
The Key to Unlocking Your Potential

Module 4: Big Picture Thinking

With Vicki La Bouchardiere



Are your eyes on the horizon or firmly fixed on the coal-face? Ideally, they'll be a bit of both, and in this module, we'll be looking at strategic thinking and how you can improve your own ability in this area

What is Big Picture thinking?

Big picture thinking is all about thinking strategically. It's the ability to plan ahead, think of ideas, organise, solve problems and spot opportunities. It complements detail-oriented thinking, and it's good to have competencies around both types of thinking. If you know you're weak in either of those areas, then you'll want someone on your team or advisory board to add the skills you lack. (It's OK not to be great at things as long as you're self-aware and willing to listen to others.)

Skilled strategic thinkers are often creative and visionary, and have the ability to spot opportunities and solutions where others can't. It's a vital skill for entrepreneurs, as it will enable you to spot gaps in the market, emerging trends and quickly find workable solutions to challenges as you progress your business idea.

The advantages of being a big picture thinker

- You're likely to be highly motivated when you spot an opportunity and have the enthusiasm to create something from nothing.
- Your mind is always working on new ideas and you have lots of them.
- It's likely you're a very positive person and focus on the opportunities rather than the problems in any given situation.
- You think BIG! When an idea enters your head, you can expand it quickly to the best possible scenario - a whole empire can be conceived in minutes.

The disadvantages of being a big picture thinker

- The downside of having lots of ideas is that you can become easily distracted and suffer from "shiny object syndrome" where you get bored of one idea and want to jump on to the next.
- All that positivity can make you blind to the potential risks and downsides of a situation. Make sure you use a trusted sounding board for ideas if you are prone to wearing those rose-tinted spectacles.
- Some big picture thinkers can be forgetful, messy and disorganised. That's where it's good to have detail-oriented people around you, to help implement your ideas effectively.

What happens when there's a difference between the thinking and doing?

There's also the matter of strategic thinking and strategic doing. Some people are much better at dealing with problems that land on their desk than they are at seeing them coming in the first place. Do you ever find yourself in the position where you feel as if you are constantly fighting fires, problem-solving and doing a good job of batting off challenges when they arise, but just didn't see them coming in the first place?

That's a sign you need to spend more time reviewing what you've done and planning for the future. If you feel you don't have time to do more reviewing and planning, then it's a sure sign you need to make more time for reviewing and planning!

What should my weekly sessions look like?

They should be simple and structured - perhaps for an hour or two, where you sit down with your team (or on your own if you're a solo-worker) and think back over the preceding week and ask yourself the following questions:

- What went really well this week?
- What were the biggest headaches?
- What opportunities did we take advantage of?
- Were there any problems that could have been avoided if we'd planned better?
- What's changing either within the business or in the world at large that could affect our opportunities either positively or negatively?
- What are our biggest weaknesses right now?
- What are our strengths?
- What's the most important action point for the week ahead?

These type of questions elevate your thinking from the day-to-day details to the bigger picture. By asking yourself these questions regularly and reporting your findings, your brain will start to tune in to the big picture subconsciously as you go through your working week. Ideally, you'll be jotting down things to discuss at the meeting as soon as you have an idea or recognise an issue that needs addressing. If you use a journal, it would make a good addition to your regular entries.

What can impact negatively on Big Picture thinking?

In the Judgement Index, strategic thinking capacity is measured. What's interesting is that a couple of factors can impact on this capacity:

- Stress is a major enemy of strategic thinking. This is because as humans we are designed to become very narrow in our focus during times of stress. Think of it as an ancient survival technique when the only things that used to cause stress were when there was physical danger - being hunted by a tiger, falling into a river, losing sight of our children... When we're physically vulnerable, we focus on getting out of danger and preserving our lives. To do this effectively, we need to direct all our mental capacity to that end. These days, stressors arise every day - being late for work, snowed under by paperwork, having a cashflow crisis, missing your VAT return deadline. These situations aren't life-or-death, but they cause the brain to focus in a very narrow way and shut out the big picture.

