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Engaging Executives in Strategic Conversations

More Than a Random Event

By Wendell Nekoranec and Mitchell Kusy

AT THE BEGINNING of a strategic planning process, executives come together with a wealth of ideas, directions, and expected actions. Executives often have preconceived ideas they want to implement immediately without reflecting on how to incorporate these ideas into a strategic plan. As a result, the consulting process may fail to reflect on purpose and intent, and an OD consultant can gather ideas that an executive wants to implement but which are not connected with mission and vision. In addition, executives sometimes try to address issues in isolation rather than in conjunction with others. One executive proposed doubling the size of a warehouse to concentrate on profitable markets only to discover another executive was working with an OD consultant to acquire new technology to address the same outcome, and the second executive had the CEO's support. The first executive had a notion that something needed to be done and had devised a plan, but he had not communicated across the organizational hierarchy. When an OD consultant initiates strategic conversations, he/she helps executives see more potential for their ideas, and the consultant can help connect executive thinking. Engaging executives individually in a strategic conversation can help an OD consultant understand opportunities, capabilities, and biases, as well as help an executive better move ideas forward to address goals.

This article will present the Strategic Thinking Conversation Model that includes three stages an OD consultant can use to engage executives in strategic conversations to develop ideas

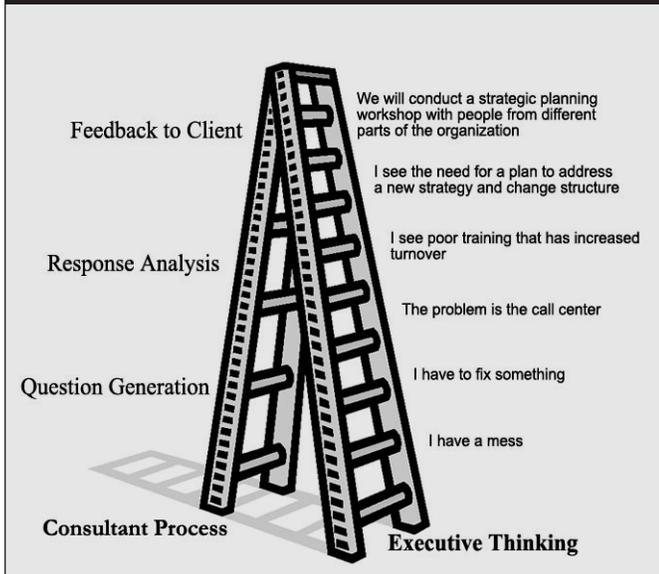
and understanding. First, the model presents eight interactive types of questions to use. Next, it offers a three-part analysis process to respond to executive thinking. Lastly, the model provides a platform for how a consultant responds to and interacts with executive thinking. In this robust idea-gathering environment, an OD consultant can best support the strategic planning process by remaining open to ideas and possible actions (Schein, 1999).

An effective strategic conversation can help a leader assess current organizational thinking so new thinking or clarification of existing thoughts can surface; this will lead to new organizational behaviors, systems, and processes (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996). Strategic conversations can help craft strategy (Mintzberg, 1987), design solutions to address unknown forces on the new economic playing field (Eisenhardt, 2002), and reinvent existing processes to meet a competitive environment. A skilled OD consultant can engage organizational leaders to expand their thinking and help align the organization to its mission and vision, as well as to support the overall strategic planning process.

CONVERSATIONS THAT BUILD LADDERS TO SUCCESS

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Figure 1
LADDER OF STRATEGIC CONVERSATION



AUTHORS

WENDELL NEKORANEC, MA, MBA, is principal of Nekoranec & Associates in Omaha. His OD consulting work includes strategic planning, leadership development and coaching; he offers training sessions in customer service, team building, and sales. Wendell is an adjunct faculty member at Creighton University, Bellevue University, and Concordia University in St. Paul, MN, teaching courses in organization theory, strategic management, and leadership. He earned a MBA from the University of St. Thomas, where he is a doctoral candidate in organization development. Wendell can be reached at wendell@wendellnekoranec.com.

MITCHELL KUSY, PhD, is an organization development consultant and professor at Antioch University, Ph.D. program in Leadership & Change. A 2005 Fulbright Scholar and 1998 Minnesota Organization Development Practitioner of the year, Dr. Kusy also headed the leadership development function for American Express. Mitch earned his doctorate at the University of Minnesota. His latest book *Breaking the Code of Silence: Prominent Leaders Reveal How They Rebounded from Seven Critical Mistakes*, was based on a research study that he co-authored with Dr. Louellen Essex. Mitch can be reached at mkusy@phd.antioch.edu.

