of Georgia (UGA), the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), Morehouse College, and Tuskegee University. Over the years, they have forced me to make tough decisions and deliver on my promises. I appreciate all who have supported my efforts to bring tough love and raised expectations to management classrooms. Learner success is paramount to my work.

Next, I want to thank the people at Emerald Publishing Group for taking a chance on me. Special thanks to Pete Baker, the editorial assistants, the reviewers, those responsible for the marketing of my book – all whose insights helped to shape *The Thinking Strategist* and make it applicable to readers beyond the business capstone.

Moreover, I want to thank David A. Thomas, the 12th President of Morehouse College, for writing a compelling and inspiring foreword. I certainly must express my gratitude to Garikai Campbell, the Provost at Morehouse who gave me an opportunity to be a difference maker at the senior administrative level. I also want to thank the many business and organizational leaders who have given me a voice in developing their business model. My hope is that my proposed strategies made you think and grow as leaders. Thanks for being open to my constant “contributions.” Thank You. Thank You. Thank You.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vickie Cox Edmondson, Professor of Management, has taught strategic management, a business capstone course, since 1994. Prior to joining Tuskegee University in fall 2018, she taught the course for seven years at Morehouse College where she served as the first Associate Provost for Student Success. Dr. Cox Edmondson taught the course at the University of Alabama at Birmingham in an academic appointment for 15 years, and at the University of Georgia while pursuing a doctorate degree in the discipline.

Dr Cox Edmondson has written and coauthored academic and trade articles, book cases, and chapters. Her teaching, research, and consulting interests are in strategic management, business ethics, race and diversity issues in organizations, organizational change, and the critical voice. Her work has been published in *Academy of Management Learning and Education*, *Business and Society*; *Journal of Business Ethics, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion*; *Journal of Organizational Change Management*; *Journal of Communication Management*, and others.

A captivating academic and management strategist, Vickie Cox Edmondson graduated cum laude from Spelman College with a BA in English. She holds a PhD in strategic management from the University of Georgia and an MBA from Mercer University. Bringing more than 20 years of industry experience, including business consulting, and senior level and board leadership in a nonprofit, to the classroom, Dr. Cox Edmondson is known as a challenging professor whose ultimate aim is to provide learners with the necessary skills to excel in business endeavors and advance in their careers.

Vickie co-founded and served as the Executive Director of Follow Me Foundation, Inc., a nonprofit established to help economically disadvantaged youth in her hometown community of Carroll County, Georgia. She also serves on the board of directors for Saint Smyrna Baptist Church in Newnan, Georgia and is a life member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.

Dr Vickie Cox Edmondson is the mother of three daughters. She enjoys traveling, socializing, and assessing the world around her for additional opportunities.

FOREWORD

Today, we live in what some futurists have coined a VUCA world. A world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. Responding effectively in this world requires that decisions be made closer to the frontline activity of organizations. How can this happen without creating chaos throughout organizations?

The answer is to have employees at every level able to think strategically about how to respond to conditions on the ground and in real time. This does not mean expanding strategic planning departments. It means developing more employees and especially frontline managers who can think strategically.

In the latter half of the twentieth century a combination of business academics, corporate executives at America's largest companies and leading consulting firms developed a set of reliable tools for setting strategy. These included the necessity to understand the organization's relationship to its environment, map its stakeholders, determine goals, and define how the organization competes and differentiates itself in the marketplace.

Organizations such as GE, GM, Citi, and IBM created large strategic planning departments that took up the task of defining strategy for their firms with five- and 10-year horizons. To staff these departments, these companies hired the best and brightest from top tier colleges such as Morehouse, Harvard, Yale, Howard, and Stanford. They also recruited talent out-of-top tier consulting firms such as McKinsey and BCG. Possessing their understanding of corporate strategy and the tools to set it, these individuals became valued employees. Many went on to lead major business units, not because they were technical experts but because they understood how to think strategically about the business.

