

# Strategic Thinking Skills for Leaders

How to develop a comprehensive view of your business-scape  
*(and how to let that inform your business decisions)*



Actuate Microlearning  
India's First Live-Action Microlearning

*“Science does a great job at reducing variables until they are small enough to be understood, but we aren't doing a great job at reassembling the picture once it has been broken down into a thousand pieces”*

— Katy Bowman (Biomechanist, Author)

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# Preface

### The Blackberry Twist

Once upon a time, in the dawn years of the new millennium, there was a smartphone that was in league of its own, in a market it essentially invented – the ultimate communication gadget that anyone could hope to get their hands on – and went by the name BlackBerry.

In June 2008, Blackberry's stock sat at a lucrative \$144 per share. Many studies at the time revealed that employee productivity could potentially be boosted by 20% through the simple act of issuing them a Blackberry mobile device. Businesses themselves wanted to buy Blackberry phones - given superior security (owing in turn, to its enterprise heritage) and fewer app-induced distractions.

Former United States president Barack Obama was known for his preference for BlackBerry devices for communication. That's how secure the Blackberry was!

Before Apple's iPhone arrived, Google's first Android prototypes were basically BlackBerry clones.

Back then, Blackberry ruled!

Come 2013 – a mere five years later – Blackberry's shares had sunk to a paltry \$6.50 – a record low.

What in heaven's name happened here?

### Blackberry in a world of Apple and Android

Blackberry's revenues were firmly entrenched in the B2B (business-to-business) as opposed to the B2C (business-to-consumer) business model. They sold to corporations who then issued phones to their users, and thus Blackberry's entire pitch was geared towards the corporations.

But who was Blackberry's **customer**, really?

It appears the answer to this question, along with other key strategic considerations was lost on Blackberry's think tank at that time.

Because, in the end, BlackBerry's rapid down spiral was a consequence of strategic thinking failures.

## The Holistic Perspective

Here's what BlackBerry's think tank failed to see, from a big picture perspective.

First, BlackBerry failed to anticipate that end users — not business customers — would drive the smartphone revolution. BlackBerry insisted on producing phones with full keyboards, even after it became clear that many users preferred touchscreens, which allowed for better video viewing and touchscreen navigation. They resisted user trends such as touch screens and mobile games because businesses didn't seem to want these things

Second, BlackBerry was blindsided by the emergence of the “app economy,” which drove massive adoption of iPhone and Android-based devices.

Third, BlackBerry failed to realize that smartphones would evolve beyond mere communication devices to become full-fledged mobile entertainment hubs.

As a result, under mounting pressure from their employees, one-by-one, IT departments of businesses capitulated to their users wishes and allowed them to switch to devices of their preference.

In an ironical twist of fate, When BlackBerry finally did launch a touchscreen device in 2016, it was seen as a poor imitation of the iPhone.

In a last-ditch attempt to survive - in a market it essentially invented - Blackberry signed an agreement to be purchased by Fairfax Financial in a \$4.7 billion deal, eventually transitioning into an enterprise software and services company it is today.

Hindsight is always 20/20, they say. Was it at all possible to pre-empt all that happened to Blackberry?



With structure and science, Yes! That's precisely the focus of the course we developed at Actuate Microlearning. This e-book contains excerpts from that body of work.



**Truth is people who are adept at strategic thinking are much sought after by employers around the world .**

There's always seat waiting for them at the strategy table.

Which brings us to you.

**Honestly Now, Would You Get Invited for a Discussion on Strategy?**

When it comes to securing an invitation from senior management to the strategy discussion table, do you reckon it's enough to be seen as a whiz at designing the roadmap for project execution?

Is it sufficient to be able to plan and oversee the delivery of top-notch work output consistently?

Not by a long shot!

The aforementioned abilities are indicative of a brilliant tactical mind, no doubt. But obtaining a seat at the strategy discussion table requires an altogether different orientation; an overall perspective, a big-picture orientation.

**“But my job only requires tactical thinking ability”**

Fair enough. Your job, currently, might well require you to only think tactically.

