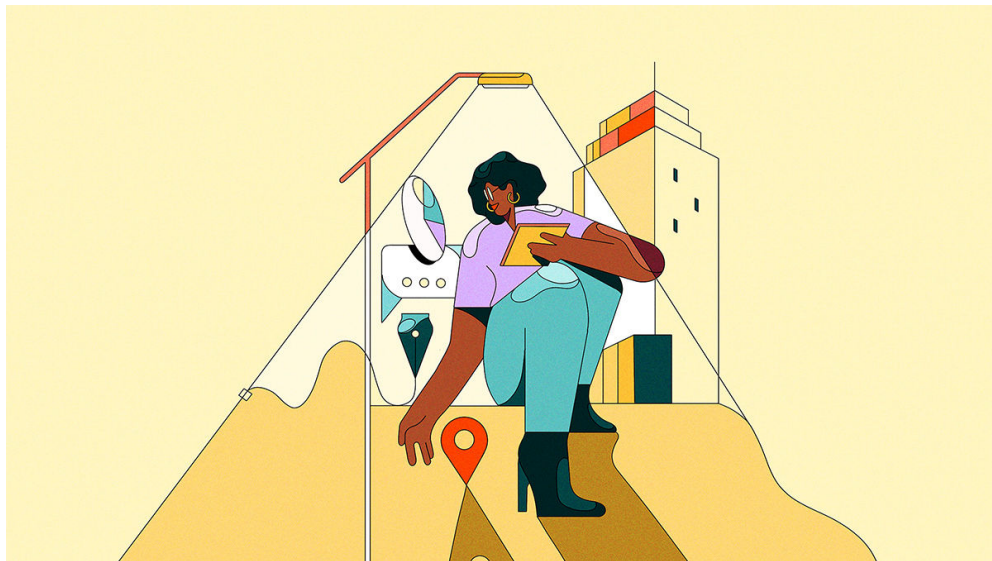




Strategy



When You're Told You're Not Strategic Enough

How to articulate and broadcast your vision successfully.
by **Luis Velasquez**

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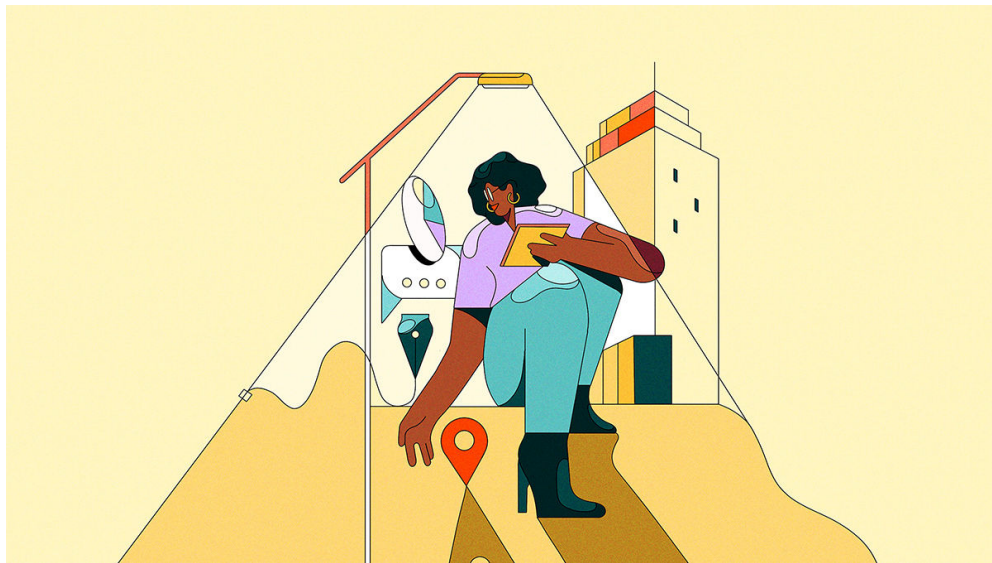


Illustration by Vilmante Juozaityte 'Bulma'

Jason, a tech executive and client of mine, had been recruited by a company to lead a major initiative. One year into his role, one thing was apparent in his last few meetings with the CEO: He doubted Jason's fit in the post. These fears materialized when the CEO bluntly told him, "I don't think you're strategic enough." This surprised Jason because he was recruited precisely because of his strategic mindset and approach. When he asked for more specific feedback, the CEO couldn't give him a straight answer.