(Bossidy & Charan, 2002). Metaphorically, such conversations help the executive move farther up a folding stepladder in order to gain the perspective necessary to see greater distances, thus enabling him or her to view both the organization's internal operation and the all-important external environment. This folding stepladder provides a valuable analogy since it is free-standing and can be moved to almost any location for use. The two legs of the ladder meeting at the top show both the role of the consultant and that of the executive in the strategic planning process in that the consultant's work supports and extends the executive's strategic thinking.

The folding stepladder image (see *Figure 1*) demonstrates flexibility, stretch, and a partnering relationship. The stepladder provides flexibility because it can be moved around to just about any landscape and stand solidly and independently. This flexibility and independence allows an executive and consultant to attain a global perspective regardless of where they are situated in the organization and to focus on both internal and the farther external issues. Lastly, the folding stepladder presents an image of how an executive climbs the rungs of thought development while being supported on the other side by a consultant who uses the Strategic Thinking Conversation Model to provide a sense of reassurance and stability. Anyone who has climbed to the top rung of any ladder understands the value of having someone hold the ladder and guide step placement on the top rungs. The model provides the same solid reassurance.

By using the model to help an executive climb the top rung, the consultant enables the executive to stand securely from the highest vantage point and see opportunities and threats unobserved by organizational members. For instance, by standing on the top rung, an executive could see the misalignment and imbalance of five production teams in relation to their distributors where the five teams provided services to meet their own needs but not the needs of the distributors. In another example, an executive could think that more analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (using a S.W.O.T. analysis) will solve a turnover problem in a call center, but an OD consultant skilled in the Strategic Thinking Conversation Model could guide the executive farther up the ladder to see this issue from a wider perspective and consider that outside competitors may be pulling away talented employees for higher wages and better working conditions. Engaging leaders in strategic conversations provides clarity and support to the ladder they are climbing, which moves thinking from tactical to strategic, similar to the benefits of the ladder of inference (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994). A consultant can work with an executive to create an even longer folding stepladder that provides for greater strategic thinking and a higher-level view of the organization.

THE STRATEGIC THINKING CONVERSATION MODEL

The Strategic Thinking Conversation Model consists of

three interacting stages, which can work in a linear fashion in much the same way as the phases of OD operate (Cummings & Worley, 2005). A skilled consultant will discover that after the first question from the Question Generation stage has been asked, the model functions in an interactive fashion among the three stages:

1. Question Generation
2. Response Analysis
3. Feedback to Client

Question Generation

In the Question Generation stage, the consultant asks questions that stimulate an executive’s thinking and intuiting, especially about an upcoming strategic planning event. For one executive, a consultant asked a question about who should attend the strategic planning session, and the executive only considered other executives. When asked about who would provide tactical knowledge and operational expertise to support strategy development, the executive jumped logically to include employees from many parts of the organization during the planning-to-plan phase of the strategic planning process (Kusy & McBain, 2000) and during the strategic planning session (Bryson & Anderson, 2000).

Executives think rationally and logically in that they identify problems and opportunities that need solutions. But executives also use intuition that works on hunches, gut feelings, and less well-defined perspectives. For instance, an executive may say the following, “I have a hunch the training program for the call center is out of balance.” Helping an executive clarify such intuitive thinking can be accomplished through strategic conversations. Executives think they know what needs to be done in terms of an organization’s strategic planning or change management process. From an intuitive point of view, many are

correct because executives spend more time in intuitive thinking than most executives and consultants realize (Isenberg, 1984). A consultant needs to listen for both intuitive insights and rational thinking with an ear to the former because rational, logical thinking is an overused executive skill, and intuition that includes feelings and sensing about a situation is an underused one (Andersen, 2000). Skilled consultants guide executives through rational and intuitive thinking conversations so the best of both intuitive and rational thinking processes influence strategic planning.

The Eight Question Generation Process (Table 1) functions as a guide for a consultant. It uses a divergent approach (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998) where a consultant explores options and possibilities. It also uses a convergent approach (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998) to help begin to focus ideas and options that will move the strategic conversation to a few emerging simple ideas (Eisenhardt & Sull, 2001). In addition, a consultant helps expand the strategic conversation to consider important outcomes that will eventually generate a quality strategic plan. One reason to keep the outcome of any executive strategic conversation limited to a few simple strategies is that the executive team will generate a large list of proposed strategies and goals. In the end, a consultant will compile a list of proposed strategies that will become part of the strategic planning process.

