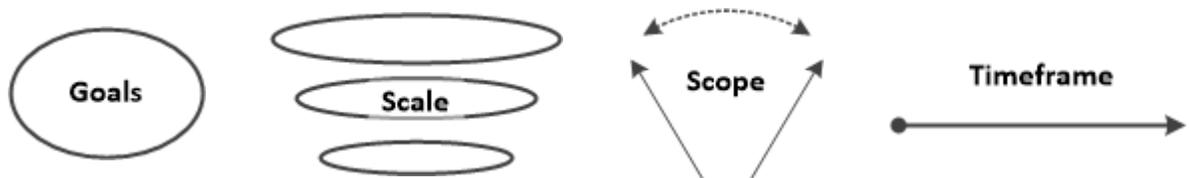


Lum's Guide to Strategic Thinking

Learning to Think Bigger, Broader, and Longer Term

Thinking Strategically

In essence, strategic thinking requires us to pull our minds back from the tactical and the immediate – that place that is intuitively comfortable for all of us – and place ourselves in a perspective that sees more of the larger environment and that looks further ahead in time. What follows are four exercises to practice when you are trying to think strategically.



Goals (vs. objectives)

Start with, “what’s the point?” Distinguish between goals (which is what we in VFS call the highest level of things we want to achieve) and objectives (which we define as smaller level things to achieve, and often seen as milestones on the way to achieving goals). What is the *ultimate* point of what your organization is doing? What’s the endgame? What’s the long-term vision of the future that you are all pursuing? If you can identify that, then you can start to properly evaluate what can be done to get the organization there, and the types of immediate actions you could take that would align with that “big picture.”

And if you *can't* identify the big goals or vision, then there’s a more fundamental conversation that needs to be had...

Scale

Whatever the level it is you work on – front desk, production line, middle management – step up a level and see more of what’s going on. This is gaining altitude, getting a bigger perspective. See not only more of what is going on around you in your organization, but get a feel for how the perspective and pressures at that higher level change the way people think and prioritize (because, trust us, they do). As you’re doing this, trying to imagine the different units and employees connecting, imagine how information and materials (and funding!) flow between them. Think about more of the processes that go on that connect units within your organization and that connect your organization to other organizations upstream and downstream in your business.

Scope

No matter the sector or industry of your organization, broaden the *scope* of your thinking by reframing how you see the boundaries of your organization’s work. Look outward to the industries that sit

alongside yours, those that are related but not directly competing or collaborating. See how industries and institutions indirectly impact each other. Imagine how events and changes in seemingly unrelated spaces could have meaning for your organization down the road. Another way of doing this is classic strategic reframing of an organization's mission: if you're in the auto industry, then reframe your view to be about *transportation*; if you're in the oil business, then reframe things to be about *energy*.

Timeframe

Finally, change the time horizon along which you're thinking. If you normally operate on a weekly view of life, push that out to a quarterly view; if you normally plan for a year, try pushing that out to five years. Begin to take into account the events, deadlines, and possibilities that will rise up further down the line. How does changing your timeframe bring different pressures and different stakeholders into your view? Changing your timeframe will cause you to examine how your immediate actions and objectives will positively or negatively position you for everything that might come next. It will also enable you to more critically consider the inherent trade-offs that you and your organization are making by prioritizing one timeframe for another.