The unspoken assumption was that companies only needed a few people who could think strategically. Strategic business decisions had long-term horizons. Only an elite group of managers defined by their intelligence and possession of the tools of strategic thinking were needed. They would sit at

the top of the corporate pyramid. This logic seemed supported by the rise and stability of large corporate behemoths in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Some realities of the marketplace for products and labor supported this view. Markets were relatively stable and innovation was slow. New products that seemed to capture the imagination of consumers could expect to last for years. A prime example was the mainframe computer. Few could imagine that one day we would have on our phones as much computing power as existed in the 3,000 sq. ft buildings that housed mainframes. Other examples were Xerox copiers, AT&T's long-distance telephone service, and the global reach of companies like Citibank. These marketplaces and companies were complex, but they were not volatile, uncertain, or ambiguous.

Labor markets mirrored this complex, but stable and slow changing environment. Career success was largely defined by earning a place on the professional and managerial hierarchy of one of these large corporations and riding the escalator up to management and eventually retirement. Career paths were long and orderly. A resume that showed employment in multiple firms was suspect.

This reality began to unravel with accelerating speed in the last two decades of the twentieth century and is not recognizable today. The competitive advantage of new technology today lasts less than a year before it is copied or matched and overcome by new innovation. The Internet has made prices so transparent that cost advantage lasts less than a day, think airline tickets. Customers are less and less captive to services, think telephone numbers which are now owned by the consumer not the phone company.

A parallel unraveling has happened with labor markets. The social contract between companies and employees no longer exchanges loyalty for job security and longevity. Employees demand that companies increase the portability of their human capital. Most individuals will work for multiple companies before they reach retirement.

This new environment is requiring companies to delegate decision rights to those closer to the frontline where employees and customers meet. It is also demanding that employees throughout the firm know how to think strategically. Most important is that the ability to think strategically will become a skill set by which employees will be selected and evaluated for selection and advancement.

The Thinking Strategist is the first book to address this reality. It describes the tools of strategy making in an accessible way. Professor Vickie Cox Edmondson makes a compelling case for why being a **thinking strategist** is necessary whether you are a senior manager trying to break through to the next level or a person early in your career.

David A. Thomas,
*Prominent Management Scholar And
The 12th President Of Morehouse College*

PART ONE

SETTING EXPECTATIONS

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SECTION A

SEE YOURSELF AT THE TOP

Would you like to be considered one of the most widely sought after candidates for a position in your company or chosen field, for entrance into top graduate and professional schools in the world, or someone destined to make your mark as an entrepreneur or a leader in causes and movements that matter to you? Are you willing to put in the work to achieve that level of success? Don't waste your time with this book if you are not. Reading it may make you believe you can achieve success if you can recall or refer back to the key points, but you won't know how good you can really be until you believe the advice and tools found within can open doors for you. Once you put in the work, you will be more empowered to achieve your hopes, dreams, and aspirations even if being at the top is not one of your goals.

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1

WHAT IS STRATEGY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ANYONE NOT AT THE TOP?

In business, products or services are offered for sale or used more often than not by more than one manufacturer, seller, or merchandiser. Competition among firms in an industry can be fierce. The moves and approaches used to entice employees, investors, customers, and clients to respond more favorably to your business and products and services than to the competition are referred to as strategy. The moves and approaches used to position your business for growth are referred to as strategy. The moves and approaches used to respond to threats in the industry are referred to as strategy. Strategy can be defined as a set of decisions, approaches, and actions aimed at successfully meeting financial and strategic objectives over time. Objectives are countless and may vary from year to year and change from leadership team to leadership team (Fig. 1). Many of the decisions are made at the top, therefore, you might ask, “Why is strategy important for those who are not at the top?” and “Why should I become an expert at strategy well before I am in position to determine strategy?”