**However, if you desire to be seen as someone who can be counted upon to handle greater responsibilities, and if you wish to have a seat at the strategy discussion table, then having that big-picture orientation is non-negotiable.**

It does pay for you then to understand what a big-picture orientation means, and hone the requisite mindset(s) needed to use it effectively.

### **What’s in This eBook for You?**

In this eBook, you’ll find helpful information on what that it means to have a ‘Holistic Perspective’, how to develop said perspective, and how to then use it to inform your business strategy

The content you’re about to go through:



- Is a series of excerpts from a larger body of our work, as we mentioned earlier
- Has roots in some of the most incisive psychological and sociological research available today.

We also hope you enjoyed our micro-videos that led you to download this ebook. If perchance, you got a hold of this ebook without getting a chance to see our micro-videos, you can still catch them on the link provided below.

[Click Here.](#)

So, if you're ready...

**...Let's move on to the Bigger Picture!**



## Chapter 1:

# What Constitutes Strategic Thinking



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*“Strategic Thinking rarely occurs spontaneously.”*

— Michael Porter (Economist, Author, Advisor)

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## What Constitutes Strategic Thinking (And what does not)?

Not to split hairs, but, as we commence this journey to understanding a Big Picture Orientation in Strategic Thinking, it is imperative that we first understand the difference between two cognitive or thinking related disciplines namely, ‘tactical thinking’ and ‘strategic thinking’, to prevent misunderstanding of the terms or to confuse one for the other.

- Tactical thinking

**Tactical thinking, thus, refers to the cognitive (mental) processes related to defining how one can achieve a defined end, and occurs long after the desired end and even the broad plan to achieve that end (target market, budget, etc.,) have been defined.**

- Strategic thinking

**Strategic thinking refers to the cognitive (mental) processes that are related to defining/identifying the ‘big picture’ in any endeavour.**

**Strategic thinking calls for reflection and taking a long-term view of things.**

Here’s how Strategic and Tactical thinking differ conceptually

Let’s evaluate both thinking types based on different criteria.

Parameter	Tactical Thinking	Strategic Thinking
01. Definition	Tactical Thinking refers to the <b>procedures or tactics</b> that are used <b>to achieve a defined end</b> . It deals with the <b>“how”</b> questions that enable us to the <b>“what”</b> or the goals identified.	It refers to the <b>big picture thinking</b> , related to the desired end, preparing for the future or ensuring that all interconnected pieces in the organisation work in cohesion.
02. Purpose	Find <b>the best possible means to achieve the goals</b> or objectives set.	To help define the goals and objectives and to enable the organisation to advance.
03. At what stage of the endeavour is this kind of thinking practised?	At <b>project implementation stage</b> , long after the overall strategy has been set.	When the overall goals and plans for a project are being described, or <b>when the overall direction of the organisation, business unit or department is being discussed</b> .

<b>04. Time Duration</b>	/	Short-term; at best medium-term	Is usually medium or long-term focussed
<b>05. Questions posed</b>		"How can we best achieve this goal, given current resources?"	"What are we trying to achieve?" "Why do we want to achieve this (and not something else)?" "What does the future hold for us?" "Are we ready for where change is taking us?" "How does this interconnect with other projects or departments within the organisation?"

As is evident from this table, the strategic thinkers look at the larger picture – they have a 'Big-Picture Orientation'.

Now, each of the 'what' 'why' and 'how to' questions that the strategic thinker asks can be clubbed under three mindsets that every strategic thinker needs to possess.

It's time we introduce you these mindsets and briefly discuss how you can hone these three mindsets, and thus be gain a seat at the strategy discussion table.



Chapter 2:

# **The Architect Mindset**





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*“Everyone has the ability to connect one idea with another, to find an idea in another department, organisation or industry, and connect it with another to solve the challenge at hand.”*

*– Elaine Dundon, (Author)*

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## **The Architect Mindset**

A manager’s ability to move from looking merely at things from the perspective of the function or unit that they are a part of, to the perspective of the entire organisation, is an uncommon, and much sought after skill.

From an analogy standpoint, this is tantamount to moving away from thinking like someone who designs and builds horse carriages, to thinking like the architect who designs how the entire transportation system in the kingdom – and consequently, how a horse carriage in that transportation system - needs to function.

