

# Developing a strategic mindset - where communicators need to be

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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The word strategy is overused these days! It has come to mean nothing more than a plan. In reality, says James E. Lukaszewski, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, one of North America's leading public relations practitioners and author of 12 books, strategy is a complex and highly involved business skill. "It is a unique mixture of mental energy verbally injected into an organisation through communication, which results in behaviour that achieves leadership and organisational objectives", he said in his presentation.

To develop a strategic mind, one needs to be able to focus on future activities, feel energised, be management-oriented, display positive behaviours, and be purposeful!

Speaking at the 2010 IABC World Conference in Toronto, Canada, Lukaszewski challenged the audience asking them how strategic they really were and whether they truly understand management's view of tomorrow and their wants and needs. To be strategic, one must also ask how strategic the individual wants to be. Strategy is all about leadership versus management; management thinking versus gut feelings; optimism versus pragmatism; tactics versus operations and strategy versus, well, stuff.

## The big question... How do I...?

He says, "I also spend a fair amount of time talking with and counselling CEOs and operating executives. You may find their perspective on our getting to the table quite interesting. Their rhetorical question is, "How do I manage all these people who constantly yak at me, who know virtually nothing about the business or what I care about, but want to tell me how to run the business?" "They all clamour for a seat at the table. The place is already overcrowded with folks who don't know how to help me. Spare me these amateurs." "Who are these people anyway?" they ask."

To address these top-level business concerns, people placed in strategic positions must have at least the following qualities: exceptional verbal skills, the ability to communicate effectively in real time, the ability to focus on what is truly and indisputably important, and the ability help everyone recognise the obvious.

In a practical conference session, Lukaszewski challenged audiences to prove strategic thinking in an operational context. It is a six-step process known as the three-minute drill; and this is how it goes:

- Step 1: *Situation description*: Briefly describe the nature of the issue, problem, or situation. (You have to be able to summarise all this in 60 words)

- Step 2: *Analysis/explanation/interpretation*: Briefly describe what the situation means, its implications, and how it threatens or presents opportunities for your organisation. (Again, you have to be able to summarise all this in 60 words)
- Step 3: *The Goal: Where are we headed?* What's our destination? What's the end-point? How far do we have to go? (Encapsulate your goal based on existing research - again, in 60 words)
- Step 4: *Options*: Develop at least three response options for the situation you're presented. You can suggest more, but three is optimal for management to choose from. Make sure that one of the options is "doing nothing." (Here, you can summarise all three in 150 words)
- Step 5: *Recommendations*: This is what you would do if you were in the boss' shoes, and why. (Back to 60 words in total for this explanation)
- Step 6: *Justification*: Identify the negative or positive unintended consequences, events, and problems that could arise due to the options you have suggested or by doing nothing. (60 words or less).

The point of the exercise is to demonstrate that less is more and strategic thinkers have the ability to summarise all key aspects of a campaign or crisis plan in a manner that will capture key executives' interest. Far too often, it was argued, communicators present mound of paperwork and 40-page plans to justify their work, when all that is needed is a 500-word headline discussion in three minutes to get buy-in.

Ultimately, if someone can summarise their situation in a more concise manner, they are perceived to know more about their area of expertise than those who take longer to get to the point. The reason... Those who know the tactics very well, can easily bring salient points from the volume to the top.

### Three-minute drill

- Step 1. Situation description (60 words)
- Step 2. Analysis (60 words)
- Step 3. The Goal (60 words)
- Step 4. Options (150 words)
- Step 5. Recommendation (60 words)
- Step 6. Justification (60 words)

Total: 450 words = three minutes

Lukaszewski suggested that Federal Express is probably the most successful example of fully integrating strategy, goals, visions, values, and mission into three simple words: Absolutely, Positively, Overnight. Walt Disney's mission strategy, "We make people happy", demonstrates that effective strategies are exceedingly understandable. And yet, many people complicate strategy, making it a greater challenge than it needs to be.

In a paper shared by Lukaszewski at the conference, he says: "General Electric's legendary CEO, Jack Welch, rebuilt this huge, successful company by clearly and unmistakably stating the company's restructuring strategy. Each product category would be #1 in its category; if #2, there must be a plan and deadline to become #1; and if neither, there must be a plan for exiting GE. This is a powerful, motivating combination of strategy, goals, vision, values, and mission. In his first 10 years as Chairman, Welch shed more than 200 000 people. He gained the nickname, "Neutron Jack," but he overcame it. Today, even in retirement, he is considered the most successful contemporary manager in American business because he found a strategy that helped his employees build the most successful major company in modern times."

The challenge is to now take this thinking and apply it to daily corporate life. Strategy is something that can be done; and if done properly and informed by other relevant key business objectives, can change the image of communications.

### ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLOW

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MDC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators' International Executive Board. He has 16 years' experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

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