While many of the final decisions are made at the top, many intermediate decisions are made throughout the organization and well before a set of recommended actions are brought to the attention of top management for consideration (Fig. 2). For example, top management may decide which new widgets will be produced in the upcoming year. However, there are many factors about each widget and its capacity to help a company successfully compete against other firms that must be determined well before the new product conceptions are presented to the decision-makers – those

Fig. 1: Hierarchical Management Structure with Strategic Business.

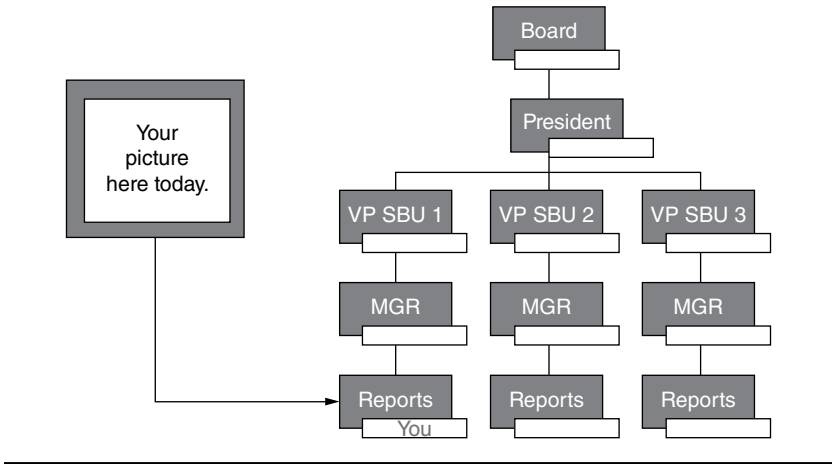
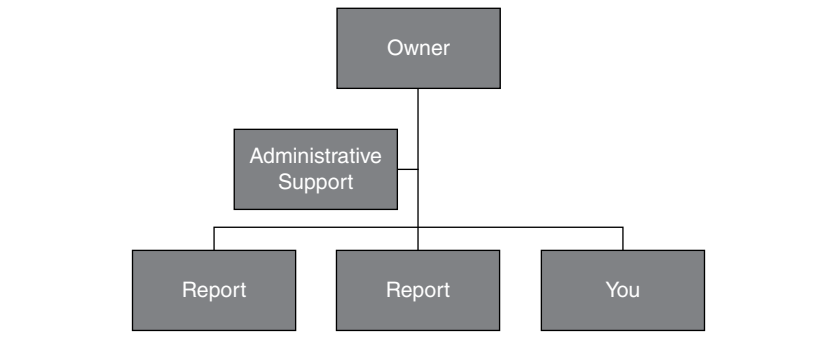


Fig. 2: Flat Management Structure for a Small Entrepreneurial Venture or Single Business Unit.



people in a company that are considered experts and are ultimately responsible for the success of a company. Imagine you are observing a comparative presentation where the decision-makers consider which new products, if any, they will support. More than likely, you will observe some of the decision-makers ask probing questions that help to determine which product or products to select. Some decision-makers will make comments that may adjust the thinking of the presenters as well as the other decision-makers.

Someone may display an unwillingness to change and must be coached for a change of position.

YOUR PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

While observing strategic decision-making in action could be enlightening and quite motivational, waiting until you are in a position to “set” or determine the final strategy is too late to develop distinctive competencies in strategic thinking and decision making. The sooner you begin to use intentional strategies in your work life, the easier it will be to handle the role of setting strategy for a firm once the competencies are needed. As a contributor, you will be judged on your ability to make better decisions and solve problems before they occur. The quality of your input can help you get noticed and considered for promotions sooner than your colleagues. At the core of this book is the goal to help you develop the skills that will allow you to be a skillful decision-maker as well as a driver of decision making – an expert, a thinking strategist.

