

Are You a Strategist?

The Art of Reading Reality and the Courage to Shape the Future

Sometimes, people and organizations are very busy. They hold meetings, create plans, buy new tools, and finish many projects. Everyone looks productive. But after some time, an important question appears: Are we solving the right problem?

A strategist is not simply a person who makes many plans. **A strategist is someone who can see what is changing around them, understand what their team can truly do, make a clear choice, and make sure that choice creates a real benefit.** A strategist does not only ask, “What should we do?” A strategist also asks, “Why should we do it, and what will improve because we did it?”

Imagine a distribution company. Many customers complain because their deliveries are late. The managers meet, study the data, and decide to buy more trucks. They also ask the couriers to work more carefully. The project is completed on time. The company can deliver more packages. On the computer screen, all indicators turn green. Everyone feels successful. But three months later, customer satisfaction drops again. The company interviews one of its biggest customers. The customer says, **“I do not mind if the delivery takes a little longer. What matters is that I know exactly when my goods will arrive.”**

This is an important moment. The company bought more trucks, but the real problem was not the number of trucks. The real problem was uncertainty. Customers were stressed because they did not know when their goods would arrive. The company worked hard, but it solved the wrong problem. **This is called a strategic gap: the distance between what customers need and what the company can actually provide.** A strategist must find this gap before spending money or starting a project. If the gap is wrong, even a well-managed project can fail to create real value. You may be good at analyzing data, creating ideas, or finishing projects. These skills are useful. But a strategist connects them. A strategist asks: What problem matters most? What is the best way to solve it? And will our work really make life better for customers?

This article explains four connected practices: **Strategic Scan, Strategic Idea, Strategic Plan, and Strategic Control.** Strategic Scan helps you understand the challenges and opportunities facing the organization. Strategic Idea helps you choose a direction and develop a coherent response. Together, they form **strategic thinking**: understanding the situation and deciding what to do. Strategic Plan translates that direction into priorities, actions, responsibilities, and resources. Strategic Control tracks progress, evaluates results, and informs adjustments. Together, they form **strategic management**: turning strategic choices into coordinated action and ensuring that action produces meaningful results.

I. Strategic Scan: Understand the Gap First

Before making a big decision, **a strategist looks outside the organization.** They ask: What is changing, and why does it matter?. Customers may change their habits. Competitors may offer new services. Technology may create new expectations. The government may make new rules. Weather, fuel prices, and social changes can also affect

business. A strategist must understand these changes before deciding what to do. For the distribution company, customers may now want faster information, clear delivery times, and updates when something goes wrong. Competitors may already offer package tracking. If customers can easily move to another company, the distribution company must improve.

One useful tool is **PESTEL**. It helps us look at six outside factors. **Political (P)** factors include government decisions, such as new roads or customs rules. **Economic (E)** factors include fuel prices, interest rates, and customer spending. **Social (S)** factors include customer habits, lifestyle changes, and the availability of workers. **Technological (T)** factors include delivery apps, tracking systems, and automatic routing. **Environmental (E)** factors include floods, extreme weather, and pressure to reduce pollution. **Legal (L)** factors include driver working hours, vehicle safety, and data protection. PESTEL is not only about remembering six words. The real question is: What does each change mean for our customers, our costs, and our way of working? For example, rising fuel prices may increase delivery costs. New tracking technology may make customers expect real-time information. A new highway may make some routes faster.

Another useful tool is **Porter's Five Forces**. It helps us understand competition. First, there is **rivalry**. If many delivery companies offer the same service, they may compete only on price. The company needs something special, such as more reliable delivery. Second, there is the threat of **new entrants**. Digital platforms make it easier for new companies to enter the market. However, building trust and a strong delivery network still takes time. Third, there is the threat of **substitutes**. Customers may decide to buy their own trucks or pick up goods directly from the factory. The company must give customers a strong reason to keep using its service. Fourth, there is **customer bargaining power**. If one customer is very large, that customer can demand lower prices and extra services. The company should not depend too much on only one customer. Fifth, there is **supplier bargaining power**. If the company depends on only one truck supplier, that supplier can raise prices. The company needs more than one option.

After looking outside, a strategist looks inside. They ask: Can we really do what customers need? A company may have trucks, drivers, and computer systems. These are resources. But having resources is not enough. The company must be able to use them well. For example, can the drivers, warehouse team, and customer service team work together to keep delivery promises? **This ability is called a capability.** A truck is a resource. The ability to coordinate trucks, drivers, warehouses, and customer service to fulfill a promise is a capability.

