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## STRATEGIC THINKING: WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

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### ABSTRACT

Strategic thinking is increasingly being recognized as an important requirement for effective strategic management in business organizations. More and more scholars, consultants, and practitioners are conceding that strategic thinking facilitates formulation and implementation of effective strategies. Despite being considered as an integral part of the strategic management process, the literature indicates strategic thinking has not received much research attention. This paper strives to address this gap. Specifically, the paper attempts to provide some useful insight into the development of strategic thinking as an important strategic management concept and a good business practice.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of strategic thinking as a requisite for effective strategic management has recently generated considerable interest. The literature in fact suggests that the increased interest in strategic thinking resulted from the growing evidence that indicates such practice can help improved organizational effectiveness. As an integral part of the strategic management process, strategic thinking assists business organizations in making effective decisions by keeping alert and making good sense of the threats and opportunities, particularly in uncertain and dynamic environment. By assisting firms to make effective decisions, strategic thinking helps to enhance their performance.

The focus on the concept of strategic thinking in strategic management began about three decades ago. The review of the strategic management literature further suggests that interest in the area of strategic

thinking has been growing steadily since the 1970s. Since its introduction, strategic thinking has gained acceptance not only as an important strategic management concept, but also as a good business practice.

Over the years, more and more practitioners, consultants, and academicians are acknowledging the need for organizations to embrace strategic thinking in order to help them reduce bureaucracy, improve effectiveness, and focus on long term performance. More significantly, by adopting and developing competencies in strategic thinking, organizations are able to conceive and implement not only creative strategies, but also more coherent strategies (Ohmae, 1982; Robert, 1988; Altiers, 1991; Mintzberg, 1995; Garrat, 1995; Liedtka, 1998; Christensen, 1997; Linkow, 1999; Harrison, 2003; Viljoen and Dann, 2003; and Thompson, Gamble and Strickland, 2004).

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Despite the importance of strategic thinking to organizations, the strategic management literature reveals not much emphasis has been given to examine its development as an important strategic management concept and a good business practice. This paper initiates an attempt to address this issue by providing some useful insights into strategic thinking. For this purpose, the paper is presented as follows. Section Two below begins by describing what strategic thinking is. Following this, Section Three discusses why strategic thinking is important to organizations. Accordingly, Section Four explains the strategic thinking process. Lastly, Section Five provides a brief conclusion of the paper.

## WHAT IS STRATEGIC THINKING?

The review of the literature shows that although the term "strategic thinking" is widely used, at the moment, there is still no one universally way of describing strategic thinking. Although strategic thinking appears to be defined differently by different authors, a comprehensive review of the definitions presented in the literature suggests most authors tend to agree and view strategic thinking as an integral part of the strategic management process (Hashim, 2005; De Witt and Meyer, 2004; Harrison, 2003; Heracleous, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Liedtka, 1998a; and Garrat, 1995b).

Morrison and Lee (1979) in their earlier study broadly classified strategic thinking as a process of thinking through and beyond the solutions in a strategically creative frame of mind. More importantly, these authors indicated that the adoption of the strategic thinking process can offer an organization with competitive advantage. Morrison and Lee pointed that strategic thinking provides competitive advantage

to the organization by emphasizing on: 1). key success factors; 2). segmentation of markets; 3). analysis of strategies; 4). anticipation of competitors' responses; 5). exploitation on the degrees of freedom; and 6). investing on businesses with clear advantages.

More recently, in a similar way; authors such as De Witt and Meyer (2004), Thomson et al. (2004), Harrison (2003), Viljoen and Dann (2003), Graetz (2002), Heracleous (1998), Sutari (1993), Bandrowski (1990), Mason, 1986; and Ohmae (1982) regarded strategic thinking as a creative process of crafting innovative strategy that emphasizes on identifying and managing competitive advantage. According to these authors, strategic thinking involved sequential critical and creative thought processes that underscored key issues and the creation of a more realistic and innovative framework for developing competitive advantage, as well as effective strategy formulation and implementation. These authors further highlighted that companies with strong strategic thinking capabilities can enhance not only their present competitive advantage, but also strengthen their future competitive position.