This confusion revealed how little visibility the CEO had into Jason's strategic work. Jason's problem wasn't actually his strategic mindset, but rather the lack of visibility into his strategic decisions. This situation highlights a common problem: If your strategy isn't seen and understood, it's as if it doesn't exist at all.

When leaders are told they need to be more strategic, their first instinct is often to seek clarification by asking for specific examples or definitions of strategy. While this is well intentioned, it can sometimes come across as defensive. Often, the feedback itself stems from a lack of clear communication and understanding between the leader and their stakeholders. Stakeholders may struggle to articulate what "being strategic" means, leading to vague feedback.

Rather than simply asking for clarification, it's more effective to proactively demonstrate your strategy. Here are three main reasons why it's hard for leaders to show that they're strategic — and ways to articulate and broadcast your strategic thinking skills more successfully.

1. Strategy can feel conceptual and theoretical.

Strategy conversations usually involve abstract concepts, such as vision, long-term planning, future threats, and opportunities, which can be challenging to quantify and describe. This complexity, coupled with the need to connect other more-concrete factors such as market analysis, competitive positioning, etc., makes it hard to have a unified narrative.

Research shows that strategic decision-making cannot be properly understood unless its context is understood. Here are a couple ways to describe that context:

Use storytelling.

Storytelling is a powerful tool for making abstract strategic concepts relatable and memorable. By engaging your audience emotionally

and intellectually, stories simplify complex ideas, turning them into actionable business plans. A compelling narrative helps your strategy stick with stakeholders, increasing understanding and retention. For example, the 96 Elephants campaign used a simple but urgent story to drive home its strategy: “Last year, poachers killed 35,000 elephants for their tusks. Our threefold strategy: stop the killing, stop the trafficking, stop the demand.” This clear narrative made the context and solution easily digestible and very clear.

Visualize strategy.

Use visuals to make complex or abstract strategies more tangible and easier to communicate. Effective visualizations will clarify complex ideas. For example, Amazon is known for using the flywheel model, a visual representation of how various parts of its business reinforce one another to drive growth. The cycle starts with improving customer experience, which attracts more customers. More customers increase traffic, which brings in more sellers. More sellers lead to a greater product selection, which drives down costs due to economies of scale. Lower costs allow Amazon to offer lower prices, which further enhances the customer experience, starting the cycle again. This visual helps teams understand how seemingly unrelated actions — such as expanding product selection or optimizing logistics — support the overarching strategic goal of long-term growth. It’s a powerful way of turning an abstract strategic idea into a tangible, actionable plan that everyone can see and follow.

2. Everyone has a different perspective.

Leaders often assume key stakeholders will understand their strategy. But individuals interpret strategic thinking differently, leading to confusion and inconsistent communication, as Jason experienced. To overcome these communication challenges, consider the following approaches:

Use a shared strategic framework.

Most companies already have a unified goal-setting framework like OKRs (objectives and key results), [balanced scorecards](#), or KPIs (key performance indicators). Rather than introducing new methods (or worse, not using any), the key is to leverage these existing processes more effectively. For example, [Google's OKR system](#) aligns company-wide goals with individual team objectives, providing clear focus and measurable outcomes. By using this kind of shared structure, you'll reduce misinterpretation and ensure everyone understands how every moving part contributes to broader strategic outcomes, fostering better alignment and accountability at all levels.

Create sensemaking opportunities for stakeholders.

In strategy discussions I've attended, I've observed a trend: People interpret strategy based on their own roles, focusing primarily on how it affects them or their teams. Senior leaders might need high-level overviews of strategic progress, while teams may require more-specific tactical instructions to align their actions with long-term goals. This self-centered approach often causes them to miss the bigger picture and leads to misunderstanding of the strategy.