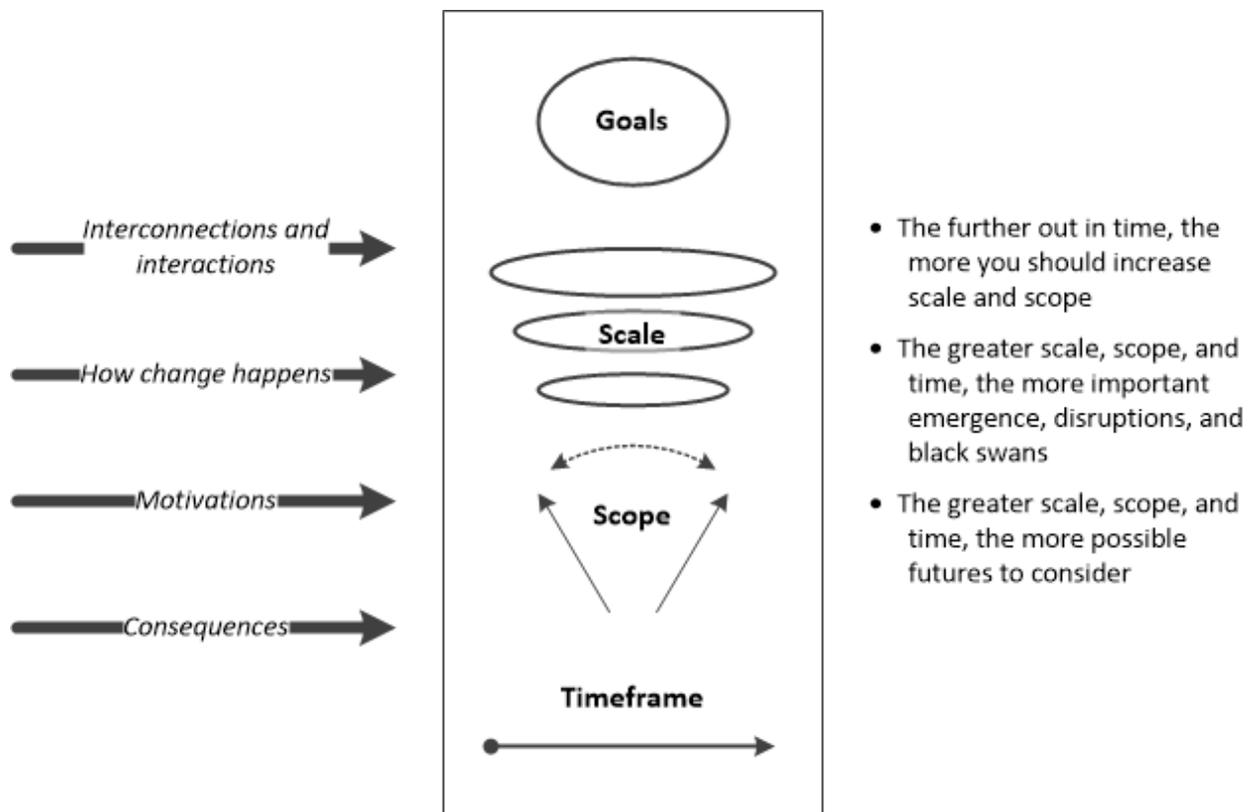


Figure 1: Lum's Guide to Strategic Thinking

Across Scale, Scope, and Time

No matter which of the three exercises you're doing, there are a few things you can consider that will help you immensely in achieving strategic insights.

- **Look for interconnections and interactions:** often it's not the individuals or pieces by themselves that are most important, but how they are linked together; always think about how people, units, and organizations are connected and the kinds of outcomes that are produced when they interact.
- **Think about how change happens (and can be made to happen):** why do things in your organization or industry change? Why do they stay the same? What strategies for making change seem to work the best? What trends, emerging issues, and disruptions seem most likely to produce change in the future?
- **Think about motivations:** life is about people (at least until AI start to unionize...); never forget to consider the messy and irrational ways in which real people respond to life and make decisions. Who stands to gain? Who stands to lose? Where does the power to effect or prevent change lie?
- **Consequences (intended and unintended):** as you consider how to pursue your organization's goals, think about the outcomes you and your colleagues desire and those that might be undesirable or unexpected byproducts of your actions. Remember all of those interconnections and all of those very real human motivations out there? Each action you and your organization takes will ripple across scale, scope, and time to impact others and produce *reactions* that may come back around to you.

Important Rules of Thumb

- The further out in time you think, the more you should increase your scale and expand your scope
- The more you expand your scale, scope, and time, the more you need to consider unpredictable emergent patterns, unexpected disruptions, and black swans.
- The more you expand your scale, scope, or time, the greater the number of possible futures you need to consider.

Additional Resources

The following sources offer more insight into strategic and futures thinking.

4 Steps to the Future: A Quick and Clean Guide to Creating Foresight. Available from Amazon.com and other booksellers.

VFS Primer on Foresight and Futures Studies. Available from Vision Foresight Strategy.

For those interested in training workshops, VFS offers foresight training workshops, seminars in using the *4 Steps* foresight model, and specialized foresight courses in its Future of Conflict program. Contact VFS at admin@visionforesightstrategy.com for more information.



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