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- Energy levels can also impact on strategic thinking, so you also want to be holding important planning meetings when you're fresh and lively rather than last thing on a Friday afternoon.

How to improve your Big Picture Thinking

- If you are looking to improve your big picture thinking, it's worth looking at the wider factors first and sorting out any underlying causes that could be affecting your ability to think strategically. Reduce your stress levels as much as possible and improve your energy levels by ensuring you have the right amount of rest and relaxation, a healthy diet and plenty of exercise.
- Make strategic thinking a regular part of your working week. Don't just plan once a year and hope for the best. Your mind works in a similar way to a muscle, and the more often you use it, the stronger it becomes so give it lots of opportunities to work out and open up new mental pathways. Practice strategic thinking daily.
- Talking to others about your ideas and problem-solving strategies is also helpful. We can become stuck in our own little thinking ruts and by sparking off other people, you'll come up with ideas you would never have had on your own.
- Be aware of your own biases. We all have them - your mind is designed to help you be right as often as possible, and sometimes it can work against you. You'll have stronger biases around your most deeply held beliefs. For instance, my mum used to have a very strong belief that car sun-roofs always leaked, so she never bought a car with one. In fairness, in the early days of automobiles, they probably did but modern cars are pretty much watertight. Her strongly held, outdated belief resulted in inaccurate assumptions. Make sure you always question your thinking, especially around things you are most convinced about.
- Improve your listening skills. Similar to the point above, make sure you aren't just hearing what you want to hear. Stay open-minded and be prepared to explore ideas that seem counter-intuitive to you.
- Improve your questioning skills and don't accept things just because they are the norm. Regularly challenge assumptions and norms with questions like:
 - Is this idea rational or driven by emotions?
 - What's the source of the information - can we trust what we're hearing or seeing?
 - What proof is there that supports the current theory?
 - Are we jumping to any conclusions or making assumptions?
- Consider the consequences. Every action we take and choice we make has consequences. Ask yourself the following things:
 - What are the pros and cons of each choice?
 - What are the wider goals and is this action in line with those?
 - What's the best decision for the long term?

It's a team effort

Make it a team effort

If you work as part of a team, encourage everyone to think more strategically. People can get very blinkered and only consider the consequences to themselves. By regularly opening up the conversation on how things can be improved all round, your team will raise their capacities strategically and instinctively think of the wider impact of all their actions.

Module 4 Worksheet: Your Strategic Thinking Action Plan

1: Thinking about what we've discussed above, which of the following things do you struggle with most?

- Making time for reviewing and planning
 - Do you have a regular meeting/private time set aside every week? If you do, how could you improve that time, or if you don't, when are you going to do it?

- Are you helping yourself as much as possible with your big picture thinking?
 - What are your stress levels like? Do you glide through the day even when you have a lot on, or are you constantly fretting? Which things immediately spring to mind that you need to address?

- If you have identified high stress levels, then what can you do to either ease the burden, delegate or delete the tasks, or cope with the stress better (we'll do a whole module on this later in the programme, but for now you might want to consider making sure you keep evening and weekends for relaxation, working on planning your day better, minimising interruptions when you're working, getting rid of pain-in-the-arse clients!)

- Are you getting enough rest and relaxation?
 - Do you sleep well? Do you have hobbies that take your mind off work? Ever tried meditation? You can get some great apps and YouTube videos to help you unwind. Jot down some ways you can chill out better.

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- Are you looking after your diet and exercise?
 - This is a subject we keep returning to because it's the key to your overall functioning. What can you do to improve?

2: Your First /Reviewing Planning Session

What went really well this past week?

What were the biggest headaches?

What opportunities did you take advantage of?

Were there any problems that could have been avoided if you'd planned better?

What's changing, either within the business or in the world at large that could affect your opportunities either positively or negatively?

What are our biggest weaknesses right now?

What are our strengths?

What's the most important action point for the week ahead?

Good luck with everything, and I'll see you in Module 5!

All the Best

Vicki