

Five Favorite Techniques to Improve Your Team's Strategic Thinking

By Jennifer Selby Long

I was recently in a conversation with a client who joined a new company a few months ago. He observed that his team at the new company approached challenges and planning from a far more tactical perspective than the teams he had led elsewhere. Since he leads a team of leaders, of course, it is essential for him to improve the strategic skill set and to change their mindset accordingly.

The first and most effective technique is the investment hire.

There is really no equivalent to showing the rest of the team firsthand how a more strategic peer thinks and acts, day in and day out. This is someone who already has the strategic skill you want the rest of the team to develop, and who will demonstrate the skill and help to bring the others along.

Remember, though -- it's not an investment hire if you send this person off to work quietly and privately in isolation from the rest of your team. The investment hire should be someone who is willing and able to be a visible role model and who has demonstrated some talent for that role, not just someone who's good at the job.

But what can you do until the investment hire is allocated, recruited, and on-boarded? This can take months, even over a year if your function is specialized and has high barriers to entry. While there is really nothing that compares to importing great talent, there are four alternatives to the investment hire that you can use to improve the strategic thinking of your team in the meantime:

1. Leverage account teams from your most strategic and forward-thinking partners and vendors. Get them in to meet with your people, to share how they're thinking about the future, and to help them think more strategically about how to create, sell, build, and support your products and services.
2. Send your people to leading industry conferences to broaden their thinking. Attend with them to the extent that you can. Your conversations with them will help them build their skills at translating the best perspectives from the conference into solutions for your company.
3. Use the Z Problem Solving Model in your discussions to help develop their ability to analyze a complex situation from multiple perspectives before deciding on a course of action. This simple model ensures that the group explores relevant facts, possibilities, logical outcomes, and subjective factors, since by our very human nature we tend to overemphasize some of these aspects more than others. If you'd like a list of Z Problem Solving questions, drop me a line at lighten@selbygroup.com
4. While it shouldn't be your first choice in the first month after your arrival, you may need to rotate some people off of the team if they can't meet your expectations. Give everyone a fair shot at stepping up, but in most cases involving management team members, you should aim for 6 – 9 months and not let poor performers linger on the team for much longer than that. Often it is not an issue of the

individual being a poor performer in general; it's that the demands of the job have changed and it's no longer a good fit for this particular role.

Improving the strategic thinking of your team is not an overnight process, but it can be done if you focus and invest.

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