A consultant can follow the Eight Question Generation Process as written, or the questions can be modified to meet the tone and direction of the strategic conversation. Using multiple approaches to respond to the needs of an executive offers flexibility and adaptability.

Response Analysis

In the Response Analysis phase the consultant clarifies the executive’s responses through reflection. The consultant actively

Table 1
EIGHT QUESTION GENERATION PROCESS

Type of Question	Purpose	Example
1. The precautionary question	To provoke	What other kinds of red flags are you worried about as you construct the mission of the organization?
2. The macro question	To broaden	What other variables might influence the strategic planning success?
3. The rationale question	To justify	Why do you think the vision needs to involve these key stakeholders?
4. The research question	To hypothesize	If you were to think of the process through the lens of an engineer, what do you think you would find out?
5. The options question	To select	What do you perceive as the most effective vehicles to use in the development of key drivers for the organization?
6. The ignition question	To stimulate	What other innovative decision-making tools might be successful during the phase of assessing the organization’s Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT analysis)?
7. The next-step question	To spur on	These are great ideas. Where do you want to go from here?
8. The expansion question	To clarify	How do you see expanding on the results from the executive retreat?

listens and suspends judgment (Isaacs, 1999) which invites the executive to talk more and go deeper into idea generation and clarification. Two elements are important to this listening. One is for the consultant to feed back to the executive what is being heard and to summarize understanding (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003). The second is for the consultant to identify collective shared meaning by hearing and abstracting out common themes and underlying threads in the stories being shared. This specialized listening enables the executive to feel truly heard and builds a stronger relationship with the consultant while at the same time increasing collective shared meaning to build a better understanding of the organization as a whole.

During the Response Analysis stage, a consultant actively listens (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999) and analyzes what is heard, objectively making connections between various parts of the conversation and other discussed topics in order to synthesize themes that will require further exploration (see *Table 2*). To do this, a consultant listens for:

- Images (Morgan, 1998)—“This is a well-run machine, and I oil it when needed.”
- Metaphors (Marshak, 1993; Morgan, 1998)—“Many times people will see a sea of troubles, but calm winds are over the horizon.”
- Stories (Allan, Fairtlough, & Heinzen, 2002)—“There was a time when this organization was young, and I remember when....”

These images, metaphors, and stories provide insights into the organization and about the executive. Out of the insights attained through a strategic conversation, a consultant creates a list of themes that can summarize important issues for the strategic planning process. Themes will usually be easily identified. An executive says what these themes are when talking about quality issues, cost control, centralizing the organization, employee retention, and the like.

Analyzing emerging themes helps identify trends, directions, and contradictions that need additional feedback to check for accuracy and implementation. Recognizing trends helps a consultant understand past decisions and actions, and can give a consultant and executive direction regarding where to move the organization through strategic planning. Contradictions often describe how the organization got off track. To distinguish contradictions, a consultant listens for espoused theory versus theory-in-use images, metaphors, and stories (Argyris, 1990). Espoused theories are a person’s beliefs and values about how to manage life and a work environment. Theories-in-use are revealed by the actions an executive takes or a path organizational members walk to achieve a goal. Strategic conversations can aid a consultant in identifying the gap between espoused theory and theories-in-use. The benefit to the organization is a tighter connection between belief and action so more clarity exists in strategic planning.

Responding to such contradictions requires some care on the part of a consultant when espoused theory versus theory-in-use comes into play. In a hierarchical organization, executives

Three-step Analysis Process	Examples of Analytical Feedback
1. Listen for Themes	Pat, here are some themes I’ve heard you mention: a clear picture of the bottom line, less expense in your department, and creating a highly motivated staff. Are these the primary ones you want me to present to the Planning-to-Plan committee?
2. Listen for Contradictions	Mike, I want to share with you a few things I’m sensing might be interpreted by your staff as a mixed message. You mentioned the staffing issue in the call center as an escalating expense. Also, you said you can hire as many part-time employees as you need. Do these sound like mixed messages to the staff? How would you like to prioritize these two issues?
3. Provide Follow-up Questions	Joan, you agree with a themed list, and you have prioritized some issues that could lead to possible staff confusion. How do you see the Planning-to-Plan group addressing some of the external environment issues like how XYZ competitor is offering online customer service for ordering? What do you think is going on that needs to be looked at?