O' Shannassy (2003), Graetz (2002), Weir (2002), Bonn (2001), Hussey (1999), Wells (1998), Heracleous (1998), Markides (1997), Hanford (1995), Mintzberg (1995), Garrat (1995a), Linkow (1999), and Ohmae (1982) viewed strategic thinking as an essential nonlinear creative activity that allows organizations to create pragmatic responses to cope with unexpected and unpredictable changes in the business environment. According to these scholars, through strategic thinking, organizations can not only better understand phenomena and events in the real world that cannot be explained by linear thinking, but also permit them to

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overcome the changes in the environment. By adopting strategic thinking, an organization is able to understand clearly the specific nature of each element of its environment, as well as to fully utilize its human brainpower to reorganize the elements in the most advantageous way.

Apart from being considered as a creative activity, authors such as Viljoen and Dann (2003), Keelin and Arnold, 2002; Raimond (1996), Morrissey (1996), Garrat (1995a), Thierauf (1993), Tweed (1992), Harper (1991), Zabriskie and Huellmantel (1991), Schmincke, 1990; Robert (1988) and Tregoe and Zimmerman (1979) described strategic thinking as the kind of thinking process that shapes and clarifies the present and the future strategic outline of an organization such as its present position, values, strategy, mission, as well as vision. In other words, these scholars believed that strategic thinking can help to provide not only insight into what an organization should be doing in the present, but also to focus on its future. By being able to do so, these authors further indicated that strategic thinking presented the organization with a more realistic and effective framework for developing its strategic plan.

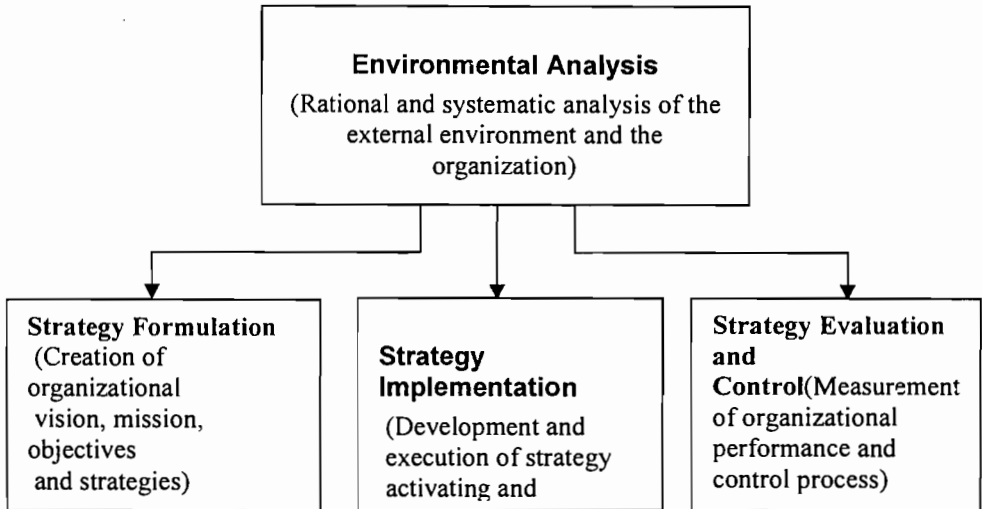
Additionally, authors such as Bates and Dillard (1993), Suutari (1993), Stumpf (1989) stressed on the importance of developing the necessary skills and knowledge for practicing strategic thinking effectively. For instance, Bates and Dillard (1993) emphasized that strategic thinking is practiced successfully with certain measurable capabilities, such as intuitive ability, mental elasticity, abstract thinking, tolerance of risk, and tolerance for ambiguity. Nevertheless, these authors highlighted those organizations most often faced the difficulty of identifying people with strategic thinking ability and disposition to carry out the strategic thinking tasks in their organizations.

The study by Suutari (1993) pointed out that for strategic thinking to be effective in an organization, decision making skills are required at all level of management in the organization. According to the author,, the practice of strategic thinking requires not only decision making skills to generate ideas, but also to make decision based on an understanding of the precepts of strategy formulation and in accordance with the strategic objectives and direction of the business.

In another study, Stumpf (1989) specifically identified six important skills and knowledge for practicing strategic thinking successfully. The six skills and knowledge include: 1). knowledge of the business and market; 2). ability to manage subunit rivalry; 3). ability to identify and overcome threat; 4). knowledge on strategy; 5). entrepreneurial ability; and 6). knowledge in accommodating adversity.

