



The Signature Voice

the quarterly newsletter for clients and friends of Isis Associates

Friends & Colleagues,

Happy 2012 -- We hope that the new year is off to a great start! For many of our clients, January is a time of goal setting and ensuring goals are tied to the strategic vision and priorities of their organizations and functions. To this end, our Senior Partner, **Nina Bowman** shares with us below some practical tips on how to lift out of the day-to-day and focus on the big picture.

Additionally, we are delighted to introduce our newest member of the team. **Amy Gleklen** joined Isis Associates in December 2011 as a Consulting Partner and is based in the Washington DC area. Amy has over twenty-five years of leadership experience in the corporate, professional services, and non-profit sectors including working for organizations such as Merrill Lynch, Booz Allen & Hamilton, and Compass, a DC-based non-profit. Amy received both her MBA and B.S. from the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania and combines her business education with a Master's degree in Counseling from Johns Hopkins and leadership coaching certification through Georgetown University. She is a PCC ICF certified coach and trained in a variety of key leadership assessments.

Start Thinking and Stop Doing: A Roadmap to Thinking Strategically

We all know that thinking strategically is important, but we have a hard time doing so when we're simply trying to keep our heads above water with the day-to-day tasks that consume our time and energy. In our "get it done" corporate cultures, we have somehow forgotten that "thinking", and not just "doing", is work. If we want to be viewed as a leader who thinks strategically, we must embrace the reality that staying in the weeds puts us on the fast track to nowhere. Whether you look within your organization, or to the iconic leaders of our time, you will find that those who stand out and make a real difference focus their time and attention on answering the BIG questions and thinking strategically.

To evolve your journey towards strategic thinking, check your mindset, skills, perspective and schedule.

1. Check your Mindset

How do you feel about strategy? Our view of strategic thinking and the strategy process is often colored by the number of strategic plans that end up collecting dust on the shelf. This makes us hesitant to engage in strategic discussions and planning processes. It's important that we separate the poor application of strategic planning processes from the importance of strategic thinking.

Checking mindset also reminds us to tame the aspects of our personality that keep us from being more inquisitive and curious. Those with a penchant for being more risk averse, please take note!

2. Check your Perspective

Thinking strategically requires expanding your perspective from several angles and aligning your own efforts to the goals of your organization and the needs of the market. Ask yourself, "Do I know what's most important to my CEO? My customers? The competition? What is the division's or department's strategy? What is the corporate strategy?" As I work with clients to broaden their strategic thinking abilities, I often start by asking the client to meet with individuals from other departments or to read from different sources, such as the Harvard Business Review or The Futurist. Over time, the focus on others' views, perspectives, and needs helps to release the myopic view that has a hold on so many managers.

3. Check your Skills

Thinking like a strategist is part art and part science. And yes, you can get up to speed by reading the works of seminal authors on the topic, such as Michael Porter, Gary Hamel, C.K. Prahalad, and Kenichi Ohmae, or more recent authors, such as W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne (authors of *Blue Ocean Strategy*). You can also become proficient in conducting SWOT Analysis, Porter's Five Forces, and in building strategy maps courtesy of Robert Kaplan and David Norton. However, thinking strategically is, first and foremost, about being open to ideas, being willing to explore concepts, having comfort with ambiguity and uncertainty, and flexing your curiosity muscles. To improve your skills, simply focus on increasing your inquiry skills. Instead of leaning on your technical expertise to provide answers, ask questions, such as: *What will the impact be on our customers? How will this impact department XYZ? What are our options for dealing with the problem? What if our competitors respond by doing....? How might this trend impact our business? Is there another way?*

4. Check your Schedule

Your daily and weekly schedule should be reflective of your priorities, and as a leader, preparing answers and strategies to the "big" questions about your business must be a priority. If 100% of your time is spent fighting fires and handling the problem of the day, start by carving out a couple of hours each week for strategic reflection or small group discussions on key strategic issues. If possible, make it the same time each week so that you and your staff create the habit of building in time to think. Having trouble finding those hours? Look no further than your delegation skills. Making time for strategic reflection and thinking will often require moving other work off of your plate. While difficult, the benefits are clear – you will have time to grow your strategic chops while building the capacity of your direct reports to learn and develop.

Thinking more strategically is a different cognitive process and ability for many. It takes patience, courage and a conscious effort to hone and develop. However, the skills position you well for providing inspirational and strategic leadership to your organization. It's well worth the journey!

– Nina A. Bowman