GCG

Global Coach Group
Lead for Good

The Missing Link in Strategic Thinking



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Introduction

Some leaders can see what's coming long before others. They understand the shifts in customer behavior, emerging technology, and global dynamics. They discuss trends such as AI, digitization, and transformation with clarity and confidence.

But ask their teams where the company is headed, or how today's decisions connect to that vision, and you're likely to hear confusion, contradiction, or silence.

That's the strategic thinking gap.
It's not that leaders lack strategic insight.
The issue is that their insight doesn't get activated.
It isn't shared, aligned, or executed with their teams.

At Global Coach Group, we've analyzed data from over 120,000 leaders worldwide.
What we consistently find is this:

Leaders are strong at seeing the future.
They score well above average in identifying trends and long-term opportunities.

But they struggle to activate that vision.
Effectiveness drops sharply when it comes to communicating strategy, aligning coworkers, and embedding strategic priorities into daily work.

This isn't a knowledge problem. It's an activation problem.

Many leaders are surprised when they receive feedback that they "aren't leading strategically." It doesn't align with how they see themselves. But the disconnect is real. Coworkers often experience a lack of shared clarity, inconsistent prioritization, or a vision that fails to translate into team behavior.

Why? Because strategy only matters if it moves people.

It's one thing to anticipate change. It's another to turn that anticipation into aligned, purposeful action. **What separates great leaders is their ability to communicate that vision, align others around it, and operationalize it into daily decisions.**

That's what this guide will help you do. We'll explore:

- Why strategic thinking often breaks down between insight and action
- What the data reveals about blind spots in leadership behavior
- How to turn vision into alignment, and alignment into movement
- A real-life example of strategy in action through a brilliant world-renowned leader
- Clear, coachable approaches to embed strategic thinking across your team

Strategic thinking isn't about having the right answer.

It's about creating the conditions for your team and other stakeholders to move toward the right future with clarity, coherence, and momentum.

What Strategic Thinking Is (and Isn't)

Ask leaders what it means to be "strategic," and the answers often start big: long-term planning, thinking five steps ahead, anticipating trends. And they're not wrong. But in the reality of leadership, strategic thinking isn't about brilliance. It's about behavior.

At its core, strategic thinking is the ability to connect insight to aligned action. It's not just about envisioning a successful future direction. It's about helping others see it, believe in it, and move toward it together.

Strategic thinking includes:

- Interpreting complex patterns and emerging trends
- Crafting a clear, shared vision that inspires direction
- Making decisions that link today's actions to tomorrow's priorities
- Creating routines, systems, and behaviors that keep strategy alive

It's not a personality trait or a title. It's a leadership discipline that can be built, coached, and practiced.

What it's not:

- It's not a solo exercise. Strategy only works when others are involved.
- It's not abstract. It shows up in daily decisions, conversations, and priorities.
- It's not once every 1-3 years. Strategic thinking is a weekly habit, not a planning cycle.
- It's not just about the vision. It's about execution that others can see and follow.

In our global coaching practice, the leaders who build strategic thinking most effectively aren't just insightful, they activate insight through others. They don't stop at articulating the vision. They make it real by involving coworkers, embedding strategy into meetings and decisions, and reinforcing it through consistent team behavior.

Strategic thinking isn't about having the sharpest answer in the room. **It's about building a room that sees more clearly, aligns more consistently, and moves in a shared direction, together.**



Where Leaders Excel (Visioning the Future)

If there's one thing leaders tend to do well, it's spotting what's next.

Across GCG's Global Leadership Assessments (GLA360), leaders consistently score above average in future-focused capabilities. They're curious, observant, and committed to long-range thinking. Many are already skilled at recognizing macro trends, anticipating shifts, and connecting systems-level patterns.

And that shows up clearly in how leaders score:

- **Invest in learning about future trends** – 61%
- **Effectively anticipate future opportunities** – 58%
- **View business processes from the ultimate customer perspective** – 52%

These are meaningful strengths. In a fast-moving landscape, strategic awareness is essential and many leaders have already built this muscle well.

But here's where the challenge begins. Because while leaders often see the horizon clearly, they struggle to bring their teams along.

> The insight is there.
> *What's missing is translation.*
> *Teams don't always feel a sense of clarity. Coworkers can't always connect the dots. That's when vision starts to fade and strategy begins to fail.*

Where Leaders Struggle (Creating Alignment and Operationalizing Strategy)

Leaders may be strong at seeing what's ahead, but many struggle to bring others along. The real breakdown in strategic thinking isn't about foresight. It's about follow-through.

GCG's GLA360 data shows the drop clearly. Once leaders move from vision into the human work of communication, alignment, and execution, effectiveness declines.

Let's look at where it breaks down, in two parts.

1. Creating and Communicating a Shared Vision

This is often the first slip. Leaders may have a strong internal vision, but it barely makes it out of their heads or beyond a slide deck. Teams are left with vague direction, competing priorities, or messages that feel inconsistent.

More information on the next page.