## WHY STRATEGIC THINKING?

A review of the literature on strategic management suggests that strategic thinking attracted the attention of strategic management scholars, consultants and practitioners for several reasons. First, the concept of strategic thinking gained acceptance as the results of the disagreement and dissatisfaction with the traditional approach to the strategic management process. As shown in Figure 1, the traditional strategic management process overemphasizes on rationality and systematic analysis. The proponents of strategic thinking have criticized the strong emphasis on analysis and rationality adopted in the traditional strategic management process (De Witt and Meyer, 2004; Harrison, 2003; Viljoen and Dann, 2003; Heracleous, 1998 and 2003; Wells , 1998; Mintzberg, 1995; Stumpf and Mullen, 1992; and Ohmae, 1982).

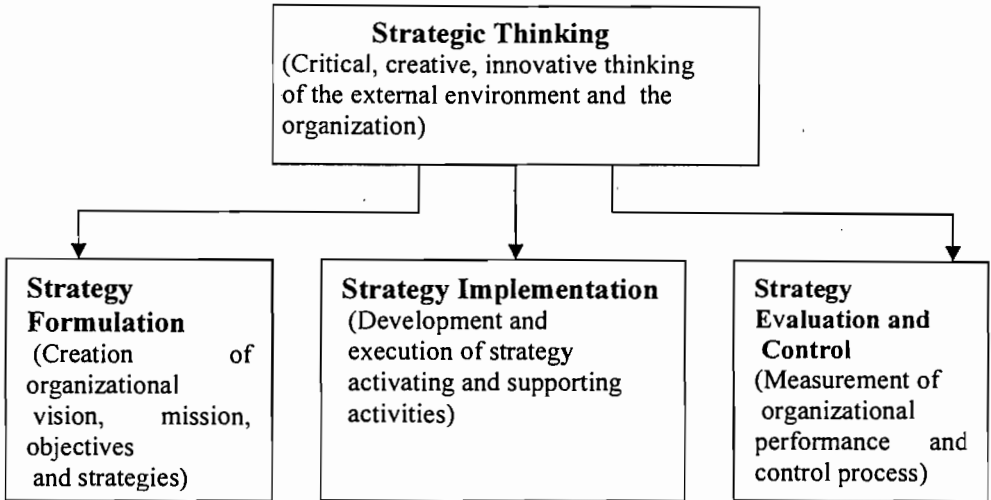
**Figure 1 : The Traditional Strategic Management Process**

Second, the strategic thinking promoters are of the opinion that devising effective strategy in uncertain and dynamic business environment requires less of rationality and systematic analysis, but more of critical, creative, and innovative emphasis that the traditional strategic management process lacks. In their opinion, formulating of strategy in the real world is about perceiving strengths and weaknesses, envisioning opportunities and threats, and creating the future, for which

imagination, intuition and judgment are more important than analysis and logic.

Third, as an activity that focuses on creativity and innovation, strategic thinking is believed to be able to help organizations move beyond what has already been tried and proven. For these reasons, increasing numbers of scholars and consultants are viewing strategic thinking as an integral part of the strategic management process (as shown in Figure 2)

**Figure 2 : Strategic Thinking As An Integral Part of the Strategic Management Process**



The main appeal of strategic thinking as good business practice is the expectation that it will enhance organizational performance. By adopting strategic thinking, managers and employees achieve a better understanding of an organization's business, problems, priorities, and operations. Strategic thinking allows organizations to be efficient, but more importantly, it permits them to be effective.

Although strategic thinking does not guarantee organizational success, the process allows proactive rather than reactive decision making. Strategic thinking may represent a radical change in philosophy for some organizations, so strategists must be trained in strategic thinking to respond to critical questions and key strategic issues that their organizations often faced in uncertain and dynamic environment.

Furthermore, over the years, as strategic thinking evolves into an important strategic management concept and good business practice, it has attracted much attention not only among academic writers, but consultants as well. The figures indicate that increasing

numbers of leading scholars and consultants are writing more and more books about strategic thinking (Thompson et al., 2004; Harrison, 2003; Heracleous, 2003; Viljoen and Dann, 2003; Garrat, 2000; Wells, 1998; Garrat, 1995; Stumpf and Mullen, 1992; Bandrowski, 1990; Robert, 1988; Harrison and Bramson, 1984; and Ohmae, 1982).

