



READING GUIDE

Thinking Strategically

HBR Guides Series

It's your responsibility as a manager to ensure that your work—and the work of your team—aligns with the overarching objectives of your organization. But when you're faced with competing projects and limited time, it's difficult to keep strategy front of mind. How do you keep your eye on the long term amid a sea of short-term demands?

The *HBR Guide to Thinking Strategically* provides practical advice and tips to help you see the big-picture perspective in every aspect of your daily work, from making decisions to setting team priorities to attacking your own to-do list. You'll learn how to align your team around key objectives, focus on the priorities that matter most, spot trends, consider future outcomes when making decisions, and manage trade-offs.

Here are some key lessons and takeaways to get you started and guide your reading.

There are six skills that allow leaders to think strategically and navigate the unknown effectively:

- **Anticipate.** Gather information from a wide network, and predict competitors' potential moves.
- **Challenge.** Reframe problems from several angles and seek out diverse views to see multiple sides of an issue.
- **Interpret.** Demonstrate curiosity and an open mind, and test multiple working hypotheses.
- **Decide.** Balance long-term and short-term goals, and determine trade-offs, risks, and unintended consequences.

- **Align.** Assess stakeholders' tolerance and motivation for change and address conflicting interests among stakeholders.
- **Learn.** Promote institutional learning, and course-correct on the basis new evidence, even after a decision has been made.

Some people prefer to see things from up close, others from afar. But to get a complete picture and think strategically, leaders need to both zoom in and zoom out.

- A close-in perspective brings details into sharp focus and makes opportunities look large and compelling. But it can have significant downsides. Leaders who prefer to zoom in tend to create policies and systems that depend too much on politics and favors, and they often miss the big picture.
- When leaders zoom out, they can see events in context and as examples of general trends. They are able to make decisions based on principles. Yet a far-out perspective also has traps. Leaders can be so high above the fray that they don't recognize emerging threats. They may fail to notice when the moment is right for action on one path. They may also seem too remote and aloof to their people.
- The best leaders can zoom in to examine problems and then zoom out to look for patterns and causes. They don't divide the world into extremes—idiosyncratic or structural, situational or strategic, emotional or contextual. The point is not to choose one over the other but to learn to move across a continuum of perspectives.

Deciding whether to adjust course on key objectives requires careful thought. You need to manage trade-offs.

- Making trade-offs involves understanding the real impact of your choices for your team, other departments, and the organization overall.
- When you're facing a change to your priorities, examine trade-offs visually by using a pros and cons list.
- Next, think through the potential short- and long-term impacts of potential courses of action.
- Assess and balance your needs with unit and company needs—always think about how changes to planned priorities may affect not only your group but others in the company as well.
- When you're making the final decision, remember that sometimes making a trade-off requires nothing more than specifying what you *won't* do.

When your leaders aren't giving you the strategic direction you need, push them for more clarity—but in the meantime, stay productive utilizing three key approaches:

- **Take pragmatic action.** Get back to basics and deliver value, place intelligent bets, and operate in sprints.
- **Cultivate emotional steadiness.** Be proactive and learn more, acknowledge and navigate emotions, and keep team communication open.
- **Tap into others' expertise.** Imagine your most respected leader's approach, engage other managers, and embrace the wisdom of thought leaders.

EXPLORE THINKING STRATEGICALLY ON HBR.ORG

We recommend the following HBR resources to accompany this guide:

Article: "[Leaders Need to Harness Aristotle's 3 Types of Knowledge](#)" by Roger L. Martin, Richard Straub, and Julia Kirby

Audio: "[Solving Problems with Integrative Thinking](#)" on HBR on Strategy with Jennifer Riel

Video: "[Identify Your Thinking Style](#)" by Mark Bonchek and Elisa Steele

Audio: "[How Do I Lead My Team without Strategic Direction from the Top?](#)" on *Coaching Real Leaders* with Muriel Maignan Wilkins

Article: "[Strategy Need Creativity](#)" by Adam Brandenburger

Video: "[A Plan Is Not a Strategy](#)" with Roger L. Martin

Article: "[How to Regain the Lost Art of Reflection](#)" by Martin Reeves, Roselinde Torres, and Fabien Hassan

Video: "[Zooming: How Effective Leaders Adjust Their Focus](#)" with Rosabeth Moss Kanter

Article: "[A Short Guide to Building Your Team's Critical Thinking Skills](#)" by Matt Plummer

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