Business coaches Graham Alexander, Alan Fine, and Sir John Whitmore developed the GROW Model in the 1980s as a coaching model. Their model has been adapted over the years (Fine & Merrill, 2010). The adaptation below will serve as a guide for your professional development throughout this book:

- Goal setting (what do you personally want to achieve and how does it help the organization)
- Reality (is the goal attainable, what obstacles must you overcome, and how long will it take you to get there)
- Opportunities (what conditions are favorable for you)
- Way forward (what is your success strategy)

A success journal can help you develop your thinking process and track how you make success happen so that you can help others. To help you along the way, I included some suggested journal entries. Don't stop with those. Descriptions of any incident that supports or questions your assumptions and beliefs should be added to the journal.

As posited by the Department of Health and Human Services (a department of the US government whose aim is to help those who are least able to

help themselves) as you gain more opportunities, you are expected to contribute more to the organization and to the proficiency of others in order to facilitate either action or a decision. Leadership competencies include:

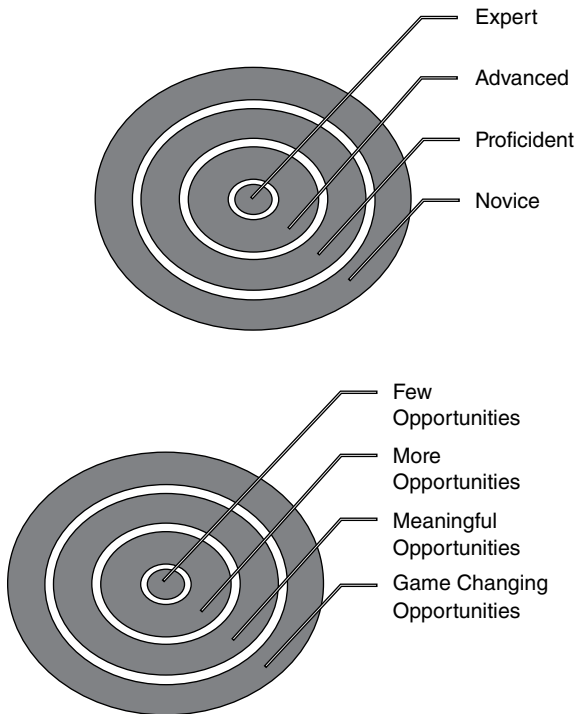
- **Expert:** models, leads, trains, and motivates multiple levels of personnel to be excellent in decisiveness.
- **Advanced:** even in the most difficult situations recognizes problems or opportunities and determines whether action is needed, takes charge of a group when it is necessary to facilitate a decision, and makes decisions in a timely manner under ambiguous circumstances and when there exists considerable risk.
- **Proficient:** usually recognizes problems or opportunities and determines whether action is needed, takes charge of a group when it is necessary to facilitate a decision, and makes decisions in a timely manner under ambiguous circumstances and when there exists considerable risk.
- **Novice:** demonstrates common knowledge or understanding of being decisive, but may avoid or miss opportunities to make decisions in a timely manner. Sometimes considers consequences and risks in order to assess the timing for a decision, uses clear criteria for and includes others in the decision-making process, and makes decisions in a timely manner when the options and consequences are clear (Fig. 3).

Few people become experts. However, the more expertise you have the more game changing opportunities you have.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO BECOME AN EXPERT IN STRATEGY?

Before we think about what it takes to be an expert, let us consider some of the things it takes to be proficient through the lens of mathematicians Fuson, Kalchman, and Bransford (2005):

- **Conceptual understanding:** comprehension of concepts and theory of how they relate to one another.
- **Skill fluency:** skill in carrying out the phases of strategy making flexibly, accurately, efficiently, and appropriately.

Fig. 3: The Skill–Opportunity Paradox.

- Adaptive reasoning: capacity for rational thought, reflection, explanation, and justification based on data in addition to natural instinct and intuition.
- Productive disposition: inclination to perceive the process as sensible, useful, and worthwhile, coupled with a commitment learn and grow.

