How Did You Learn to Become an Expert in Strategic Thinking?

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Abstract: Within the changing world of business, individuals are compelled to demonstrate their ability to think strategically. Nevertheless, many are ill prepared and lack the skills to do so. Studies revealed that adults learn in different modes and means to develop necessary competencies. Despite, the fact that much research revealed adults learned from various learning methods and experiences, most of these studies were quantitative in nature. Very few studies focused on how specific skills are developed from the respondent's own words. The general aim of this study was to examine the most significant learning experiences which contributed to the proficiency of strategic thinking amongst a group of senior managers. This qualitative, exploratory study addressed the means as to how adults learned to develop their expertise in strategic thinking. Semi-structured interviews were conducted amongst a group of 25 managers in Malaysia. Data collected were transcribed immediately after each interview. Coding, analysing and writing were undertaken concurrently to identify major categories and themes. Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. These led to the sorting of data into three general themes: formal and informal learning, individual factors and work factors. These themes provided crucial insights into the significance of salient factors in influencing the development of strategic thinking ability based on the participant's perceptions.

Key words: Qualitative, strategic thinking, adult learning, grounded theory, perceptions

INTRODUCTION

How can educators teach students if they do not know how best the students learn? How, can organisations improve the performance of employees if they do not know how employees learn or how to enhance their learning?. These are just some of the issues raised by researchers who for the last 40-50 years have been studying ways adults learn best.

The business world is facing greater challenges and demands. Change is a dynamic force that is part of business and managerial life. Constant changes that are taking place, including globalisation of product, volatile financial markets, fierce competition, advances in technology, unstable economic and political environment, as well as the organisation's internal environment are some of the changes that present challenges and opportunities for current and future managers. It is the combination of these changes that is linked to the high levels of business uncertainties.

Organizations need pro-active managers who will be able to foresee and plan beyond the current business scenario. China, for instance has employed a more proactive approach embedding strategic thinking after being criticized by developing economies on its incapability to adapt to the fast changing world. Kwandayi accentuated that some of the problems faced by Zimbabwe were due to the lack of strategic thinking and attributed the success of some countries were due to their strategic thinkers who were able to think and deliberate, looking holistically to find appropriate measures to solve critical issues. The need for strategic thinking was highlighted by Porter (1987) some 28 years ago when he stated that the need for strategic thinking would be greater in this time of rapid changes. Managers must have the ability to think strategically to predict the environment accurately in order to gain competitive advantage.

Managers have been recognized as a dynamic and crucial source in organizations. They are ultimately responsible for making decisions relating to business plans, structures, systems and also strategies. They are also responsible for making sure what have been decided upon are implemented and executed. In order to cope with this increasing complexity and uncertainty, continuous development of managerial skills is crucial for current and future managers to ensure that they possess the competencies required to manage changes in the workplace.

Research question: What were the learning experiences that contributed to the development of strategic thinking? How do respondents learn to acquire and develop the ability to think strategically?

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Research objective: The general aim of this study was to examine significant learning experiences which contributed to the development of strategic thinking ability. The study explored what learning interventions enhanced the ability to think strategically.

Literature review: How does one become a strategic thinker? What are the significant learning experiences which could help one to be a strategic thinker? What is the most effective way to develop strategic thinking capability? These are some of the questions which this study was focusing on.

Recognising the importance of strategic thinking in today's environment, Barnakova *et al.* (2014) concurred with Porter (1987), Mintzberg (1994) and Liedtka (1998a, b)'s inference that there was a need to create a capability for strategic thinking at all levels in organisations. Goldman agreed with Bonn's statement that everyone in the organisation should think strategically when performing their roles and responsibilities.

Within the changing world of business, individuals are compelled to demonstrate their ability to think strategically (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Garratt, 1995. Nevertheless, many are ill prepared and lack the skills to perform this task (Garratt, 1995). Many new executives and even those long within the executive ranks are unsure how to engage properly in strategic thinking (Bonn, 2001, 2005; Garratt, 1995).