To check capabilities, we can use **VRIO**. **Value (V)** asks whether the ability really helps the company. **Rarity (R)** asks whether many competitors have the same ability. **Imitability (I)** asks whether other companies can copy it easily. **Organization (O)** asks whether the company can organize its people and systems to use the ability well. Buying trucks is easy for competitors to copy. But building a trusted partner network, training an experienced operations team, and creating smooth coordination takes years. These things are harder to copy. Therefore, they may become a stronger source of advantage.

Now, **external analysis and internal analysis meet.** The company can identify **its strategic gap**. For the distribution company, the gap may be: "Customers need

predictable deliveries, but our information and coordination cannot yet guarantee that.”. This statement is powerful. It helps the company evaluate every idea. Buying more trucks may help, but it does not automatically close the gap. Perhaps the company first needs accurate data, better coordination, and clear communication with customers.

SWOT: Seeing the Current Situation Honestly. To summarize the situation, the company can use SWOT. **SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats.** It helps the company see its current condition honestly. **Strengths are things the company already does well.** For the distribution company, strengths may include experienced drivers, good relationships with major customers, a wide delivery network, or strong knowledge of local routes. **Weaknesses are internal limitations.** For example, warehouse data may be recorded in different systems, the operations team may not share information quickly, or customer service may not know the real position of a package. **Opportunities are positive changes outside the company.** More customers may want real-time tracking, new technology may make route planning easier, or a new highway may reduce delivery time. **Threats are external dangers.** Competitors may offer better tracking, fuel prices may rise, customers may switch providers, or extreme weather may disrupt deliveries. The power of SWOT is not in making four lists. The power is in connecting them (reduce the strategic gap). A strength becomes meaningful when it can be used to capture an opportunity. A weakness becomes urgent when it makes the company vulnerable to a threat. For example, the company may have experienced drivers, but if its information system is weak, customers still cannot receive accurate delivery updates. **A good SWOT analysis ends with a clear conclusion: Which strength should we use, which weakness should we fix, which opportunity should we pursue, and which threat must we prepare for?**

SOAR: Seeing the Future with Possibility. Another tool is SOAR. **SOAR stands for Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results.** It is similar to SWOT, but it focuses more on the future. Instead of only asking what is wrong, SOAR asks what the company can build from what is already strong. **Strengths are things the company already does well. Opportunities are positive changes outside the company. Aspirations describe the future the company wants to create.** The distribution company may aspire to become the most reliable delivery partner in its region. **Results are the measurable outcomes that show the aspiration is being achieved.** For example, the company may want to increase on-time delivery from 80 percent to 95 percent, reduce complaints, or increase repeat customers. SOAR is useful when a company has strong potential but feels stuck in problems. It helps leaders move from “What is wrong with us?” to “What can we build from what is already good?” However, SOAR must still be realistic. A company cannot only talk about dreams. It must also understand the weaknesses and threats that could block its journey.

SPACE: Judging the Company’s Position A **third tool is SPACE, which stands for Strategic Position and Action Evaluation.** While SWOT helps us list important factors and SOAR helps us imagine the future, SPACE helps us judge how strong the company’s position is and what kind of action may be appropriate. **SPACE looks at four dimensions. Financial strength** asks whether the company has enough money and resources to invest. **Competitive advantage** asks whether the company has something valuable that competitors find difficult to copy. **Industry strength** asks whether the industry has good potential. **Environmental stability** asks whether the external

environment is predictable. If the company has strong finances, a clear advantage, a growing industry, and a stable environment, it may choose an **aggressive strategy: invest, expand, and build new capabilities**. If the industry is growing but the company has a weak advantage, it may need to **improve its capabilities first**. If the environment is unstable, the company may need to **protect its core business**. If finances are weak, the company may need to **focus on efficiency** before making large investments. SPACE does not give one perfect answer. It gives a direction for discussion. It helps leaders ask: Should we grow aggressively, build our capabilities first, protect our position, or focus on efficiency?

Together, **SWOT shows the current situation, SOAR shows the future direction, and SPACE shows how strong the company's position is**. But none of these tools replaces judgment. **The strategist must still ask:** Which gap is most dangerous if we do not close it?. Which gap between where we are and where we need to be poses the greatest risk if left unaddressed?

II. Strategic Idea: Choose the Future You Intend to Create

After a company understands its strategic gap, it must decide what kind of future it wants to create. **This is the heart of strategic thinking**. A company cannot solve every problem or follow every trend. It must choose a direction. There are two main sources of strategic ideas. The first is called market-driven, or follow the market. The second is called invention-driven, or lead the market. These two approaches are different, but both can help a company grow.