It is for this reason that we label this mindset, i.e. the inclination to think about the design and working of the entire ecosystem, the Architect’s mindset.

There are several distinguishing characteristics of the Architect Mindset. Let’s talk about two of them now.

## The Characteristics of the Architect Mindset

### 1. A 'business' focus:

The Architect Mindset looks at things from the perspective of the organisation's business objectives.



**Every plan and decision is assessed to identify**  
*if these facilitate or impede the achievement of the broader organisational goals.*

This is what we call a business focus.

This mindset can see individual actions and endeavours in the light of the broader organisational focus, in the service of devising more robust strategies.

## 2. Multidisciplinary or cross-functional knowledge.

**The Architect  
mindset displays a broad  
spectrum of knowledge  
and skills,  
*borne by a multidisciplinary  
viewpoint.***



This provides a unique and more well-rounded perspective into issues; perspectives far broader and holistic than those focused on by a typical business leader whose expertise lies in her or his function alone.

This cross-functional knowledge also facilitates adoption of best practices from one business or functional unit within the organisation to aid another unit focused on achieving similar outcomes.

And, needless to say, but deliberations at the strategy formulation table are significantly furthered by such insights and viewpoints.

Great. But how does one acquire this 'Architect' mindset?

## How to Hone the Architect Mindset

We have seen that the Architect mindset concerns itself with acquiring insights into the various functions, departments and disciplines within the organisation. Here then are a few steps you can take to cultivate – or hone, as might be the case - the Architect's mindset:

**Socialise  
with people**  
*outside of your own  
domain or function.*



1. Expose yourself to what your colleagues in other departments concern themselves with. Gain as detailed information as you possibly can into the metrics that they use to define success, into their processes, structures, strategies and business challenges. Seek to gain insights into their successes and best practices.
2. Cultivate the discipline of asking yourself questions related to interconnectedness, when working on a task or a project
  - “How – if applicable - might this impact other functions within the organisation?”
  - “Does this need to ‘talk to’ some other function?”



- “Does this need to mesh with what someone else is doing?”

These simple steps will go a long way in helping you acquire or hone your ability to think like the Architect and make an invaluable asset at the strategy discussion table.

*And if it's possible for you to*  
**work closely**  
**with someone who has**  
**the Architect Mindset,**  
*there's nothing like it.*



Earlier, we dabbled with the question of whether BlackBerry's decline could have been pre-empted.

What if BlackBerry's think tank had taken a moment to consider what their customer's customer/stakeholder really wanted from communication devices? What kind of alternatives were available to the said customer's customer? Was BlackBerry's business focus (its then existing B2B pitch ) in line with its objectives (to be the most preferred brand globally)?

You now know that BlackBerry's leadership insisted on producing phones with full keyboards, even after it became clear that many users preferred touchscreens and ignoring user trends because it didn't fit in line with their then existing business model.

From an Architect Mindset perspective, that looks downright short-sighted and blinkered, doesn't it?





## Chapter 3:

# The Craftsman Mindset



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*“If you want to love what you do, abandon the passion mindset (‘What can the world offer me?') and instead adopt the craftsman mindset (‘What can I offer the world’).”*

*— Cal Newport, (Author, So Good They Can’t Ignore You)*

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## Specialists vs Generalists

We live in an era of specialisation and division of labour, and rightly so. The nature of work that we handle is complicated, and division of labour and having specialists handle each division makes sense. Gone are the days of the craftsman, the individual who was the master of and who single-handedly managed the manufacturing process from end-to-end.

However, and this is what leaders today increasingly need to possess to be successful: you need to understand everything that concerns your domain and your department from end-to-end.

*Your role might not involve creating the output from end-to-end like the craftsman of old,*

**but you need to have a deep understanding of everything that concerns your craft, or your department.**



In other words, you need to possess a craftsman's mindset, even though you work in a system that is predicated upon specialisation and division of labour. The craftsman mindset is fundamental to what we call a big-picture orientation in strategic thinking. Lacking this mindset can compromise and severely undermine your own work and success.