Where Leaders Struggle (Creating Alignment and Operationalizing Strategy)

We see this in the scores leaders receive:

- **Create and communicate a clear vision** – 43%
- **Develop an effective strategy to achieve the vision** – 44%
- **Inspire people to commit to the vision** – 49%
- **Clearly identify priorities** – 52%

What is the story behind those numbers? Teams feel disconnected. Coworkers are unsure where to focus. Leaders believe the vision is clear, but the message isn't landing.

And if the clarity isn't shared, it doesn't matter.

2. Operationalizing the Strategy

Even when vision is shared, many leaders struggle to turn it into real, aligned execution. The strategy gets lost in day-to-day noise. Urgent tasks, shifting demands, and reactive decisions bury long-term focus.

Execution scores show the biggest drop:

- **Develop ideas to meet the needs of the new environment** – 42%
- **Inspire focus on future opportunities** – 46%
- **Demonstrate adaptability in a global environment** – 48%
- **Encourage people to challenge the status quo** – 48%

Even leaders who care deeply about long-term outcomes often lack the tools, habits, and structures to bring that intent into their team's daily work.

The result is a disconnect. Strategy remains a concept instead of a capability. Teams stay busy, but not always aligned.

The Bottom Line

Leaders aren't falling short because they can't see what's coming. They're falling short because their teams don't understand where they're supposed to go.

That's where strategic thinking must evolve, from individual insight to shared direction, from isolated planning to connected execution.

Up next, we'll explore why even experienced leaders fall into this trap, and how to coach your way through it.



The Strategic Thinking Trap: Why Leaders Get It Wrong

Few pieces of feedback confuse leaders more than being told they "lack strategic thinking ." It clashes with how they see themselves. They read about trends, attend strategy sessions, and make bold decisions. So why does their team and manager see something different?

Because in strategic leadership, intent isn't the same as impact.

That's the trap. Leaders believe they're being strategic because the direction feels clear to them. But their teams experience mixed messages, scattered priorities, or a strategy that changes often.

What leaders think:

- "We already defined the strategy."
- "I shared the vision at the offsite."
- "The direction is clear. It's just about execution."

What coworkers feel:

- "I don't know how this connects to our bigger goals."
- "We keep shifting priorities."
- "There's no real focus."

The GLA360 data highlights this gap. Leaders rate themselves highly in terms of future thinking, but their scores drop in areas such as inspiring commitment, aligning priorities, and translating strategy into everyday decisions.

This isn't just a communication issue. It's a **perception gap,** and it plays out in subtle but powerful ways:

- Leaders talk about long-term goals, but teams are buried in short-term tasks.
- Strategy is presented, but not reinforced.
- Vision is discussed, but not consistently translated into priorities, decisions, or behaviors.

And the most common trap of all: leaders get pulled back into tactical problem-solving. They stop leading the strategy and start managing around it.
The good news is that this gap is visible, measurable, and coachable.

> *Strategic thinking isn't about thinking harder. It's about thinking more clearly, sharing that thinking openly, and making it actionable for others.*



What Great Strategic Thinkers Do Differently

Great strategic thinkers don't just see the future. They bring others into it. They don't overwhelm their teams with complexity. They create focus. And they don't leave strategy on a slide. They bring it into people's lives — into how they think, decide, and act.

Across thousands of coaching engagements, three shifts consistently separate strong strategic leaders from those who stall after the vision phase.

1. They Translate Insight into Narrative

Insight alone doesn't move people. Leaders who think strategically know how to create a shared story that makes direction clear and meaningful. They distill complexity into simple messages, repeat key themes, and help teams see their place in the bigger picture.

What it looks like:

- Leading with "why now" before explaining "what next"
- Boiling the strategy down to 3–5 core themes
- Repeating the message until it becomes part of the culture

> *Coaching Insight: If your team can't describe the strategy accurately in their own words, they're not aligned yet.*

2. They Create Strategic Habits, Not Just Strategic Plans

A plan in a binder doesn't drive change. Practice does. Great leaders embed strategic focus into daily routines. They talk about priorities in meetings, connect decisions to strategic objectives, and build systems that reinforce what matters most.

What it looks like:

- Starting meetings with a quick reminder of strategic priorities
- Making tradeoffs based on long-term goals
- Using OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) or scorecards to keep the team focused

> *Coaching Insight: Strategy sticks when it becomes part of how people work, not just what they hear once a quarter.*

3. They Align Before They Execute

Strong strategic leaders don't assume buy-in. They build it. They involve others early, ask for feedback, and look for blind spots before launching into action.

What it looks like:

- Running cocreation sessions to clarify direction
- Asking, "Where could this break down in practice?"
- Creating real-time feedback loops to adapt as needed

> *Coaching Insight: Execution without alignment creates motion, not momentum.*



Strategic Thinking Is a Skill Built Through Practice and Feedforward

Strategic clarity isn't just about what a leader sees. It's about what their team embraces and experiences.

Many leaders assume they've communicated the strategy well. But unless coworkers understand it, believe in it, and know how to act on it, the gap remains.

That's why strategic thinking can't stay in the leader's head or in a slide deck. It has to become a shared mind-set and a visible behavior. And the good news is, this isn't about being naturally "strategic." It's about being intentional.

Strategic thinking is a skill. It can be built, strengthened, and coached.

