

Servant Leadership and Strategy

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Strategic thinking is an essential skill for leaders in all industries and one that supports maintaining progress through the challenges and leads to sustainable success in the organizations that leaders create. There are many definitions of strategic thinking and the one we will use is from the *Harvard Business Review*, where they describe it as the ability to, "Analyze opportunities and problems from a broad perspective and understand the potential impact your actions might have on the future of your organization or bottom line." (Schoemaker, p. 2-3) For a servant leader, strategic thinking takes on additional significance. While traditional leadership focuses on achieving results through authority and control, servant leadership prioritizes the growth and well-being of others. A servant leader's strategic thinking is not just about directing the organization toward its goals, but also about guiding a team in a way that supports their development as well. This approach calls for a special blend of foresight, empathy, and adaptability. Servant leaders need to envision challenges, create an inclusive environment, and empower their teams with a long-term sight of the organization. That said, strategic thinking is a broad field with many principles and dynamics, out of which, this paper narrows in on a few themes particularly relevant for servant leaders. Among those are foresight, long-term vision and alignment, empathy and active listening, empowering others, flexibility, and finally decision-making and accountability. Exploring these principles allows us to discover from a specific lens how servant leaders can apply strategic thinking in a way that produces success and a space for people and the organization to thrive.

In the realm of strategic leadership, foresight is more than the ability to predict what will happen next. It is about forecasting and preparing for future changes, challenges, and opportunities that may not yet be visible in any organization. As a Director of Sales, having the foresight to see the trends, and market shifts that might affect our business enables me to take

proactive measures to ensure that our organization stays ahead of the game. Yes, a strategic mindset supported by foresight must be both about meeting the needs of a business today and anticipating the external environment, but it also involves reading the tea leaves, predicting future hurdles, and spotting opportunities. That is where foresight is quite important for me, while planning for both the expected as well as for the unexpected, I keep the company prepared to face turbulence and still remain competitive. As a sales leader, I use various tools such as sales performance metrics, analysis of market trends, and customer feedback as insight to help develop the skill of foresight and make decisions that meet not only present, but also future business needs. In addition, foresight has the greatest impact when it works in step with the business's long-term strategy and objectives. I am a servant leader and while we have good strategic direction my role is to bring foresight to the team and ensure it is absolutely integrated into that direction. To cite a specific instance, if I am able to anticipate some shifts in the market, I can help the sales team course-correct and then identify new opportunities early in the game to focus on areas that will help the company achieve long-term sustainable growth. From entering into new markets, to investing in new technologies and expanding our portfolio, keeping foresight in line with the company's vision helps us remain focused.

While strategic thinking is about foresight coupled with alignment to long-term vision, empathy, active listening, and empowering others are all critical skills for servant leaders. These principles promote collaboration within the group, and above all, motivate engagement at every level, ensuring the long-term success of the company. Empathy and active listening are mutually inclusive as a strategic leader. Empathy is the ability to identify with, and understand, the feelings of others; while active listening is the practice of attentive and reflective listening in a conversation. Together, those qualities enable a leader to see the needs of individuals and the

team, so that a collaborative environment can exist where everyone feels heard and valued. As a servant leader, listening to my team closely enough to recognize what is preventing them from being their best is critical so that we can come up with solutions to help achieve their individual goals and those set for our larger team are pivotal. For example, in quarterly sales reviews, I personally hold one-on-one meetings with each of my team members to go over their performance, challenges and any feedback they have. Through active listening, their voices are heard and through empathy toward their struggles, I can create solutions that are collaborative efforts taking their perspectives into consideration. When doing this, servant leaders are not just building trust but also creating a sense of belonging and purpose within the team.