Simply put, two interrelated factors will determine your success in crafting strategy:

1. Having Realistic Expectations of Success

Expectations guide rational thinking. When we look into the long-term success of any organization, there is a positive correlation between its key players' ability to craft and implement appropriate strategies to solve problems

and the organization's long-term success. It seems obvious that the strategies developed by organizations have been undertaken with a sincere belief that their successful implementation will improve the situation. In fact, one can easily say that it is illogical and improbable that decision-makers might intentionally craft strategies they believe will make the situation worse. It is, therefore, safe to assume that any change is undertaken with the expectation of improving or limiting the negative impact of an issue to positively affect the performance of the organization. While we can agree on the good intentions of decision-makers and everyone involved in the strategy-making process, a strong look at the results of their actions tends to present another picture – one of less than optimal results.

2. Learning from Repeated Practice

Without question, the primary way to develop competency as a thinking strategist is to intentionally and actively participate in the strategy-making process. No matter how many articles and books you read, how many case studies you analyze, how many discussions over coffee you have with experts, and how many times you watch someone else do something you want to learn to do well, to become an expert you must do the thing you want to learn and learn from that experience (analyzing what went as expected, what went better than expected, and what did not go as expected). You must practice as often as necessary – learning from each experience and making necessary adjustments based on the previous incident. With each decision-making opportunity, you can integrate the new knowledge and skills as part of your natural style. Moreover, once you become skilled, the expectation is that you will help others succeed in becoming skilled. Thus, a company benefits from having more thinking strategists because of your efforts.

HOW WILL YOU KNOW WHEN YOU HAVE ACHIEVED EXPERT STATUS?

Inherent to expert status is the idea of a comparison to others, or relevant strength. Articles and books will help you learn the vocabulary and perhaps ensure you know in which context the terminology is used or how the tactic

should work. However, as in any competition, until you get into the game, you won't know how good you are in comparison to others.

Let us go back to the meeting where the decision-makers are considering which widgets to produce in the upcoming year. A thinking strategist will pay attention to the presenters' communication style, the content of their presentation, the process they use to present the information, etc. Attention would also be paid to the decision-makers' understanding and appreciation of the presentation content, their engagement with the presenters, and their willingness to objectively compare all of the widgets under consideration. The thinking strategist is pondering which presenters are experts at what they do for the firm and what competencies should be emulated or modeled throughout the firm. There may be some thought as to how some people were selected as decision-makers if their contributions are not meaningful.

A signal that you are NOT an expert is when you realize that you do not objectively compare well to those whom you have determined to be experts. Certainly, your assessment of the decision-makers' competencies may differ from others as your direct knowledge of their knowledge, skills, and contributions to a company may be limited. However, an introspective self-assessment of your competencies will reveal areas for improvement that only you can confirm or deny.

You will know you are becoming an expert when you are invited to the decision-making table as a member of your work group or to represent your work group. Your work output has shown signs that you are a contributor worthy of closer attention – based on your knowledge of the internal and external environment of business, your attention to detail, creativity, innovation, and a willingness to change the status quo, etc. When you are at the decision-making table, you now have an edge that will allow you to become more proficient and thus, more valuable to a company. You will become a go-to resource for others in a company and perhaps the industry.

Likewise, you will know you are becoming an expert when your network includes key decision-makers throughout the organization. Intentionally, build your support network by connecting with others with similar goals and interests. Learn what others do in your department and your company. Invest in their success. Connect with colleagues and others in your industry to learn more about different functions that can help you develop your competency to problem solve.

This book seeks to provide business students and aspiring decision-makers with an overview of what it takes to be an expert in the strategic management process. Given that learners differ in the ways that they perceive and comprehend information, not everyone achieves expert status at the same rate. Many people find the competencies hard to attain, regardless of how often they practice or are invited to the table. Moreover, someone can be an expert in one phase and a novice in another. However, most succeed, to varying degrees. The better you become at setting yourself apart for making a difference for others – not just yourself, the more opportunities you get to contribute.