At GCG, we help leaders close the gap between vision and execution by building focused, repeatable behaviors that bring strategy to life. This includes asking for feedforward, reinforcing key themes, making visible decisions, and aligning priorities. These behaviors build trust, momentum, and clarity across teams.

One of the fastest ways to improve strategic alignment is to use **feedforward.** This means asking coworkers forward-looking questions that generate practical suggestions instead of backward-looking critiques.
For example:

- "What part of our strategy still feels vague or misaligned?"
- "What would help you or your team act more confidently on this?"
- "Where could we make our direction more actionable?"

This kind of input uncovers blind spots and builds ownership. When leaders act on it, the impact is tangible. Coworkers feel more connected to the strategy and more confident in their role in making it happen.

Strategic thinking doesn't happen all at once. It is built step by step through daily practice, open dialogue, and a clear commitment to leading forward together.



Legendary Leader in Action

Satya Nadella and Microsoft's Quiet Strategic Reinvention

When Satya Nadella became CEO of Microsoft in 2014, he inherited a company with global scale but diminishing relevance. Internally, teams were siloed and competitive. Externally, Microsoft was losing ground to faster, more innovative rivals. The cloud revolution was underway, and Microsoft was behind.

Nadella saw the opportunity. But his impact came not just from having the right vision. It came from how he activated it — through story, alignment, and daily execution.

Vision with Simplicity and Purpose

Nadella didn't begin with a flashy transformation plan. He introduced a human-centered strategy:

"Empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more."

That wasn't just a slogan. It reframed Microsoft's identity. It opened space for employees to think bigger and gave customers a more inspiring reason to engage.

He then placed big bets on cloud computing, cross-platform tools, and open systems — all of which positioned Microsoft for the future of tech.

Aligning Culture with Strategy

Nadella understood that culture drives execution. So before changing products, he changed how people worked together.

He flattened hierarchies to reduce silos. He promoted learning over knowing. He wrote openly about failure and progress. He made curiosity and vulnerability strategic.

This wasn't "soft stuff." It was deliberate alignment work. Because strategy doesn't live in decks — it lives in behavior.



Operationalizing the Vision

Under Nadella, strategy became routine. Teams aligned around shared goals like cloud-first development and AI readiness. Strategy was evident in hiring, roadmaps, and how meetings were conducted.

Leaders were held accountable not just for KPIs, but for how their actions advanced Microsoft's long-term goals. Nadella made bold moves, like acquiring LinkedIn and GitHub, that reinforced the company's shift in direction.

The Outcome

Within a decade, Microsoft's market value more than tripled. Azure became a major cloud competitor. Internal collaboration surged. External trust was rebuilt.

But Nadella's real legacy? He redefined leadership. He showed that strategic thinking is not about being the smartest person in the room. It's about making strategy simple, shared, and sustainable.

He didn't win because he had the biggest vision. He won because he made the vision visible and actionable. He turned strategic thinking into strategic behavior — and made it everyone's job.

Conclusion: *Seeing the Future Isn't Enough. You Have to Activate It.*

Strategic thinking isn't about having the answer. It's about creating the conditions for progress. The most effective leaders don't just see what's coming. They help others move toward it with clarity and confidence.

They translate complexity into direction. They invite others into the process. They build habits that make strategy visible and real. And they stay focused on impact, not just intention.

This kind of leadership doesn't happen by accident. It happens through awareness, practice, and support.

Whether you're leading a team or coaching one, strategic thinking is not a fixed trait. It's a skill that can be developed, refined, and sustained. It grows through conversation. It deepens through feedback. And it strengthens when it's practiced together.

At Global Coach Group, we believe that leadership development should lead to measurable change. That's why we work with both coaches and leaders to build the capabilities that matter most, like turning vision into action, aligning teams, and creating momentum that lasts.

If you're ready to lead more strategically, or coach others to do the same, you don't have to figure it out alone. With the right support, the right tools, and a commitment to learning together, strategic thinking becomes more than a mindset.

It becomes a movement.



For Clients



We Deliver a Triple Win

Better Leaders, Better Teams, and Better Results — boasting a 95% success rate confirmed by coworkers, based on more than 100,000+ leaders coached.

Global Coach Group delivers the best results-based coaching worldwide through our network of over 4,000 world-class certified coaches, powered by our proven Triple Win Leadership Coaching approach and proprietary digital tools.

Triple Win Leadership Coaching, captured in Everybody Wins by Will Linssen — Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author.

Author



Will Linssen

Will Linssen has been ranked World's #1 Leadership Coach by Global Gurus (USA) and World's #1 Coach Trainer by Thinkers50 (UK), serves as advisor to the Harvard Business Review, and is recognized as a LinkedIn Top Executive Coaching Voice. He is an Amazon #1 International Bestselling Author. With more than 30 years of experience in executive leadership across Europe, North America, and Asia, Will holds the International Coaching Federation's highest accreditation: Master Certified Coach.

He is the founder and CEO of Global Coach Group, the world's #1 international leadership coaching network, with over 4,000 coaches worldwide serving Fortune 500 companies and leading multinational corporations.