Another critical factor of strategic thinking is empowering others. This means engaging team members in the decision-making process and encouraging them to share their views and contributions. Team members that feel empowered are more likely to take initiative, share creative ideas, and care about the success of the company. As a Director of Sales, empowering my team is not only crucial for delivering on short-term goals, but also for positioning myself to be a strategic leader. Instead of simply announcing team changes, I involve team members in conversations about the sales strategy, so team members feel engaged, and I get additional feedback in the process. For instance, when launching a new product in 2023, I brought the entire team early into the process and asked what challenges they might expect, how customers might react, and what key things sold the product through their perspectives. Not only does giving them a voice in planning make certain that the sales strategy is feasible and informed by the insights of those who will implement it daily, but it also does something even more critical - makes sure that I get stakeholder buy-in from the start. The combination of empathy, active listening, and empowerment with foresight and long-term vision presents a compelling

framework for serving as a strategic thinker. These key principles come together to not only ensure team alignment towards goals, but also to ensure they feel engaged and supported to achieve the long term goals.

The final two key principles that are central to strategic thinking are flexibility and decision-making (with accountability). These principles work together to ensure that a leader remains adaptive to change while maintaining a sense of responsibility and ownership over the decisions made. In the unpredictable environment of sales I live in, having the flexibility to adjust strategies quickly, coupled with decision-making that holds both myself and the team accountable, is essential for our continued success. Flexibility in leadership refers to the ability to pivot quickly when circumstances change, whether due to shifts in market trends, customer demands, or internal challenges. For a servant leader, flexibility also means being open to input from others, adjusting strategies based on team feedback, and being willing to make course corrections as needed to achieve the desired outcomes. As a Director of Sales, flexibility is a key aspect of my approach. The sales landscape is constantly changing, whether it's due to new competition, changing customer preferences, or market disruptions. However, flexibility doesn't mean abandoning the overall strategic vision. As a servant leader, I balance flexibility with a clear understanding of where the organization needs to go in the long term. This means that while I may adjust tactics to meet immediate needs, I do so in a way that still aligns with the broader goals of the company.

Decision-making with accountability refers to owning the decisions you make as a leader and a member of a team. A servant leader realizes that each choice has consequences in the organization and accepts ownership for the results. This doesn't just mean holding yourself responsible, but also establishing a culture of responsibility within the team, giving people the

power to make decisions and own their actions. By creating this alignment, the organization is also ensured to keep moving towards their strategic goals, with each member of the team committed to the accomplishments of the organization. Flexibility and decision-making with accountability are not mutually exclusive. In fact, when combined, they create a powerful leadership dynamic that allows for both adaptability and responsibility. A servant leader must be flexible enough to adjust to changing circumstances while simultaneously holding themselves and their team accountable for the decisions made. In my role as a Director of Sales, these principles come into play frequently, particularly when navigating unforeseen challenges or new opportunities. For example, during a quarterly sales review, we may discover that one of our top accounts is at risk of churning due to a competitor's new offering. In this situation, I must be flexible enough to shift resources and priorities quickly, perhaps allocating additional support to the account, reworking the sales approach, or offering special incentives. At the same time, I must make decisions with accountability, ensuring that the team understands their role in retaining the account and that we collectively take ownership of the outcome. This accountability ensures that everyone remains committed to the decision and takes the necessary steps to achieve success, even when the strategy needs to be adjusted.

Such strategic thinking is a crucial skill for any leader and especially important for servant leaders; after all, it not only involves helping the organization move toward its long-term goals, but also creating a collaborative, empowering community that encourages growth among comrades. Incorporating foresight, empathy, active listening, empowerment, flexibility and commitment, and decision-making with responsibility in strategic thinking gives a leader the ability to respond to challenges while also keeping connected to the broader mission of their organization. This intersection creates a strategic organization that is not only responsive to

current crises but also positioned to realize its long-term goals in what is sure to be a changing environment. By blending foresight with a long-term vision, building their team and adapting yet holding themselves responsible, a servant leader can develop growth and success right from the team level to the organization. A servant leader who thinks strategically is not just focused on results, but also on the how and why behind the achieving of those goals, and their approach to the process.

References

Schoemaker, J.H., et al. (2013). *HBR guide to thinking strategically: to be strategic balance agility and consistency*. Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation.