



by Ryan Cornell-d'Echert

Leaders should not wait until they are serving at the strategic level before they start thinking strategically. Even at the tactical or organizational levels, it's critical for leaders to practice strategic thinking, widen their aperture, and take an enterprise-wide perspective. While thinking "down and in" helps us leaders run the organization from day to day, thinking "up and out" prepares us for the future. A strategic perspective helps us anticipate events. Being able to anticipate means preventing surprise, which reduces frustration.

Sometimes I call it "discovery learning."

Pretend it's time for an annual evaluation report. Your rater and/or senior rater have never given you feedback on how well you are (or are not) meeting their intent and supporting

their priorities. You receive your report card and, pleasantly or unpleasantly, are surprised by the evaluation you receive.

As my co-facilitator at the Army Management Staff College says: *surprises are for birthdays*.

According to Chapter 5 of FM 6-22, strategic thinking is important even for junior leaders so they can better address recurring problems and create lasting solutions. A key activity of strategic thinking is [systems thinking](#). Systems thinking helps us conceptualize processes, feedback loops, relationships, and the interrelated parts of a larger whole. If we aren't using systems thinking, we may be suffering from shortsightedness.

There are countless examples of shortsightedness that create surprises and frustration. Let's say I supervise a Soldier who is retiring in eight months. Let's say I think he or she deserves a Legion of Merit as their retirement award after 30 years of honorable service (I am not saying he is automatically entitled to that award, but let's say I think he deserves it). If that's the case, I need to be writing his award *now*. I had every reason to know this was coming; he has probably been saying for months that he is retiring or that he is "dropping his packet." But, in too many cases, we are "surprised" when we are asked where a departing Soldier's award is, and we throw something together accompanied by a letter of lateness.

Perhaps some of your tactical vehicles have gone months without sufficient exercise or a proper PMCS (Preventive Maintenance Checks and Services). The first time you conduct a full rollout to the field, a quarter of your vehicles cannot drive out of the motor pool, and several more break down enroute to the field. This is a significant emotional event, and in too many cases, we are "surprised" our fleet is not in better shape.

Maybe you are conducting your daily business when the office is suddenly overcome with panic. Everyone must drop whatever they are doing and submit slides for the Command and Staff, USR, or some other routine event. Seldom do cooler heads say, "It's almost like our

input is due at the same time every month.” Instead, in too many cases, we are “surprised” whenever we owe input for routine battle rhythm events.

Surprises are for birthdays.

Why are we surprised by events we should have seen coming? This problem is not unique to the military. In Chapter 6 of the [book](#) *The Laws of Human Nature*, author Robert Greene proposes four signs of shortsightedness. I will list the four signs and add my own interpretation to each.

1. **Unintended Consequences.** As humans, we have a habit of reacting instead of thinking. Leaders should take care to ensure they are addressing the root cause of a systemic problem, and not just a symptom. What has happened in the environment that led to this problem? What has changed in the environment? Who else is affected by this problem? Will they see things the same way?
2. **Tactical Hell.** You spend so much time “putting out fires” or getting stuck in the daily “knife fight” that you lose sense of your long-term goals (or your organization’s goals, or your boss’ goals). While it is common to be understaffed and told to “do more with less,” how well are we managing the talent that surrounds us? Are we letting our subject matter experts *be* subject matter experts? Are we delegating so little that our subordinates go home *hours* before we do? What are we doing to unburden the boss and create “decision space” for him or her?
3. **Ticker Tape Fever.** In my experience, junior leaders tend to sensationalize things when describing some event that took place. We should acknowledge the first report is usually wrong. Instead of being swayed by daily reports, we must look deeper: at trends, relationships, and historical tendencies. Leadership deals extensively with ambiguity and we can seldom wait for perfect information, but we should avoid making knee-jerk decisions without context. This can lead to unintended consequences (see

sign #1).

4. **Lost in Trivia.** You are drowning in information because you demand to be on the cc line for every email inside and outside your organization, and you get deep into the details of everything your subordinates do. You want to control everyone and everything, which stifles initiative and creativity, and erodes trust. This also means you do not have a clear sense of priorities, which clouds your perspective, frustrates your subordinates, and hinders your ability to anticipate and plan strategically.

[According to Robert Greene](#), leaders should: *Learn to measure people by the narrowness or breadth of their vision; avoid entangling yourself with those who cannot see the consequences of their actions, who are in a continual reactive mode... Your eyes must be on the larger trends that govern events, on that which is not immediately visible. Never lose sight of your long-term goals. With an elevated perspective, you will have the patience and clarity to reach almost any objective* (page 150).

Am I saying we should never be surprised by *anything*? Of course not. Certain events are truly unknown and unknowable, though some may seem obvious in hindsight. But if we can put systems in place to do routine things routinely and [manage our organization's finite capacity](#), we can stop playing "firefighter" with daily events because they are better managed. In the words of a former boss of mine, "Structure your knowns to create space for your unknowns." Understanding the connections, conditions, trends, and tendencies in our environment — or using systems thinking — enables strategic thinking.

To practice strategic thinking, I propose starting by [taking a self-assessment](#) based on the comparisons depicted below. As we gain self-awareness of any potential gap or "hole in our swing," we can make a conscious effort to become more flexible or more willing to take risks (It's not a lesson learned until it creates a change in behavior). Organizational leaders should support their subordinates as they build their capacity to think strategically. An organization with more strategic thinkers is unlikely to suffer from Robert Greene's signs of

shortsightedness.

**Strategic thinkers are . . .**

**Conventional thinkers are . . .**

**Future-based:** They anticipate change and look for opportunities that may arise.

**Reactive:** They rarely initiate ideas and wait to be told what to do or what actions to take.

**Curious:** They are interested in what is going on throughout their department, organization, industry, and the larger business environment.

**Isolated:** They typically work without input from others or without understanding others' goals and objectives.

**Long-term focus:** They are willing to invest today to gain a better outcome tomorrow.

**Short-term focus:** They often do not consider the potential impact of an action on long-term goals.

**Willing to Take Risks:** They aren't limited to past or current thinking and are willing to try new methods.

**Cautious:** They fear changing or challenging the status quo.

**Able to prioritize:** They do not equate being busy with being effective. They place a high value on projects with the potential for great impact and return.

**Unable to prioritize:** They often treat all tasks equally without regard to impact.

**Nimble:** They are able to adjust and modify their approaches.

**Inflexible:** They may be unwilling to alter their plans even when adjustments could yield a better return.

**Life-Long Learner:** They proactively seek knowledge and skills and are willing to teach others.

**Satisfied:** They normally are not interested in learning new things or methods, and are content with their current capabilities.

**Creative:** They consider unorthodox ideas.

**Predictable:** They often stick with familiar paths.

Leaders can certainly develop strategic thinking skills through professional military education, but we can also develop these skills in the operational domain. We can challenge our subordinates with “stretch” assignments and unfamiliar (perhaps daunting) tasks that take them out of their comfort zone and force them to practice critical and creative thinking. We can apply Army Design Methodology to an organization’s most ill-structured problems, using systems thinking to understand, visualize, and describe what events have happened and what events could happen.

If leaders can think strategically and anticipate to prevent surprises, they can solve problems before they become problems. It is debatable whether people are an inherent part of “systems,” or whether “systems” require people to make them function. Either way, leaders must develop and implement systems to do routine things routinely and anticipate their boss’, their organization’s, and their Soldier’s needs. The more we can anticipate, the less we will be surprised.

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