make comments like, “I run a tight ship, and I have a handle on what goes on around here. And, employees look to me for leadership. I also want employees to be open to talking to me about anything that’s on their mind. I want them to bring me all their ideas.” This executive has a strong influence on the organization, wants to control the organization, but also wants to be approachable. In this situation, the theory-in-use, that of being solidly in control, dominates any desire for the espoused theory which is approachability and employee-generated ideas. In follow-up questions, a consultant cannot blurt out, “I just heard you make a contradiction.” Instead, a consultant mentally notes a contradiction and then addresses it at an appropriate time when it can be heard by the executive. The consultant might say, “Pat, I’ve heard you say a few times that you run a tight ship and that you want your employees to approach you with ideas. Sometimes these two comments seem to rub against one another because employees might believe that control is more important to you than openness. How would you address these two impressions, if asked?” Another good response might be,

“Pat, initially you asked me to mention things I see and hear that may affect our work, and I want to bring to your attention a discrepancy in something I’ve heard you say…” If a consultant jumps the gun and makes a point about a contradiction too early, the executive might challenge the consultant on that point, or the consultant may find the contract terminated. A consultant needs to address contradictions since they will affect the consulting work at some point, but he/she must try to address them when the timing is right. When to say something is probably a gut feeling and a sixth-sense move. There is not a perfect answer other than to be in touch with the client, and build a trusting relationship.

Feedback to Client

The Feedback to Client stage best takes place through dialogue between the consultant and executive (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Isaacs, 1999). Consultants interact with executives in two primary roles: expert and facilitator (Hale, 1998). Blending and separating both roles as a situation dictates will enhance how an executive sends information to the consultant and how a consultant receives feedback. As an expert, a consultant brings specific knowledge, skills, and tested experiences that allow him or her to provide timely opinions and direction, thereby broadening strategic thinking, solving problems, or filling performance gaps. As a facilitator, a consultant functions in a questioning mode that encourages a creative thinking process where a consultant and an executive tap into the executive’s individual and operational ideas. In the facilitator role, the consultant remains neutral and tries to elicit useful ideas from the executive.

Supporting the expert and facilitator approaches are three additional roles that a consultant can assume when engaging

executives in strategic conversations: critic, doer, and spectator (Hale, 1998). In the critic role, a consultant points out ideas and thinking that are problematic and need immediate attention. As a doer, a consultant suggests or challenges actions in order to help fix a situation or fill in a gap with an ongoing problem. As a spectator, a consultant reflects his/her observations of the past conversations and meetings to stimulate the executive to ponder an idea or rethink a direction or consider the broader affect of a decision on an organization. *Table 3* outlines these roles.

A consultant frequently shifts between expert and facilitator as a conversation moves across organizational issues and problems. Experienced consultants know when to function as an expert and when to function as a facilitator. In general, a strategic conversation will be enhanced by the ability of the consultant to ask questions, reflect, provide feedback, and think together with the executive. When a situation surfaces and the timing is right due to the content and spirit of the conversation, functioning as an expert can help clarify an important issue as well as increase the value of the strategic conversation because the consultant can help identify tough issues and provide reflective, experience-based direction. For one CEO who was considering a

change in executive reporting responsibilities, simply segregating profit center departments from expense centered departments created a new structure with simple reporting rules.

On the other hand, problems may arise if the consultant functions only as an expert. When the consultant always behaves as the expert, the executive—the real organization expert—is not allowed to shine and take responsibility for the planning process. In the end, a consultant needs to stay focused on the executive by facilitating a conversation to broaden think-

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**TABLE 3
PRESENTATION OF FEEDBACK TO THE CLIENT**

Roles Expert	Expert Feedback	Facilitator Feedback
Critic	“Your notion of vision is not aligned with the thinking of successful leaders. Here’s why.”	“You’re thinking of vision from a micro perspective. How might you think of it in a more macro sense?”
Doer	“I think you need to consider drafting a personal mission statement before determining how to strategize an organizational mission.”	Some leaders have found that the drafting of a personal mission statement is a great way to begin. What value might you see in this process?
Spectator	“At the last executive meeting, I observed the team coming down pretty hard on any kind of an involved approach in strategic planning. Involvement is a key to successful strategic planning. What do you think?”	“At the last executive meeting, there was some controversy about involvement. At the next meeting, what do you think should be done?”

ing and to focus an executive's thinking by offering timely and helpful expert insights.

CONCLUSION

Strategic conversations will assist a consultant in the strategic planning process. Working with an executive to clarify and understand the big picture is the role of any consultant. This important work is not to be left to the whim and caprice of fads or perceived trends that can rock the organization's foundation, but is the methodical work of how organization development assists the vision of an executive and guides implementation of a strategic plan. The Strategic Thinking Conversation Model provides a starting point when entering a strategic planning environment. Using this model to understand the executive's rational and intuitive thinking processes, a consultant can guide the organization through a successful strategic planning process. ■

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