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**Strategic Thinking: How to eat like a lion**

You need to be more strategic. Great. What does THAT mean?

Here's an analogy that I use frequently to shed light on this common development opportunity. (I saw the analogy in a book on effectiveness in politics.)

**Lions need to eat and eat a lot. Field mice are plentiful where lions live so mice could easily be the star item on the lion menu each and every day. But (and this is a big 'but') even though lions are fully capable of capturing, killing and eating all the mice they want, the actual energy required to capture even ONE field mouse exceeds the caloric content of the mouse itself. So, while it may be tempting to spend the day chasing down the plentiful field mice, it is actually strategically disastrous, because the lion would wear itself out and starve.**

**Enter the antelope -- a much larger animal that can be caught (unlike the jaguar). AND, just one kill feeds the lion and the pride for days.**

**Guess what? Lions live mostly on a diet of antelope.**

In business, as in the forest, we care deeply about getting important work done efficiently. And we use concepts like "outcomes," "strategy," and "tactics" to guide our thinking and discussions about WHAT we want to achieve and HOW best to do it. The trick is to be sure we discipline our thought process (and discussions) to answer the following questions carefully and IN SEQUENCE.

- What is our desired outcome?
- What is the best approach or strategy to get to our desired outcome?
- What are the steps or tactics to best execute that strategy.

**1. *Desired Outcome***

When faced with solving a problem or creating something new, it is critical to define a desired end state or outcome as completely as we can. Many times, we identify 'objectives' but stop short of putting a stake in the ground for a particular outcome.

Let's use our hungry lion friends as examples. Simply stated, their objective is 'to eat' (Note: objectives generally start with a 'to' such as 'to sell; to train; to present; to decide). But the strategic question is not whether or not 'to eat'; it is about HOW best to get food to eat. Clearly, a mouse now and then is fine but the ideal outcome for the lions is a sustainable path to food. Once we clarify that sustainable is the key factor here (ie, getting enough energy from their food to go find more food), then we are on the mental path towards antelope and not mice.

## **2. Strategy Selection**

The second step is to surface possible strategies BEFORE diving into our beloved tactical planning. For those of us who are passionate about taking action, this pause is often a difficult one to master.

As suggested above, a clearly defined outcome can immediately shed light on more and less effective strategies. Nonetheless, we always want to surface possible strategies BEFORE diving into the action planning so we can confirm that: 1) we are selecting the best strategy for our situation; and 2) we can focus on a tactical plan consistent with the chosen strategy (versus defining all the action steps we could reasonably take.) Note: If we can't name the strategies we considered but rejected (and why), then we are likely to be tagged with the 'not strategic' descriptor.

Let's go back to our lions. What are some possible strategies? The big two are: chasing mice or hunting antelope. There are others but we don't need to list them to make the essential point: The key to smart 'action' had to do with choosing hunting versus chasing and antelope versus mice. Generally speaking, competitive advantage comes from the STRATEGY SELECTION and EXECUTION.

There are many examples from inside and outside business. To provide a brand-defining 'friendly' experience for their customers, Southwest Airlines adopted a strategy of 'hiring friendly employees' versus trying to train existing employees to be friendly. To win an unprecedented number of Tour de France races, Lance Armstrong chose a strategy of 'beating his competition in the mountain' versus focusing on straight-away racing speed to give him a competitive advantage. To improve my health, I might focus on building my strength versus lowering the number on the scale.

## **3. Tactical Planning**

Lastly (and finally) we should invest time in tactical planning. Every strategy requires an efficient course of action. But, as with the lions, our action steps should vary dramatically based on the prior choice of mice versus antelope. Further, our time and attention should not be diverted by the temptations of the strategy not taken (ie, chasing mice that we find on the way to the antelope field).

**Bottom Line:** I can simplify what strategic thinking is but I can not make it easy. It requires hard thinking. It requires PAUSING before producing an ambitious To-Do list. It requires saying NO to possible alternatives without a guarantee of success. It requires reviewing data on parallel efforts without getting lost in analysis paralysis. It requires that we are smartly selective.

Leadership is all about making and sticking to hard choices. Strategy is one of them.

Are you spending your time chasing mice or hunting antelope?