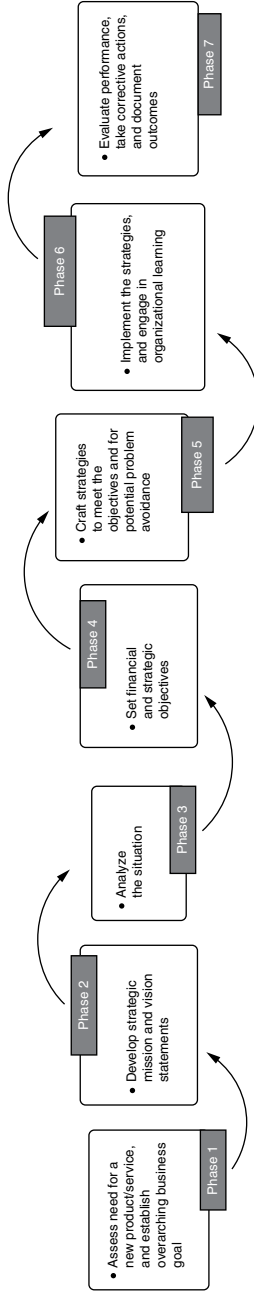
As shown below, there are countless opportunities for you to contribute in the strategy-making process. The process will be introduced in Chapter 2, and each phase will be discussed further in Part two. As you move through the process, it will become increasingly clear that it is not a linear step-by-step process and that the amount of time required for each phase differs. Moreover, depending on who is at the table, conducting some processes is more challenging than others are. Nonetheless, each phase is necessary for optimal performance, and you should strive to be more than proficient in each phase in order to make good contributions. Successful leaders understand that it is the collective strength (the interdependencies of factors, both positive and negative, that determine competitive positioning) of the process and the competencies of the people utilizing the process that determine its success (Fig. 4).

What Constitutes a Good Contribution?

It depends. How does the contribution you seek to make tie into the overarching organizational goal or to a particular objective that has been set? Most people are not interested in learning or doing more of the same. How well do you understand how and why something is or is not happening? How well can you explain that understanding? How confident are you that what you know matters or what you can do will be beneficial to the company? How willing are you to be involved in the process to make a difference?

Considering these questions and making necessary adjustments before making a contribution is necessary to avoid the appearance that your information/skill is not worthy of further consideration in the decision-making process (Fig. 5). Too many of moments of low influence can lead to you no longer receiving an invite to the table.

Fig. 4: The Strategic Management Process Used to Gain and Leverage a Sustainable Competitive Advantage.



Decision-makers rely on everyone at the table to contribute good information and demonstrate skill that will result in improved organizational performance and lead to a competitive advantage in the industry (Fig. 6). Your immediate mission is to get to the table and stay there.

Fig. 5: Quality of Knowledge-Based Contributions and Skill-Based Contributions.

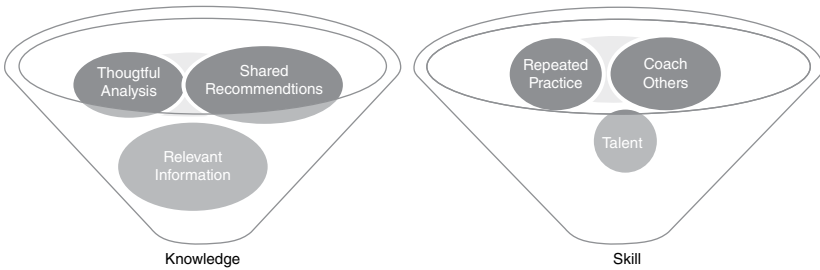


Fig. 6: Requirements for Making Good Decisions. Adapted from Draman and Edmondson (2012).