Kwandayi proposed that like other countries, Zimbabwe is also in a great need of more strategic thinkers. Nevertheless, similar to Bonn (2005), Kwandayi found that one major shortcoming was the lack of strategic thinking among managers and leaders. This finding was supported by Garratt (1995) who disclosed that many senior managers in United Kingdom, Europe, East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and the United States lacked strategic thinking skills. Strategic thinking skill was also found to have been one of the critical skills employers looked for in graduates in order to succeed in an environment of uncertainty, ambiguity and change.

Research has helped to clarify the essence of strategic thinking but few actually looked at how individuals develop competency in strategic thinking. Porter (1987), Mintzberg (1994), Garratt (1995), Liedtka and Rosenblum (1996) and Liedtka (1998a) have long been proposing that further research should investigate what constitutes strategic thinking and what conditions would facilitate the development of strategic thinking.

On a similar note Bonn (2001, 2005) and Garratt (1995) have all argued that there is a need for more empirical research in this area so that managers may respond more effectively in uncertain and unpredictable times. Goldman accentuates "the ability to think strategically is an admired and sought-after leadership requirement, yet we know little about how it develops".

Strategic thinking: What is strategic thinking? Is it different from strategic planning or strategic management? Can strategic thinking be developed? Current literature suggests that strategic planning and strategic thinking supplement each other. Strategic thinking and strategic planning are both necessary, in the process of developing effective strategies.

There seems to be a lack of understanding of what strategic thinking really means. This is apparent as highlighted by Goldman who concurred with Mintzberg (1994) and Bonn (2001) and noted many practitioners referring to the term related to strategic planning, strategic management and strategic thinking as synonymous. Wilson (1994) for instance, applied the concept interchangeably with strategic management or strategic planning. He argued that strategic thinking was "merely thinking aboutstrategy". Wilson (1994) argued that there was a need for strategic thinking within organisations. Changes and continuous improvement called for another look at the character of strategic planning and a need to differentiate it from strategic thinking and strategic management.

Some writers had distinguished among the different strategic terminologies, for example, strategic management, strategic planning and strategic thinking (Mintzberg, 1994; Mintzberg, 1987a, b; Graetz, 2002; Bonn, 2005). Mintzberg (1994) argued that strategic planning involved analysing and dealing with establishing and formalising organisational systems and procedures while strategic thinking involved synthesising "innovative and creative thinking at all levels of the organisation". Mintzberg stressed that strategic thinking was a "particular way of thinking with specific and clearly discernible characteristics". He suggested integrating strategic thinking with strategic planning so that organizations could gain competitive advantage. Prahalad and Hamel supported Mintzberg's views on strategic thinking. They referred to strategic planning as the process of filling up forms while strategic thinking was translated as skilled strategic design with an emphasis on Mintzberg's general themes of creativity, exploration and understanding discontinuities.

Strategic planning is closely related to the overall direction of the organisation, thus requiring thinking which is critical, forward and long-term. Strategic management is the blueprint for the organisation to map

the way to managing the organisation. Managers need to understand how their organisation works as a subsystem within a larger system. It is not adequate for an organisation to develop a strategic plan or a vision without a team of people to think, plan, act, rethink and re-plan to ensure the success of the strategic plan or vision. Strategic thinking involves disciplined thinking which is focused on the whole business as a system. Strategic thinking is the foundation of strategic planning and strategic management. Thus, organizations must play a more active role in developing strategic thinkers should they want to survive and succeed in the uncertain times ahead.

Developing and managing strategic talents and thinkers should be a main concern for organisations today. For strategic thinking to occur, organizational structures, cultures, systems and processes should be conducive to promote strategic thinking among employees (Porter, 1987; Bonn, 2001; Kabacoff, 2014). Liedtka (1998b) stated that individuals can learn to enhance their thinking abilities. Nevertheless, to become a strategic thinker takes time and skill to master. Appropriate training techniques, for example simulation and apprenticeship can develop and enhance a capability in strategic thinking (Graetz, 2002).