At the same time, numerous studies and journal articles have focused on the relevance and applicability of the strategic thinking process in organizations. A major conclusion of these studies and articles is that companies that are able to instill strategic thinking process and capabilities within their organizations enjoyed a number of benefits (O'Shannassy, 2003; Bonn, 2001; Liedtka, 1998b; Masifern and Vila, 1998; and Altiers, 1991). More specifically, Masifern and Vila (1998) outlined the following benefits of applying strategic thinking within an organization:

1. day-to-day activities in the organization become more aligned

- with strategy as managers shared a common framework arising from the strategic thinking process;
2. the common framework allows for a better coordination among different departments and levels;
  3. decision making takes place at a much faster rate as the strategic thinking process enhances speed, flexibility, and facilitates decision making;
  4. Strategic thinking process that allows for employees at every level to engage in strategic conversation that helps to foster a 'common language' and align mental models within the organization.
  5. strategic thinking also facilitates delegation as expectations are more aligned between manager and subordinates; and
  6. Strategic thinking encourages the company to be more innovative through the development of ambitious objectives and innovative strategies.

## HOW STRATEGIC THINKING WORKS

The literature review in general appears to show that many authors tend to concede that strategic thinking forms an integral part of the strategic management process. The literature further indicates that as a process, strategic thinking can be applied not only by an individual, but also by a group of individuals or a team at both the organizational and industrial levels. In fact, Ohmae (1982) earlier on suggested that strategic thinking should be viewed as a daily discipline and creative activity to be practiced by strategists and managers in organizations.

Like every process, strategic thinking can best be studied and applied by using a model. The framework illustrated in Figure 3 below is a widely

accepted, comprehensive model of the strategic thinking process. Although this model does not guarantee success, it does represent a clear and practical approach for applying strategic thinking in an organization. Accordingly, the following section explains briefly the six major components of the strategic thinking process as depicted in Figure 3.

### 1. Understanding the Organization's Present Situation and Desired Future.

Understanding the firm's present situation is the logical starting point for strategic thinking because thinking strategically involves not only in making sense of the trends, events, and problems faced by the firm, but also to figure out how to bring the conditions most advantageous to the firm in the most creative and innovative manner. At the same time, as a long term expedient thinking process, strategic thinking requires the firm to be future oriented. Simply put, the strategic thinking process begins with not only the understanding of the firm's present situation, but also its future direction.

### 2. Diagnosing the Business Domain.

Diagnosing the business domain helps the organization to focus on its internal components as well as external environment. More specifically, diagnosing the business domain involves observing and understanding the firm's business, its different internal components (such as its resources, skills, knowledge, technology, structure, operations, and culture), and their relationships with the stakeholders in the external environment.

In other words, diagnosing the business domain provides the firm not only a better and clearer view of its business, but also permits the firm to have a more comprehensive business outlook. For example, an organization



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that views itself as part of a larger business system and belonging to more than one value chains has a broader business outlook than a firm that sees itself as only a firm in an industry. Having wider business perspective is essential to organizations competing in uncertain and dynamic business environment.

### **3. Obtaining Insight**

Apart from allowing a firm to better understands it and providing it with a broader business outlook, the strategic thinking process also stresses on the need to obtain insight into the threats and opportunities hidden from the firm. Obtaining insight involves not only thinking critically about the threats and opportunities, but also creatively identifying the needs, wants and the key success factors of existing and new customers, markets, products and services, technologies, skills, knowledge, capabilities, resources, business models, and other future requirements, and potential competitive advantage.

### **4. Developing Foresight**

Developing foresight is the fourth important component of the strategic thinking process. Foresight permits the firm to anticipate not only the patterns and trends that are taking place in and around the organization, but also to predict what the future of the firm and business would be like. Developing foresight is useful for the purpose of positioning appropriately the firm in the future. In the strategic thinking process, foresight is developed through the construction of scenarios. A scenario represents written descriptions of some likely future postures, in terms of key variables and strategic issues. Flexibility and alternatives in scenario building exercises can help an organization to develop more creative ideas and innovative solutions that go beyond what are obvious, as well as those that have already been tried and proven.