In the words of David Packard, co-founder of IT giant Hewlett-Packard, "the best job can be done when the manager has a genuine and thorough knowledge and understanding of the work. I don't see how managers can even understand what standards to observe, what performance to require, and how to measure results *unless* they understand in some detail the specific nature of the work they are trying to supervise."

### Hone your ability to think like a craftsman

Here are a couple of inputs on how you could further hone your ability to think like a craftsman:

1. Identify if there is anything more that you can learn about your department or process.

#### **Know every protocol related to your department from end-to-end.**

Understand how parts (sub-processes in your function or department) interconnect to create the desired output. Management experts call this Systems Thinking.

#### **2. Understand how the technology that undergirds your domain is structured/ works.**

For example, if you are in finance, learn as much as you can about the structure of your accounting software. Please note, we are not talking about how to *use* the software, but the construct of the software. For example, the platform that the software has been developed upon, the logic used for the software construction, etc., Learn about rival software, and the relative merits of each.

Bottom Line: Pursue depth as much as you do breadth, when it comes to your business domain knowledge. You probably already possess such a mindset but do evaluate if you need to hone this further.



Chapter 4:

# The Grandmaster Mindset



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*“To succeed, study the endgame before everything else”*

*José Raúl Capablanca (Chess Grandmaster)*

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## **What is the Grandmaster Mindset?**

Let's cut to the chase here. Think chess, if you will. The ability to think three steps ahead – to employ strategic foresight – is what we term the Grandmaster mind-set. Like its namesake, the Grandmaster mind-set concerns itself with how a step taken in the present will play out in the long-term (how today connects to tomorrow, or to the desired tomorrow). It involves having a 'future orientation' w.r.t decisions and tactics.

Grandmasters concern themselves with long term visions, and constantly ask what-if questions.

### **Acquiring the Grandmaster mindset**

How does one develop this mindset, you ask? The answer is Strategic Foresight, a key driver of the Grandmaster mindset. Development of this skill is elementary, and the good news is that it can be acquired.

### **Developing Strategic Foresight**

Developing strategic foresight requires cultivating the discipline of looking at what you do regularly from three-five-and ten-year perspective.

Looking at emerging trends in technology, people practices, and social behaviour could lend a unique angle on how the situation might evolve and impact the aforementioned long term perspective.



## The benefits of employing the Grandmaster Mindset

But the payoffs are huge, in both short and long-term considerations. The benefits of employing the grandmaster mindset are:

### 1. *Focus point*

A strategic plan is like a game plan for the team to follow. It can help the team to feel connected to the mission of the organization and to feel that they can make a contribution to helping the organization to reach the desired destination.

### 2. *Path to success*

The strategic plan is a guidepost for those times that you can't seem to remember what you are supposed to be working towards.


### 3. *Remembering the big picture*

A well-written strategic plan reminds you of the overarching aims of your activity and invites you to discuss the direction that the company is taking. Are you getting the best performance that you can out of your business? Are you using the best skills available from your employees?

**A strategic plan gives you a top-level overview of your organization, its performance, its mission, and its goals and it encourages you and the other leadership to keep these high-level topics in your conversations and on your minds.**

## When to reign in the Grandmaster Mindset

That said, it is probably a very bad idea to force the grandmaster mindset everywhere.



*Not every scenario  
lends itself to the  
**grandmaster  
mindset.***

Sometimes you just have to knuckle down and get down to brass tacks. Strategic thinking here might consume precious response time leading to failure, the very thing strategic thinking is meant to avoid.

Also, remember that actionable intelligence is the foundation stone of the grandmaster mindset and strategic foresight. If one does not have an adequate information base, the grandmaster mindset gives way to empty speculation and wasted time. And who knows how many corporate failures have stemmed from that?

### **BlackBerry Jam Redux**

What if BlackBerry's C-Suite actually studied the endgame before they made the business decisions, they did end up making?

Remember, the 'app economy' was on the rise, and end-users, in more ways than one, indicated strong interest in that concept.

Had BlackBerry brought the Grandmaster Mindset into play, they would not have been blindsided by the emergence of the said app economy, which drove their end-users to switch to iPhone and Android-based devices. Also, with Grandmaster thinking, BlackBerry would be able to latch on to the fact that smartphones would evolve into full-fledged mobile entertainment hubs.