Bonn (2001) proposed that management set up 'strategic forums' or dialogues to utilize the ingenuity and creativity of employees. These forums should: include managers with good track records in their respective areas, meet regularly, focus on strategic areas deem to be important for the organisation's survival and longevity and focus on the long-term wellbeing of the organisation. Wenger and Snyder suggested that larger organisations have set up 'communities of practice' deliberately to develop strategic thinking capability. Communities of practice are seen as a means of sharing knowledge, skills and know-how among employees. Generally, communities of practice developed informally among employees from different areas and departments and shared common interests and reasons. Communities of practice could be a platform for organisations to encourage employees to think strategically for the benefit of all.

Strategic management is the blueprint for the organisation to map the way to managing the organisation. Managers need to understand how their organisation works as a subsystem within a larger system. It is not adequate for an organisation to develop a strategic plan or a vision without a team of people to think, plan, act, rethink and re-plan to ensure the success of the strategic plan or vision. Strategic thinking involves disciplined thinking which is focused on the whole business as a system. Strategic thinking is the foundation

of strategic planning and strategic management. Thus, organizations must play a more active role in developing strategic thinkers should they want to survive and succeed in the uncertain times ahead.

Bonn (2001) proposed that Human Resource Development (HRD) could be a means to enhance strategic thinking ability in individuals. The purpose of HRD is to develop human capital on an ongoing and continuous manner by means of training and education. Argyris suggested that HRD interventions could be incorporated in the strategic planning process, thus acting as a learning experience or curve for those involved.

Developing and managing strategic talents and thinkers should be a main concern for organisations today. For strategic thinking to occur, organizational structures, cultures, systems and processes should be conducive to promote strategic thinking among employees (Porter, 1987; Bonn, 2001). Human resource management policies and practices can be a tool to encourage and enhance strategic thinking. Recruitment and selection processes can be designed to include criteria and features that will enable organisations to recruit and select candidates who possess the ability or have the potential to think strategically in the workplace. Organisations should include strategic thinking ability as a criterion for succession planning. Employees who have the ambition to climb up the management ladder should exhibit their capabilities to think strategically to be considered for a promotion.

Liedtka (1998a, b) stated that individuals can learn to enhance their thinking abilities. Nevertheless, to become a strategic thinker takes time and skill to master. Appropriate training techniques, for example simulation and apprenticeship, can develop and enhance a capability in strategic thinking (Graetz, 2002). However, proper recruitment, selection and training alone may not be able to improve strategic thinking skills. Organisations should put in place appropriate reward and incentive programs to help stimulate employees to think strategically. Rewards and incentives can serve as motivators to push employees to think. Communication structure should also be redesigned to encourage strategic thinking within the organisation. Bonn (2001) proposed that management set up 'strategic forum's or dialogues to utilize the ingenuity and creativity of employees. These forums should: include managers with good track records in their respective areas, meet regularly, focus on strategic areas deem to be important for the organisation's survival and longevity and focus on the long-term wellbeing of the organisation. Wenger and Snyder suggested that larger organisations have set up 'communities of practice'

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Adult learning: Adults learn at a different speed and ways. One underlying principle in adult learning and adult development is that adults learn from various interactions of experiences which include life, social and work experiences. Boud and Walker found that social and cultural environment, blended with awareness and efforts contributed to adult learning experiences. Nevertheless, learning occurs only when the adult learners understand, reflect and apply those experiences. Mezirow stated that "learning is the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and actions".

