

## Why leaders don't do enough strategy

- Gareth English -

In the world of leadership development we talk about strategy a lot, and being strategic is deeply cool. Ask someone about it in an interview and everyone does strategy. Right? Wrong. I've had the opportunity to work with leaders from organisations all over the world and time and again I find that there are brilliant managers who work incredibly hard for their organisations, who are not putting their energy and attention where it should be. They are not doing what is really needed. They are not being the leaders that they could be.

So what are these conscientious managers with their long hours and dedication doing wrong? If you're coaching them, how can you help? If this is you, what can you do to fix it?

### More than the day job.

You're so busy in your managerial role, working so hard, giving all those late nights, so why is some Psychologist saying you're not being the leader that you need to be? Why? Because you're putting this vast effort and attention into the wrong things.

Yes, it's all of what [Covey](#) calls the 'urgent, but unimportant stuff'. All those last-minute requests, all those things that definitely must be done. This is what gets in the way. This of course includes solving crises and responding to incredibly vital customer requests. Part of the job – yes. But of course, if you keep doing them then you can't get into the non-urgent, vitally important leadership stuff.

The real reason that this is such a trap is that the urgent, unimportant things are tangible, immediate tasks where you know what to do, and you know that you can do a good job. That's going to be attractive to focus on any day of the week. That's going to trap your attention. So instead you *should* be focussing on things that you actually find more difficult, where you're not sure what to do. You should be looking at your longer-term tasks, where you're *not* clear what needs doing and you're *not* confident you'll do a good job. So it's obvious why you've not been doing that then!

And how do you break out of this trap? Where can you start in developing this vital leadership skill?

### Your eye line.

When you're riding a bike, it goes where you're looking. Get distracted by a dog with a fluffy tail, crash into a hedge. Or at least I'm told that can happen. To other



people (I broke by hand falling off my bike a short while ago). I often apply this metaphor to look at goal setting, but I actually want to shift this a little now and consider what this means for the time-focus of your attention.

What do I mean by that? It's like your eye-line when riding a bike, but where you're looking in time. The simplest tasks tend to have the nearest time-focus. If something needs doing right now, that's straightforward, simple and tangible. And these are the sorts of tasks we might start with in individual contributor roles. 'Gareth: get this done next please'.

As we move on and gain experience, our time-focus tends to lengthen. 'This is what needs to get done by the end of the week' / 'this is what the sales target is for this month'. For many middle-managers, their time-focus seems to end up somewhere between one and twelve months, depending upon how changeable their world is.

The big point here is that senior leadership roles involve looking at much longer timelines. So many prospective leaders will have to learn to raise their time-focus so that their attention is where it needs to be. Crashing a company is generally worse than crashing a bike. One of the questions I ask leaders that I work with is 'what is your biggest challenge for the next 12-18 months'. It's surprising how often people struggle to answer that. At senior levels, the question would be 2-5 years.



### **But I haven't been set my goals yet!**

A common reason I hear for a short time-focus is 'well I have to wait for the trickle-down of goals from my manager'. This is a big issue in many companies, and I feel for leaders trying to work in an annual goal-setting system that requires them to set goals before they've been set them.



However, the leaders who master their time-focus are always looking further ahead. They don't wait for the annual system of goal setting to remind them what needs to happen in a year's time. If you are constantly creating a rolling view of where you need to be in 18 months time, then you are far less likely to be surprised.

So the challenge here, the skill to develop, is to extend your time-focus; to be clearer about where you want to be in 18 months time. Otherwise you run the risk, that I see in so many leaders, of setting arbitrary annual goals for their team, because they're not sure where they really want to be in 18 months.



## How to develop a longer timeline?

OK. Now you want to move to a more senior leadership position, and you recognise that your time-focus is currently at a year or less. Or maybe you're trapped in the habit of relying on your organisation's annual goal-setting system. What can you do to raise your timeline?

1. Talk to people. The information about what will be important in 18 months time is out there. The first place to look is to talk to your manager and their manager. They will have a good view of what is likely to be relevant. If they're not sure, then this may be a good time to start that conversation with them.
2. Work with your network. Outside of your immediate line are your other stakeholders and your peers. Outside of your organisation are your customers, suppliers and partners.

Engage these people in conversations about where things are headed. What is likely to be important in 18 months time?

3. Deal with ambiguity. Anyone who promises you exactly what your world will look like in 18 months is confusing accuracy with confidence. You have to accept that there will be unknowns, complexity and differing opinions. Lengthening your time-focus isn't about perfectly predicting the future. It is about saying 'given what I know now, where do I need to be then'
4. Where do you want to be? The final part of the puzzle (or maybe the first) is your desires and ambitions. What do you *want* to be doing in 18 months time? Where do you want to be? If that involves changes from where you are now, then it will involve you making changes in your self, your information, attitudes and skills.

## What's the first thing you can do right now?

Sit down and answer the following questions:

1. What are you 90% sure will be needed in 18 months time?
2. Who are 3 people who you will talk to about what will be required in 18 months time?
3. What do *you* want to be different in 18 months time?
4. What skills will your team need to deliver what will be needed?

And of course if you're too busy to sit down and answer these questions? Raise your time-focus.