Market-Driven: Follow the Market. A market-driven strategy starts by listening carefully to customers, competitors, and changes in the market. The company asks: What do customers need now? What are they complaining about? What do competitors already offer? What new expectations are appearing?. In this approach, the company does not try to create something completely new. Instead, it observes what the market wants and responds better than others. **The main goal is to improve what already exists. That is why market-driven ideas are often called improvement ideas.** For example, customers of the delivery company say, "Your service is good, but I do not know when my package will arrive." Competitors have started offering tracking. If our company creates a tracking feature, sends automatic notifications, and gives customers a clear delivery time, this is a market-driven strategy. The company is following the market because customers already expect tracking. However, it can still win by doing it better: faster updates, clearer information, friendlier notifications, and better handling when delays happen.

A market-driven idea is usually safer because demand is already visible. Customers have shown what they want. But the risk is that the company may always be one step behind. If everyone offers the same improvement, customers may see little difference between companies. So, a market-driven strategist asks: **"How can we serve an existing need better, faster, cheaper, or more reliably than our competitors?"**.

Invention-Driven: Lead the Market An invention-driven strategy starts from a different question. Instead of asking, "What do customers want today?" the company asks, "What could become possible if we create something new?". This approach does not wait for customers to ask for a solution. Sometimes, customers do not yet know what they need

because the solution has never existed before. The company uses new technology, a new business model, or a new way of working to change the market. This is why invention-driven ideas are often called disruptive ideas. The word “disruptive” does not mean destructive. It means the new idea changes the old way of doing things. It can change customer habits, market rules, or the way competitors compete. For example, before ride-hailing apps became popular, many people used conventional taxis or private drivers. Customers may not have said, “I want an app that connects me with nearby drivers and shows the price before I travel.” But when the app appeared, it changed customer behavior. People began to expect transparent prices, driver tracking, digital payment, and ratings. This is an invention-driven idea. The company did not simply improve the taxi system. It created a new way for people to move around the city. It led the market instead of following it. In the distribution company, an invention-driven idea might be using artificial intelligence to predict traffic, estimate delivery times, and automatically inform customers before problems happen. Or the company might create a system where customers can see the exact location of their goods in real time. **An invention-driven idea can create a big advantage, but it also carries a bigger risk.** The market may not be ready. Customers may not understand the new service. The technology may be expensive. Competitors may copy it quickly. Therefore, a strategist must ask: What benefit does it create, who will use it, and why should people change their habits?

Improvement Idea versus Disruptive Idea

An improvement idea makes an existing product or service better. It answers a need that customers already understand. For example, making deliveries faster, adding tracking, improving customer service, or reducing costs. **A disruptive idea creates a new way of solving a problem. It may change what customers expect.** For example, instead of only tracking a package, a company may create a service that guarantees a delivery window, automatically rearranges schedules when traffic happens, and informs customers before a delay occurs. The difference can be seen in the question behind each idea. **An improvement idea asks, “How can we do this better?” A disruptive idea asks, “What if there is a completely better way to do this?”** The two approaches can work together. Customer input helps the company understand real problems. New technology helps the company imagine solutions that customers have not yet requested. Together, they prevent the company from simply copying competitors or creating technology nobody needs.

Vision, Mission, and Strategic Initiatives

After exploring ideas, the company must choose its direction. This direction is expressed through vision and mission. **A vision describes the future the company wants to create. It answers: “Where are we going?”** For example: “To become the most trusted delivery partner for customers who need certainty.” **A mission describes why the company exists and what value it provides. It answers: “Why do we exist, and whom do we serve?”** For example: “We help businesses deliver their goods reliably by providing clear information, dependable schedules, and fast responses when problems happen.” Vision and mission are not just beautiful sentences. They must help people make decisions. If a new opportunity does not support the vision and mission, the company should be careful before pursuing it.

Then, the company chooses strategic initiatives. These are major actions that make the vision real. For the distribution company, possible initiatives include unifying information systems, redesigning delivery promise standards, building real-time tracking, training teams, and strengthening partnerships. **Each initiative must answer three questions: What capability will it build?, How will it close the strategic gap?, And what benefit will customers and the company receive?** This is where strategic courage appears. Choosing an initiative means committing resources. It means accepting the possibility of failure. It also means saying no to activities that look interesting but do not support the main direction.

III. Strategic Plan: Turn Direction into Work

A strategy sets the company's direction. A strategic plan translates that direction into clear objectives, measurable targets, coordinated work, and accountable owners. It connects the company's mission to the work of departments, project teams, and individuals. The plan brings together three elements: strategic objectives that define the desired results, mission metrics that measure achievement, and strategic projects that execute the strategic initiatives needed to achieve those results.