### **5. Mapping the Future Direction**

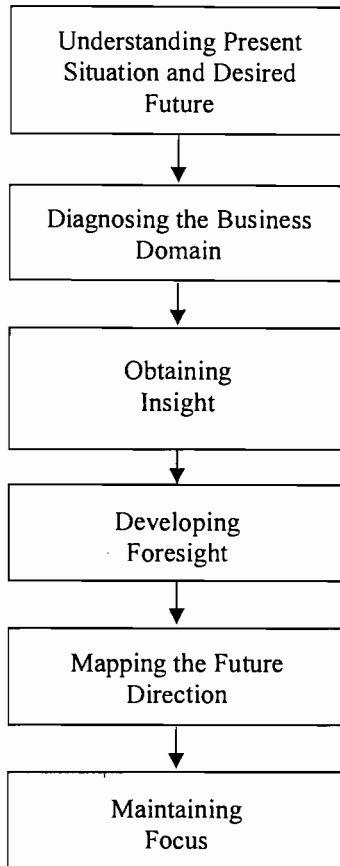
Another important aspect of the strategic thinking process is the mapping of the firm's future direction. Organizations need to consider their present as well as future success. The future success of a firm, however, depends on well it is able to survive and grow in the long run. Given this, the firm needs to map its future direction. Mapping the firm's future direction involves applying critically and creatively the inputs obtained from the previous four components of the strategic thinking components.

The map of the future direction of the firm will assist the organization to focus on important strategic issues such as the target market to be served, technological expertise required, type and level of resources, organizational skills and knowledge needed, and future competitive advantage. In this way, the future direction map not only helps to steer the organization into the right direction, but also provides the firm a more realistic framework for formulating and implementing effective strategy.

### **6. Maintaining Focus**

The sixth component of the strategic thinking process stresses on the need for the firm to maintain focus on its chosen direction. Maintaining focus on the chosen direction requires that the organization monitors its previous assumptions for selecting the specific direction and critically observing whether the strategy being pursued is based on the same assumptions. At the same time, the firm is also required to be cautious of the validity of the assumptions as they may changed and no longer be relevant and applicable. If the assumptions are no longer applicable and relevant, the firm should be prepared to accept the facts, take corrective measures, and make the necessary changes based on the new assumptions.

Figure 3: Strategic Thinking Process



The strategic thinking process does not guarantee success; however, it does represent a more realistic approach for crafting strategy in organizations. More specifically, by adopting the strategy thinking process, organizations are able to better understand themselves, their businesses, and their roles as well as relationships with the stakeholders in the external environment. Moreover, the strategic thinking process can assist firms to break out of the traditional mindsets and seize opportunities, and allows them to utilize a more creative approach to test ideas that can result in various advantages to the organizations. In fact, previous studies have identified the following advantages:

1. continuous adaptation and improvement (Barnett and Berland, 1999; Bonn, 2001; Graetz, 2002; Liedtka, 1998b; Suutari, 1993; and Wells, 1998);
2. superior business approaches (Barnett and Berland, 1999);
3. provide superior value for customers, (Liedtka, 1998b; Wolf and Gering, 1998);
4. hard for competitors to imitate (Bonn, 2001; and Liedtka 1998b);
5. the ability to improve relative advantage (Ohmae, 1982; South, 1982; Suutari, 1993; Garrat, 1995a; and Wolf and Gering, 1998);

7. the capacity to extend relative advantage, (Hickman and Silva, 1984; Ohmae, 1982; South, 1981; and Suutari, 1993);
8. enjoy higher growth, (Suutari, 1993; Well, 1998);
9. more innovative and able to challenge industry norms, (Masifern and Vila, 1998);
10. Markides, 1997; Ohmae, 1982; and Wells, 1998);
11. greater chances for survival (Robert, 1988; Suutari, 1993); and
12. flexible and speedy respond to changes (Bonn, 2001; Liedtka, 1998b);
13. Linkow, 1999; and Masifern and Vila, 1998).

## CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper attempted to provide some insight into strategic thinking as an important strategic management concept as well as a good business practice. More precisely, the paper describes what strategic thinking is, discusses why it is important, and explains how the strategic thinking process works. By describing, discussing, and explaining strategic thinking, it is hoped that the present paper would not only help to further clarify the concept, but also point out the right direction for positive adoption of strategic thinking in business organizations.

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