Stakeholders need to connect your strategy to their own realities to make sense of your plans — and the role they play in them.

Therefore, you need to provide them with sensemaking opportunities. This involves helping them find meaning in your strategic decisions by linking those decisions to their own goals, challenges, and aspirations. Here's how you can do this:

- **Shift the focus to collective impact:** When discussing your strategy, first frame the discussion around collective impact rather than individual or team impact. Highlight how different teams are interconnected in achieving long-term goals, ensuring that all stakeholders understand that the strategy is a shared responsibility.

Then and only then can you talk about what each team/person needs to do to support the collective effort of the strategy.

- **Facilitate “dot connecting”:** Encourage and facilitate regular discussions where stakeholders can connect the dots between their own work and the broader strategic objectives. These conversations help team members see beyond their immediate responsibilities and understand how their efforts contribute to organizational goals. Ask questions like, “How does this initiative support our long-term objectives?” to guide the conversation toward big-picture thinking.

3. Shorter-term issues take precedence.

The immediate pressures and urgencies of the day-to-day business sometimes overshadow the need for communicating about long-term planning. Leaders often prioritize execution and operational work over strategic reflection and communication, making it harder to articulate the bigger picture. As one stakeholder told me about Jason, “He appears too busy, always in execution mode.” Additionally, uncertainty and pressure can make leaders hesitant to articulate plans that aren’t fully concrete, and their stakeholders may be unable to connect the dots between the strategy and what’s happening on the ground, causing misunderstanding and misalignment. Here’s how to ensure strategy remains top of mind for stakeholders when other pressures start to take over:

Build strategic reflection into your routine.

In high-pressure environments, strategy can easily take a backseat to daily operations. You need to intentionally carve out time for strategic reflection. Instead of reserving a large block of time, opt for consistent intervals where it becomes part of your routine. For example, you could start by asking yourself every day:

- How is today's work helping us adapt to future challenges?
- What key assumptions am I making about the future, and are they still valid?
- What's one small change I can make today to better align my team with our strategic objectives?

Break down long-term goals into short-term wins.

One reason leaders stay in execution mode is the pressure to show short-term results. To address this, break down long-term strategic goals into smaller, more manageable milestones that demonstrate progress but still contribute to the bigger picture.

I've often seen leaders separate strategic discussions from operational work, but a more effective approach is to make strategic thinking part of your job. Instead of relying solely on formal strategy meetings, use informal check-ins or casual conversations to continually reinforce how day-to-day activities tie into the broader strategic picture. For example, ask yourself: What small milestone can I achieve this week that moves us closer to our long-term strategic goal?

Focus on strategy during times of crisis.

Typically, strategy and crisis management are seen as two separate issues, often at odds with one another. In other words, strategy is often sidelined when urgent issues arise. However, crises are opportunities to demonstrate your strategic leadership by anticipating the future. Use this time to handle the immediate challenge and look around corners, considering where things could go by planning two or three steps ahead.

For example, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Airbnb faced a massive crisis as global travel came to a standstill. CEO Brian Chesky made the difficult decision to lay off 25% of the workforce. However, he didn't just focus on survival — he pivoted Airbnb's strategy to emphasize local stays and long-term rentals by tapping into new customer needs such

as remote working and local tourism. This pivot helped Airbnb weather the immediate crisis and also positioned the company to thrive in the new travel landscape, which now includes a greater emphasis on remote work and flexible living.

In high-pressure situations, make sure you communicate not only your immediate solutions but also how these actions fit into the broader, long-term vision. By doing this, you showcase both your tactical expertise and strategic foresight.

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Being told you're not strategic enough can be frustrating; however, take it as an opportunity to reset by strengthening your leadership and the visibility of your impact. By making your strategy visible and easy to understand through storytelling, leveraging existing frameworks, and ensuring ongoing communication with stakeholders, you can shift perceptions, align your team with long-term goals, and be recognized for your strategic approach. Crises and day-to-day pressures should not get in the way of your strategic thinking; instead, use these moments to demonstrate your foresight and ability to connect immediate actions to the bigger picture. When the strategy is seen, understood, and actionable, success follows.

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