

Mentoring to Develop Strategic Leaders

Here's how mentoring can support leaders in developing a strategic mindset.



By Michael Miloff and Lois J. Zachary

As the world becomes ever more complex and interconnected, strategic change that is multiorganizational and multidisciplinary becomes increasingly important. And yet, many leaders miss the mark because they lack the strategic mindset and collaborative process skills and tools necessary to drive strategic change.

Strategic leadership requires many soft skills that cannot be fully learned from a textbook or classroom. And mentors have an instrumental role to play in building the capacity of leaders to hone strategic leadership skills and harness the multiorganizational and disciplinary synergies that drive strategic change.

By working with leaders one-on-one, mentors can help them become more strategic by encouraging and supporting them to reflect on their business

experiences and relationships, set stretch goals, try new behaviors, and gain and integrate feedback.

In our work with clients, we've discovered seven strategic leadership components that enable leaders to bring fresh thinking and perspectives into their organizations and successfully advance priority strategic initiatives. Below are the components and steps mentors can take to help the evolving strategic leader develop in each area.

Self-awareness and ability to manage emotions

In *Thinking Fast and Slow*, Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman reminds us that humans are constantly at risk of making irrational decisions, especially under stress, time pressures, and information uncertainty. At the same time, the ability to quickly grasp the right action to take is crucial. Being able to check, harness, and manage one's knowledge, intuition, and emotions also is critical to good judgment and leadership.

Mentors can hold up a mirror and help mentees analyze their decision-making patterns and understand their strengths, weaknesses, and the factors that influence them by

- facilitating their reflection about mistakes and successes in judgment

- encouraging identification of their own (and others') decision-making and behavioral patterns
- asking deep questions that open up honest assessment of what they could have done differently.

Knowledge

It is difficult for leaders to capitalize on opportunities and respond to threats unless they possess a firm grasp of the technical and social domains immediately relevant to their business and an understanding of the broader societal trends that shape their environment. In our knowledge-intensive, but often siloed world, many of the breakthroughs will come from applying insights and solutions from other spheres of work and life.

Mentors can help mentees gain exposure to a broad range of perspectives, whether through reading, talking to experts and clients within and outside their organization, exploring the power of metaphor, brainstorming, or extracting lessons from their own customer experiences and lives.

Vision and focus

Organizations face countless potential problems with myriad potential

solutions. Effective leaders focus individual and organizational attention on the central opportunities, threats, and solutions to build a compelling vision and strategy. By learning to say “no” to seductive distractions, strategic leaders position themselves to say a louder “yes” to the right actions.

Mentors can help leaders overcome the common tendency to pursue interesting, secondary, or easy issues, and help them focus on the central, linchpin issues. They also can

- create an environment of safety so as to better challenge the leader to think deeper and broader
- encourage leaders to keep peeling the onion to identify root causes (asking many “why” questions).
- help leaders to prioritize the best solution
- identify obstacles that need to be overcome and how.

Empowerment and process management skills

Successful leaders create synergy. They energize, mobilize, and focus participant intelligence, talent, creativity, and accountabilities.

Mentors can help leaders better understand and build relationships with

key leaders, and exercise substantive and process leadership by

- crystallizing great maps of problems and potential solutions
- leading processes that generate strategic insight and focus
- engaging key players by creating excitement and building ownership.

Presence and entrepreneurialism

Presence and credibility are prerequisites if a leader is to be taken seriously. Entrepreneurialism enables one to see and seize opportunity, develop and apply creative solutions, take risk, tenaciously pursue one's goals, and resiliently bounce back from defeat—all valuable attributes in a highly competitive world that values innovation.

Although personal attributes, such as presence and entrepreneurialism, are somewhat hard-wired, mentors can help leaders

- insert themselves earlier into discussions and the decision-making process with well-thought-out strategic insights and process next steps
- develop or sponsor innovative thinking while recognizing the importance of risk management

More Ways to Support Strategic Leadership Development

In addition to mentoring, there are other ways learning professionals can support leaders in developing strategic leadership skills. Consider the following approaches, which must be adapted to the organization and individual leader's context, budget, and culture.

Use a competency model. Using this or another leadership framework, define the knowledge, skill, attitude, and personal and network competencies for being an effective leader in your organization, especially one that can harness collaborative processes to create strategic change. Having a competency model is the basis for mentees' own and others' assessment of leadership performance, identifying

gaps and formulating personal development plans.

Concurrently address organizational strategy and personal capacity. Ensure that any development process attends to both external organizational situations and internal personal capacities. Turn real world strategic initiatives into opportunities for reflection, feedback, and personal growth and turn professional growth into direct opportunities to benefit the organization.

Demand structure. Build a demand structure for showcasing what mentees have learned and the practical implications for the organization. This can add excitement, engage senior leadership, and create a

healthy tension and motivation for the development process.

Deploy tools and templates. Work with organizational leaders to ensure they develop strategic management tools and templates that are customized to the organizational context. This will help each new generation of developing leaders learn, apply the best techniques, and contribute to further enhancing the tools.

Support communities of practice. Facilitate the operation of communities of practice that promote personal development and network-building, along with cross-organizational learning, peer support, rapid diffusion of innovative practices, and a culture of collaboration.

- maintain high personal energy levels.

Building and maintaining personal networks

What people think about a leader shapes if and how they approach that leader and what they offer—whether it's with information, opportunities, or a willingness to collaborate. To attract and capitalize on the talents of other individuals and organizations, strategic leaders need to have good networks or a reputation as someone worth working with those who are trustworthy.

Mentors can help leaders build their network, profile, and brand with other leaders in the field, current and potential clients and partners, and experts and influencers through engaging these parties in dialogue that

- demonstrates appreciation of their context and approaches
- shares perspectives about strategic

challenges, opportunities, and solutions

- profiles the leader's achievements and plans
- gains feedback on the leader's views and performance
- explores the potential for synergy.

Personal development

Succeeding in a world of accelerated change, intertwined systems, and rough-and-tumble competition requires continuous adaptation. For any leader, this means a commitment to ongoing personal development.

Mentors collaborate with leaders they mentor in the design and implementation of their personalized learning and development plan. It begins by focusing on the future and where that leader wants to be. Mentors help leaders

- integrate their career and personal aspirations and values
- gain real world feedback

- champion for their development.

Leaders must be learners and build their strategic leadership capabilities so they can inspire, mobilize, and create ownership for the future. Mentors can play a key role in helping to make this happen.

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