Adult learning is a complex process and occurs in 'multilayered way's. Knowles (1984) referred to adult learning as andragogy which is "the art and science of helping adults learn". Knowles (1984) proposed four suppositions of how adults learn:

- Adult are self-directed learners. They need to know why they need to learn certain knowledge or skills
- Experience becomes a critical resource for learning. Adults accumulate knowledge through life, social and work experiences. These experiences are resources for adult learning
- Adults learn through problem-solving. The processes of problem-solving and decision-making become sources of learning to adult learners
- Internal factors motivate adults to learn. Adults learn best when learning is of direct or immediate value. Adult learners must have the readiness and motivation to learn

These propositions provided a theoretical framework in exploring how adults acquired certain skills. The basic aspect to adult learning is that most adults learn from experience. According to Bossidy and Charan experience provided a learning opportunity through observation and reflection from those experiences. Mezirow and Kolb believed the underlying assumption to individual learning was that past experience amalgamated and transformed into new experiences.

Learning shaped and reshaped behaviours constantly. Luoma stressed that the knowledge gained from the learning experience could develop into expertise and capability provided there were appropriate organisational structure and human resource practices. For learning to occur, Jarvis implied that adults need to separate experience from their everyday world. Experience becomes meaningful when adults are able to explain that experience by reflecting on it. In other words, they learn turn the experience into learning through reflection.

Knowles considered interpersonal relationships as another key factor in adult learning. Adults learn from each other by sharing and exchanging ideas, opinions and information. On a similar note, Wenger postulated that adults learn from one another during social engagements. Shacham and Od-Cohen found that adults develop certain expertise by learning from one another through communities of practice.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Despite the fact that much research revealed adults learned from various learning methods and experiences, most of these studies were quantitative in nature. Very few studies focused on how specific skills are developed from the respondent's own words. The general aim of this study was to examine the most significant learning experiences which contributed to the proficiency of strategic thinking amongst a group of senior managers.

This qualitative study was designed using grounded theory to discover significant learning experiences perceived to have contributed to the development of strategic thinking skill. The qualitative research method was appropriate for uncovering individual's perceptions on the subject matter (Creswell, 2003). The adoption of grounded theory was appropriate to develop a better comprehension on the subject matter by exploring participant's experiences in their own words. Johnson contended that "a quantitative study does not provide the richness necessary to understand the scope of what is going on". This study explored the perceptions of a group of 25 individuals who were in the top management in their respective organizations. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to gather data. The focus of the study was the individual's perspectives. Denzin and Yvonna (1998, 2003) described qualitative research as an interpretation process that made sense out of certain phenomenon from the voice of the respondents based on their own experiences. This study provided the richness necessary to understand the phenomenon under study and allowed the writer to uncover the meaning individuals assigned to their experiences.

This study was designed to discover significant learning experiences perceived to have contributed to the development of strategic thinking skill. The adoption of grounded theory was appropriate to develop a better comprehension on the subject matter by exploring participant's experiences in their own words and identifying emerging themes based on the interview data.

Theoretical sampling: Glaser and Strauss (1967) described theoretical sampling as the process of collecting data to make sense out of it all. The writer decided what data to collect how to collect them and from whom to collect the data, in order to develop an emerging theory. This idea guided the researcher when selecting samples for the study.

Theoretical sampling in grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) does not require the fullest possible coverage on the whole group except at the very beginning of research when the main categories are emerging. After the emergence of categories, the grounded analyst collects only on categories. This is the mechanism of theoretical sampling in GT to have a broad coverage of data for the generation of categories in open coding stage. After the open coding stage, the categories become saturated and the coding and data collection becomes selective.

The researcher adopted certain criteria to select a specific group and setting to be studied. Barrett explained that the respondents acted as informants who actively collaborated with the researcher to provide an abundance of knowledge or their own special knowledge about the subject under study which is invaluable to the researcher. The sample was selected based on criteria of interest in order to provide richness to the description of strategic thinking and its development. When recruiting respondents, the following conditions were emphasised:

- At least ten years working experience. Goldman cited the works of Ericsson, Krampe and Tesch-Romer and Skovholt, Ronnestad and Jennings which indicated that 10 years working experience in an organization or organizations as the minimum period to develop expertise in their respective areas
- Involvement in organization-wide decision-making process or strategic planning at any time whilst in the management position Goldman
- Working experience as an entrepreneur or those in middle to top management positions including managers, senior managers, general managers, managing directors and also chief executive officers

Fetterman explained that normally purposive or judgemental sampling was employed by qualitative researchers. He added that purposive sampling normally was used to initiate data collection in exploratory or field research. Newman emphasised that purposive sampling was suitable in one of three conditions: the researcher used it to select specific cases; the researcher used purposive sampling to select members of a specified population and the researcher needed to identify particular types of cases for in-depth investigation. Based on Fetterman and Neuman convenient, purposive and snowball sampling methods were adopted for this study.