1. Strategic Objectives

A strategic objective defines the result the company wants to achieve. It translates the mission into a clear target and provides a reference for decisions, resource allocation, and action. Strategic objectives should follow the **SMART** principles: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Each objective must explain what the company wants to improve, by how much, and by when. It should be realistic, relevant to the mission, and easy for those responsible to understand. The objective becomes the central reference of the strategic plan. It guides the selection of mission metrics, strategic initiatives, and strategic projects. Departments, project teams, and individuals should understand how their responsibilities contribute to its achievement.

2. Mission Metrics

Mission metrics measure progress toward the strategic objectives. They translate the mission into measurable performance expectations across organizational levels. In this framework, mission metrics take two forms: **Critical Success Factors (CSFs)** and **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)**.

CSFs are long-term mission metrics at the corporate level. They measure the overall results the company must achieve to fulfill its mission and strategic objectives. They direct attention to sustained business performance, such as customer retention, service reliability, or profitable growth. **KPIs are short-term mission metrics at the department, project, and individual levels.** They measure the contributions needed to achieve the long-term CSFs. They help teams and employees understand what they must deliver, monitor progress, and address performance gaps.

Level	Mission metric	Focus
Corporate	CSF	Long-term results that demonstrate strategic achievement.
Department	Department KPI	Short-term functional performance that supports the CSFs.
Project	Project KPI	Results and milestones required from a strategic project.
Individual	Individual KPI	Each personal's contribution to the required performance.

Every mission metric needs a clear definition, baseline, target, timeframe, and accountable owner. The measures should reinforce one another so that short-term performance contributes to long-term achievement. Consider a distribution company whose mission is **“Reliable Service.”** Its long-term strategic objective might be: “Increase customer retention from 80% to 90% within two years while maintaining on-time delivery at 95% or higher.” At the corporate level, **customer retention rate** and **sustained on-time delivery rate** serve as CSFs. Their targets and timeframes make the intended strategic achievement clear and measurable.

The company then establishes short-term KPIs to support those results. For example:

- **Department KPI:** Operations increases on-time dispatch from 88% to 97% within six months.
- **Project KPI:** The delivery-dashboard project integrates all designated delivery-data sources within four months.
- **Individual KPI:** Delivery coordinators record at least 98% of required status updates within 15 minutes of receiving new information each month.

These illustrative KPIs connect immediate work to the long-term objective. Timely status updates improve information quality. Integrated information helps teams identify delays and coordinate responses. Better coordination supports reliable delivery, which contributes to customer retention. The company must review whether these relationships hold in practice. Achieving short-term KPIs should produce progress toward the long-term CSFs. If the KPIs improve but corporate results do not, the company must reassess the measures, initiatives, project, or underlying assumptions.

3. Strategic Projects

Once the strategic objectives and mission metrics are clear, the company determines its strategic initiatives and selects strategic projects to execute them. A **strategic initiative** defines a major effort or direction of change needed to achieve a strategic objective. A **strategic project** turns that initiative into a temporary, organized effort with defined results, resources, responsibilities, and a clear beginning and end. For the distribution company, a strategic initiative might be to **strengthen delivery planning and information management**. To execute this initiative, the company may select a project called **“Integrated Delivery Dashboard.”**

The project brings delivery information into one system, establishes consistent updating procedures, and trains employees to use the information. Its scope may combine process improvement, technology adoption, capability development, and organizational change. The company selects projects according to their expected contribution to the strategic objectives, feasibility, resource requirements, and priority. One strategic initiative may require several projects. Each selected project must define:

- **Expected outcome:** The improvement the project is intended to support.
- **Scope and deliverables:** What the project will produce.
- **Schedule and budget:** When the work will be completed and what resources it requires.
- **Project KPIs:** The short-term measures used to assess delivery.
- **Accountability:** Who will sponsor the project, manage its delivery, and ensure its benefits are realized.

For the dashboard project, the deliverables may include an operational system, integrated data, revised procedures, and trained employees. The expected benefits are earlier identification of delays, better coordination, and more dependable delivery promises. Building and introducing the dashboard is a project. Using and maintaining it every day afterward is operations. The strategic plan must connect project delivery with ongoing operations so that the new capability produces sustained improvement.