Had BlackBerry been able to see the 'Big Picture', chances are you'd be reading this on a BlackBerry screen today!

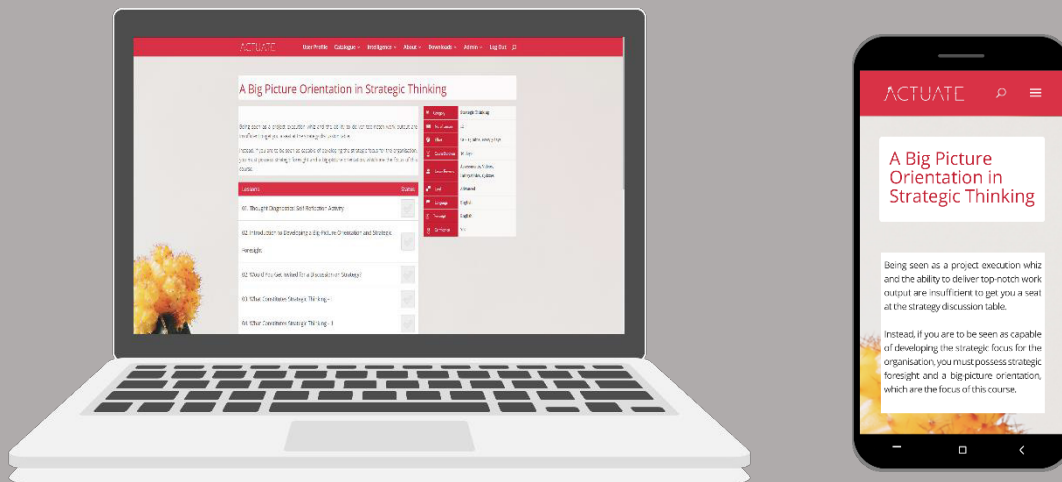


# Epilogue



That's all we had for you in this ebook. We hope you found the content interesting and of value. Truth is though, this was just a trailer – there's so much more where that came from!

At the start of this ebook, we mentioned that the content presented here is a derivative of a massive and comprehensive body of work we have developed at Actuate Microlearning, on the topic of acquiring a Big Picture Orientation.



For your information, that body of work is a module titled 'Big Picture Orientation'. You'll find many more case-studies, stories and strategies in there, that are based on real-life experiences of clients we work with and our own people at Actuate Microlearning too.

Here's a link to the module, in case you want to pursue it further.

[Click Here.](#)

Thank you! Good luck on your learning journey!

So, here's to good choices and decisions, and here's to you!





## **Video-Format Microlearning from Actuate Microlearning**

As you surely know, video-format microlearning courses are perfect to:

1. Engage the modern-day learner (especially the burgeoning millennial and Gen-Z workforce)
2. Create learning journeys for your learners
3. Ensure better course offtake and completion rates

### Twenty-Nine Video-Format Microlearning Courses You Could Use Right Out-Of-The-Box

Considering the advantages that video-format courses offer, we, at Actuate, have created a catalogue of twenty-nine courses - a total of 283 video lessons, 52 hours of learning - on behavioural, leadership, cognitive and technical skills topics.

You could procure these off-the-shelf, get them branded for you and have them deployed pretty much immediately for your learners!

### Here're a Few Reasons Our Clients Choose Us:

- 1 Our courses follow a micro-video format (the format of choice for the modern-day learner)
- 2 Users love our courses  
(you should see some of the fabulous feedback we've received!)
- 3 Users find our courses relatable and relevant
- 4 Our courses are built for the phone
- 5 We work closely with you in ensuring people use these courses

#### Indicative Client List

Over the last nine years of our existence, we've served over seventy organisations across industry verticals. Some of our esteemed clients include Kotak Securities, ICICI Lombard, Zydus Cadila, Edelweiss, Angel Broking, Motilal Oswal, DCB Bank, Lodha, Tata Capital, DESIS, Prudential, to name but a few.

## Do Get in Touch!

If you'd be interested in knowing more, please suggest a date and time we could possibly speak/ meet. Thirty minutes should suffice for our discussion.

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