This strategy aimed to capture those who meet the research criteria and have experienced the phenomenon. This was then augmented via a snowball sampling approach whereby those who were interviewed were asked to identify others who might be interested in contributing to the study. Initially, networking via a range of key informants was used for generating a target sample. These 'knowledgeable insider's were helpful throughout the research in identifying promising respondents.

Initially, electronic mails were sent to ten senior managers who were in the writer's network and who fit the criteria set. Two responded and agreed to participate in the initial phase of the study. Following their agreement to participate, an introductory letter explaining the purpose of the study was sent two weeks before the scheduled interview. Next, the snowballing method was used in this qualitative study. At the end of each interview, the respondents were requested to provide at least one name of a person who fit the characteristics or features of a strategic thinker and the criteria set. This was stated in the letter inviting them to participate in the study. The writer contacted the leads to seek for their cooperation to participate in the study. A further sixteen subjects had agreed to participate in the interviews and efforts were made to suit their convenience for interviews. At the end of each interview, the respondent was requested to provide at least another lead for the writer to contact. This led to another seven leads who agreed to participate in this study when they were approached by the writer.

Data collection: The interviews took place at the respondent's workplaces or places suggested by the respondents. Respondents were interviewed on a one-to-one basis. Each interview was recorded after gaining the respondent's consent to tape the proceeding. Brief notes were also taken particularly on issues or matters that the respondents raised as important. Each interview lasted for about 45-60 min.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used. Questions were developed that were based on the relevant literature regarding strategy, adult learning and experiences. Introductory letters explaining the purpose of the study were sent two weeks before the scheduled interviews. Three primary questions were included to allow respondents to reflect on their experiences relating to the subject matter.

Question one: Your current position involves a lot of strategic thinking. What do you think strategic thinking refers to?

Question two: What are the characteristics or features of a strategic thinker?

Question three: How did you acquire the skills and expertise in strategic thinking?

Each respondent was given the list of questions prior to the interview. Questions were emailed, faxed or posted to those who had agreed to participate in the study. These questions served as a guide to prompt their reflections on their learning experiences related to strategic thinking. These questions were referred to during the interviews and the respondents were encouraged to discuss anything they felt were related to the subject matter. Probing questions were used to obtain more in-depth responses from the participants.

The questions were open-ended, neutral and non-leading in order to avoid imposing the researcher's values. In addition, it was made clear at the start of each interview that the questions given were intended only as prompts and any topic or issues related to the subject matter could be included in the interviews. The interview data were then transcribed for analysis of data.

Data were also collected from published literature. Glaser (1992) agreed that data obtained from libraries were akin to data collected through interview or fieldwork. "Every book, every magazine article, represents at least one person who is equivalent to the anthropologist's informant or the sociologist's interviewee". On that note, this research acknowledged library materials as field notes, i.e., primary source of data as they were of theoretical relevance.

Data coverage in this study was guided by data saturation. As Glaser and Strauss explained, the study required a sufficient number of participants until it reaches a 'saturation point'. This saturation point occurred when any additional participant would be repeating what others have reported. Data collected saturated after

22 respondents were interviewed. Nonetheless, to confirm data had saturated, the writer carried on with three other respondents who had agreed to participate.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data analysis: Basit acknowledged that data analysis is the most arduous and critical phase of qualitative study. The analysis of qualitative data "is a dynamic, intuitive and creative process of inductive reasoning, thinking and theorizing". Patton stated that the goal of qualitative data analysis was to transform data into meaningful findings. He suggested that this could be done by "reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal". The data analysis in this study was consistent with Cresswell (1998)'s and Miles and Huberman (1984) strategies of general data analysis and data reduction.