Three roles establish this accountability: the **sponsor, project owner, and benefit owner**. The **sponsor** provides strategic direction, secures resources, approves major decisions, and removes barriers. For example, the Director of Operations may sponsor the dashboard project because dependable delivery information is essential to reliable service. The **project owner** is responsible for delivering the agreed project results. They coordinate the team and manage the scope, schedule, budget, and quality. Their performance is assessed through the project KPIs. The **benefit owner** is responsible for ensuring that the project's results are used and produce the intended improvement.

Suppose the dashboard is launched on time and within budget. The project owner has delivered the system. However, employees still use separate files and rarely check the dashboard. Delivery problems continue. The benefit owner must address this gap. They ensure that employees are trained, the dashboard becomes part of daily work, and managers use its information to resolve delays. Success therefore has two parts: **delivering the project and achieving its benefits**. Launching the dashboard completes the project. Using it to improve short-term KPIs and achieve the long-term CSF of reliable delivery fulfills its strategic purpose.

IV. Strategic Control: Learn Whether the Strategy Is Working

After the plan is executed, the company must check whether the strategy is truly working. This is called strategic control. Strategic control does not only check whether the project is finished. It checks whether the whole cascade is working: Is the project being used? Are department KPIs improving? Are the CSFs being fulfilled? And is the mission metric getting better?

Imagine the integration project is finished on time and within budget. The new dashboard is launched. The project KPIs are green. On paper, the project is successful. But customers still feel uncertain. Why? The operations team uses the new system only to record completed deliveries. Meanwhile, customer promises are still managed through separate WhatsApp chats. In this case, the project KPI may be green, but the department KPIs are not improving. Data accuracy has not improved enough. Customer service response time has not improved. The CSF of “coordinated operations” is still not fulfilled. Therefore, the mission metric of reliable service has not improved. This is why a strategist must look at the whole cascade, not only one level. A green project KPI is not enough if department KPIs, CSFs, and the mission metric do not move.

Sometimes results take time. The company must be realistic. It needs to distinguish between a delayed result and a wrong connection between activities and outcomes. A delayed result means the strategy may be correct, but the benefit needs more time. A wrong connection means the activity does not actually support the intended result. This is the purpose of strategic review. The company compares targets with actual results. Then, it asks honest questions: Was our diagnosis correct? Is the new tool being used? Are departments working in a more coordinated way? Did the investment create the expected benefit?

Problems can come from different causes. Maybe the team lacks capability. Maybe coordination is weak. Maybe resources are not enough. Maybe the original assumption was wrong. Each cause needs a different solution. The review must end with a decision. The company may need to reinforce the use of the new system, change the process, retrain people, revise KPIs, or even revise the target. A strategist must be firm in pursuing a direction, but open enough to revise it when the evidence says it is wrong.

Finally, the company needs a strategic reward system. Rewards should encourage the behavior the strategy needs. Recognition, learning opportunities, and bonuses should support long-term goals, not only short-term numbers. In the distribution company, the operations team and customer service team should be appreciated together when delivery promises become more reliable. Finishing a project matters, but what matters more is whether the new capability is used, department KPIs improve, and customers feel the benefit. Leaders should ask: What lessons does our reward system teach?, Does it encourage collaboration and honesty?, Or does it make people chase short-term numbers and damage the future?

From Strategy to Project Management

Now we can see the connection between strategy and projects. Strategy decides why a project matters. It identifies the strategic gap, chooses the direction, defines the capability to build, and sets the benefit the company wants to create. Project management helps answer how the project will be delivered. It helps the team define the goal, plan the work, organize people, manage time and budget, handle risks, communicate with stakeholders, and make sure the expected benefit is achieved. In other words, a project is not successful only because it is finished. A project is successful when it helps the organization build a new capability, improve department performance, fulfill its critical success factors, and deliver the intended benefit to customers and the business.

That is why, before learning project management, we must first understand strategy. We must know why the project exists. Then, project management teaches us how to plan,

execute, control, and close the project successfully. Begin with One Decision. Before your next meeting, write this sentence: “What gap is my most important initiative trying to close?”

Then build the cascade:

What mission metric will prove success?

What CSFs must be fulfilled?

What department KPIs will show progress?

What project KPIs will show that the project is building the right capability?

What individual KPIs will connect each person’s work to the strategy?

Who is the sponsor, who is the project owner, and who is the benefit owner?

If the connection is still unclear, start there.

Becoming a strategist is a lifelong learning process. You learn to understand external demands, assess internal capabilities, make choices, organize execution, and learn from results. You truly become a strategist when your thinking changes the organization’s choices—and those choices become real capabilities, real achievements, and real benefits that bring the mission to life.

Do not only ask, “Did we finish the project?”

Ask, “What is now better because we did it?”

Make it a good day !

Never stop learning