

# CRITICAL FUTURE LEADERSHIP SKILL – STRATEGIC

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“Ultimate excellence lies  
 Not in winning  
 Every battle  
 But in defeating the enemy  
 Without ever fighting.  
 The highest form of warfare  
 Is to attack  
 Strategy itself”  
 - an excerpt from *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu <sup>1</sup>

Master Sun penned these words 2,500 years ago, but the weight of his message remains. To decode and dismantle an enemy’s strategy is arguably the most powerful way to defeat them. Modern times may not bear witness to bloody battles, but the war between organisations and corporations has emerged. To win this war, one needs to put in place a solid strategy.

An article by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) puts forth the main idea of leading strategically: to ‘think, act, and influence others in ways that promote the enduring success of the organisation’<sup>2</sup>. But strategy is not defined by one specific practice. Thus, there is no one-size-fits-all: the right approach to strategy will differ depending on the current context, culture and structure of the organisation.

Adapting to change is one form of strategy embraced by many. Lego, with its simple brick-toy concept, experienced a period of difficulty during the onslaught of internet and video games<sup>3</sup>. Their turnaround strategy? To leverage on collaborations with the entertainment industry, such as Star Wars and Batman. This subsequently resulted in movie franchises, new brick-toy concepts, and of course, video games. But they did not stop there. They have also noticed that millennial parents associate Lego with educational values – this toy helps develop our children’s minds through creative play. Lego has restored its position by responding both to outward, digital change, and also to the cultural shifts of our times.

One goal remains clear when being strategic, and that is to think for the long run. It may be said that technology has killed strategy - by creating an environment that forces us to re-consider our strategies from time to time. Nevertheless, strategic leaders need to have vision beyond that of an operational leader. While the latter focuses on short-term targets, a strategic leader ‘must make decisions that position the business for the future, while meeting current demands’. For IBM, positioning themselves to ensure survival meant re-inventing their business model. This required a transformation of their

<sup>1</sup> *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu (Translated by John Minford, 2002) Penguin Classics

<sup>2</sup> *How to Successfully Move Into a Strategic Leader Role*, Center for Creative Leadership (9 Aug 2016)  
<https://www.ccl.org/blog/how-to-successfully-move-into-a-strategic-leader-role-2/>

<sup>3</sup> *Lego made 3 changes to become the world’s most powerful toy company*, Business Insider (12 May 2015)  
<http://www.businessinsider.com/legos-turnaround-strategy-2015-5/?IR=T&r=MY>

portfolios: from low-growth product lines like memory chips, to high-value offerings such as analytics<sup>4</sup>. Recognising transformation as a constant is a crucial aspect in long-term planning.

Let us now shift our focus to the public sector landscape, where the environment may be more rigid, but also complex. Strategy execution is less cut-throat, and yet the public sector receives bigger pressure to deliver results. One way to ensure results is by actually laying out effective strategies, which ‘must define practical actions (projects) that will produce real results that people will actually use to create worthwhile benefits’<sup>5</sup>. It has been argued that scores of public sector strategies are not actually strategies at all. For instance, ‘ensure fit and healthy citizens’ may sound great, but it does not actually define what you have to do and what the outcomes are: it is a vague aspiration; an end-goal. Rather, it could be rephrased as such: ‘construct public gyms in every Klang Valley district by 2020’. Bear in mind also that there must be compelling evidence to suggest that citizens will use the gyms, and in turn, become fitter. This further emphasises the importance of having clear and validated strategies, and not confusing them with goals.

Exceptions do occur. Although strategy is concerned with long-term success and sustainability, the story of Airbnb contradicts this idea. Airbnb started poorly, only taking off after the founders physically went out to take more attractive photographs of tenant listings. This strategy is work-intensive and not scalable, and yet this exact move gave them the momentum needed to grow bigger. Similarly, Apple did not push to become the first mover in the smartphone market even when they could. They chose to wait. But sacrificing the originator advantage was in fact a blessing in disguise: they came up on top as the innovator instead. By learning from competitors, they have now managed to capture a sizeable market of less tech-savvy but financially-able consumers<sup>6</sup>. Different corporations may have varying stories of success, but what they do have in common is an effective vision. In his book ‘Leading Change’, John Kotter states that a vision is ‘a sensible and appealing picture of the future’. This, in turn, produces strategies, or ‘a logic for how the vision can be achieved’<sup>7</sup>. And, as proven by both Airbnb and Apple, sometimes the right logic is far from conventional.

Perhaps the final important element in creating effective visions and strategies is leadership itself. To be a high-performing corporation, there must be a leadership strategy. Each layer of the organisation must practice a leadership culture while undergoing continuous development in leadership, and not just merely relying on the CEO to take charge<sup>8</sup>. The ability to lead will then allow the influencing process to kick in, thus getting everyone on board with the organisation’s strategy.

Our nation has embarked upon a Blue Ocean Strategy of creating new opportunities and collaborating our way to success. A great number of initiatives have taken the Blue Ocean approach – ranging from public welfare projects to the transformation of the workforce. On the whole, this strategy incorporates all the elements we have discussed: being transformative, collaborative, forward-looking, and effective – with a dash of innovation. With clear directions, visionary foresight and exceptional leadership, this strategy will surely remain as an indispensable force in delivering our society and organisations to greater heights.

<sup>4</sup> IBM’s Transformation--From Survival To Success, Forbes (7 Jul 2010) <https://www.forbes.com/2010/07/07/ibm-transformation-lessons-leadership-managing-change.html#48c5eb283afb>

<sup>5</sup> Why most public sector strategies aren't actually strategies at all, The Guardian (8 Apr 2014) <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2014/apr/08/public-sector-strategies-vague-aspirations>

<sup>6</sup> The 5 Best Business Strategies I’ve Ever Seen, Cascade/ExecuteStrategy.net (28 Nov 2016) <https://www.executestrategy.net/blog/the-5-best-business-strategies-ive-ever-seen/>

<sup>7</sup> Leading Change, John P. Kotter (1996) Harvard Business Review Press

<sup>8</sup> It’s Not The CEO, It’s The Leadership Strategy That Matters, Forbes (30 Jul 2012) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshbersin/2012/07/30/its-not-the-ceo-its-the-leadership-strategy-that-matters/#7af7734f6db8>