

Member Communication Experience

Coaching Your Team to Think Strategically

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It's typical for a business owner or leader to believe that strategic decisions are their responsibility – after all, they have the “big picture” view of the business and how all the pieces fit together. On the other hand – remember the axiom “no one of us is as smart as all of us.” Why not harness your team's knowledge and experience to assist in making strategic decisions?

Coaching, as a management style, has gained popularity since the late 1990s. It involves engaging in conversations rather than simply giving instructions, which requires more time and offers employees more autonomy in decision-making. Consequently, this approach encourages employees to take greater ownership of their work and its results.

Too often a manager or leader has a “let's get it done mindset” which ends up being directive – telling the team what to do. It gets you to a faster solution in the short term, but in the long term you aren't building strategic thinking capabilities. With coaching you are aiming to get individuals to think for themselves. You want to help them explore what issues or options they see and help them think through how they arrive at decisions.

You might be wondering, what is meant by the term strategic thinking? One interpretation is “looking ahead,” another might be “better planning.” Let's use this definition: the ability to lead ourselves, our teams, and our organizations in ways that advance the goals of the organization and create long-term advantages.

When you give your team the tools to think strategically you are upleveling the capabilities of the organization, enabling it to move faster by anticipating problems and opportunities, and



focusing on things that help secure the future of the business.

Ways to Coach Your Team to Think Strategically

One way to coach your team to think strategically is to take the time to communicate the goals of the business and those things that drive the business, including explaining opportunities and threats. Also share the goals of individual departments and ensure employees understand how their work aligns with their department goals. This helps them to see activities from various angles and how the “big picture” comes together.

One recent example is the supply chain issues associated with the pandemic. By explaining to your employees that the cost of supplies has increased, which will have ramifications throughout the business, you can then ask the team for suggestions. People with a customer service focus will suggest proactively reaching out to customers to explain the delay and assure them that you are working hard on a solution (so that


you don't lose business). Finance individuals might suggest ways to cut other expenses in order to free up money. Human Resource folks might suggest a four-day work week in order to conserve cash and continue to keep all employees employed. You've now harnessed the strategic thinking capabilities of your entire team!

Another coaching method is to ask open ended questions such as "If we did X, what do you see as the positive or negative ramifications?" For example, I once worked with a group of facilities managers from a well-known hotel chain. They complained that they had to be the "answer person" for every decision and were disappointed in their skilled employee's inability to think strategically about their work responsibilities. I suggested asking open-ended questions such as the one above, as well as "what might the inspector say if he were to look at this work," "how could we accomplish this with the least amount of inconvenience to the guests," or "if you coordinated with another trade, how would that change the timeline, outcomes, quality, or costs?"

A third way to enhance strategic thinking capabilities is to prompt employees to think about the impact of stakeholders on the business. One interesting exercise would be to simply ask your employees to name their stakeholders. We often think externally about stakeholders (customers, government, etc.) but rarely do we acknowledge internal stakeholders such as the departments and individuals whose work comes before and after our own. Acknowledging internal stakeholders goes a long way towards enhancing communication and collaboration and thereby achieving company goals (when, of course, employees know what those goals are).

In all three suggestions given here, you are ultimately asking your employees to consider options and their ramifications (positive and negative). If you make this a regular part of one-on-one conversations and company communications, you will ultimately begin to help your employees to think and contribute strategically to the organization.

Conclusion

Coaching your team to think strategically empowers employees to take personal responsibility for their work and contribute to the long-term success of the organization. By communicating business goals, asking open-ended questions, and prompting consideration of stakeholders, you can create a workforce of "big picture," strategic thinkers at all levels of the organization. 



About the Author

Dr. Nanette Miner is a leadership development and workplace-learning strategy consultant. Through her firm, [The Training Doctor](#), she has revolutionized the way that individuals are prepared for leadership roles in their organizations. Rather than a chosen few, her process is aimed at ensuring everyone in the company has the skills and business acumen of a leader. This approach ensures both immediate and long-term return-on-investment (ROI) for an organization.

She has written articles for Chief Learning Office magazine, Forbes, and MBA World and is a frequent guest on workplace training and career podcasts and talk radio such as Inc. Radio and America's Workforce Radio.

Nanette regularly speaks at industry conferences and corporate learning events on how to integrate leadership capabilities throughout an organization. An author of eight books, her most recent is Future-Proofing Your Organization.

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