Data collection, transcribing, coding, analysing and writing were undertaken concurrently throughout the study. Each interview was conducted and transcribed by the researcher. The transcriptions were quite intricate as participants responded in a mixture of Malay language and English. To ensure that the data gathered would be workable, translations were carried out word for word from Malay language to English. The writer had taken great care in doing so to make sure the translation did not go out of context and retained the same meaning. No attempt was made to correct grammatical errors when translating and transcribing data. On that note, the writer had made every effort to use direct quotes from the subjects as they said them.

Eleven transcriptions were sent back to the respective respondents who had agreed to go through them to ensure accurate information was recorded. They were requested to read through the transcriptions carefully and to agree, disagree or alter any part which they felt were out of context of their responses. All seven called the researcher and confirmed that the transcriptions reflected their actual responses.

Data analysis began immediately after the first data was collected. This process continued after each data collection until the end. The sorting and coding of the transcripts involved a rigorous and time consuming process. Comparisons between cases and categories were constantly and repeatedly done to ensure the researcher did not overlook any relevant or important part of the interviews.

After transcribing each interview, a report was prepared to summarise the key aspects of the interview. In

doing so, the writer looked out for common words, phrases, themes and categories that emerged. Patton stated that "through imaginative variation, the researcher develops enhanced or expanded versions of the invariant themes". In most cases the respondents repeated certain words or phrases a few times in their respective interviews. These words or phrases were combined to unveil the respondent's true experience. Concept mapping was also used in this process to give the writer a better and bigger picture of the emerging conceptual framework.

Goetz and Lecompte highlighted that in qualitative research, data collection and analysis were concurrent and interdependent processes. These led to the sorting of data into theoretical frameworks and reporting the findings in the context of existing and relevant literature and theories. The coding process in this study entailed three stages, i.e., open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Glaser, 1992). Coding was a process of sorting data and arranging them into appropriate categories. The coding was undertaken as each transcription was typed and reviewed several times.

Once the coding for the first transcription was completed, the researcher went through the labels or categories again. When doing so the researcher would group up relevant categories together under subcategories and provided them with another label or subcategory name. As more categories emerged, some of the previous coding would relate to the existing categories while others would fit better into new categories. Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. For instance, the researcher found that categories labelled as 'formal education' and 'Training and Development [T&D]' could be grouped together under a subcategory 'HRD'. The process was repeated after each subsequent interview until the data gathered saturated by comparing incidents from earlier sources. This process of axial coding continued until all the cases were reviewed. The emerging themes were generated after considering every distinct type of occurrences connected to one another.

Findings: Reporting the findings involved comparing and integrating the themes or categories in order to develop theoretical constructs and the theory as it emerged. To validate the categories and themes identified, three methods were used. Initially the coding was done manually by the researcher. The researcher's mentor did a separate manual coding for the first eight interview transcriptions to strengthen the findings. After the manual coding was completed for all eighteen interviews,

the data were analysed using NVivo10. The researcher allowed the system to identify the possible categories and relationships from the data. The list of categories and themes identified manually by the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and NVivo10 were then compared and were found to be very similar.

The themes emerged from the questions asked and probed relating to how respondents perceived they acquired their strategic thinking capabilities. Reporting the findings involved comparing and integrating the themes or categories in order to develop theoretical constructs and the theory as it emerged. The researcher coded each occurrence into as many categories as possible. As more categories emerged, some of the previous coding would relate to the existing categories while others would fit better into new categories. Every category and occurrence were analysed and compared to find significant connections among them. The categories were grouped as follows.

Formal and informal learningcaptured the fundamental entity of the respondent's experiences of strategic thinking. For the respondents, they believed that their formal learning experiences enhanced their ability to think strategically. As one respondent articulated "I received many types of training and development programs, locally and internationally. The training varied from technical to soft skill programs. I think I acquired my management and thinking skills through the various training".

Personal factors covered various factors that the respondents went through and were perceived as a significant contributing factor in strategic thinking such as open-mindedness, never giving up and self development strategies like reading. Individual factors can be divided into intrinsic as well as extrinsic factors. One respondent highlighted "I think when I think in respect to certain issues", I do a lot of digging for info, asking around, a lot of reading... then I do some analysis or evaluation on the situation. What is involved? Why? Who is involved? How do you normally solve it? Is there a better way? What if this way does not work, is there another way? You know, things like that. It's like doing a SWOT analysis, I mean I look at my strengths and weaknesses and also opportunities that arise as well as threats involved".

Work and life experience incorporated previous and existing work or life experiences that are regarded by participants to be essential in promoting strategic thinking ability. As one respondent put it "I think this thinking (strategic) does not happen in a day or two. It takes time.

We learn from experiences, work, life. The mistakes that we do. The trials and errors. The success. The everyday things. Some people try to avoid mistakes. But you learn more through it".

Organisational factors include rewards and/or incentives be they monetary or not, work system, organisational culture and HRM policies and practices comprising recruitment, selection, training and succession planning that respondents perceived as critical in strategic thinking. A respondent stressed "encouraging employees to think strategically, in line with the company's direction, the management has put in place a reward system both monetary and non-monetary. For example, good contributors will be acknowledged in their bulletin and notice boards. Some exceptional ones with continuous good contributions and performance and potential will be considered for future promotion or possible succession planning. How? Based on their qualities, performance, we identify them and develop them for future to realise their potentials".

Current position or role referred to the positions held by respondents within their respective organisations. These positions which include becoming a Chief Executive Officer (CEO), General Manager (GM), Senior Manager (SM) and Manager (M), exposed the respondents to various scenarios which require them to apply their strategic thinking abilities. At this level in the organisations, the respondents must take into deliberation other factors as well. These factors include alternative business strategies, economics, politics and government rulings and regulations. One respondent shared. "The Chairman (my brother), CEO (me) and President of the company make the strategic planning and decisions. We are guided and advised by an external consultant. This small group is involved in all the company's decision making process. We are also involved when formulating the company's vision and mission statements".

Relationships and networking covered various associations and affiliations with professional bodies, business circles as well as social groups. These factors are identified as significant in encouraging the development of strategic thinking ability. As one of the respondents explained "I learn a lot from the dealers. They are the ones who have direct contacts with customers. So they know better about some things. For example new competitors in the area, etc. They are my network".

Table 1 depicted the six emerging themes from data analysis. Each theme was interrelated and an integration of all or several contributing factors were identified to have some influence on the development of strategic thinking ability.

Adult education goes beyond formal education which includes tertiary, technical and vocational

Table 1: Emerging themes

Themes	Categories
Formal and formal learning	Formal education
	Training and development
	Experiential learning
Personal factors	Self-directed learning
	Upbringing
	Self-development strategies
	Subject-matter expertise
	Open-mindedness, never give up
Work and life experiences	Personal experiences
	Task force/special projects
	Failures/successes
	Job experiences
Organizational factors	HR practices-rewards,
	recruitment, selection,
	succession planning
	Organizational culture
	Organizational policies
	Management support
Current position or role	Being a CEO, GM, SM, M
	Understand the business and industry
	Vision, mission, goals, strategic issues
	Involvement with strategic and/or
	strategic decision planning making/
	problem solving
	Holistic view
	Alternative business strategies
	External factors
Networking	Professional/business/social affiliation
	Peers, other people
	Communities of practice
	Social gathering
	Professional seminars
	Business circle

education. Workplace formal and informal training and development provide and enhance adult learner's knowledge, skills and aptitude to enable them to perform their jobs. As such adult educators and organisational trainers should focus on understanding how best adults learn in order to develop effective programs by incorporating adult learner's personal and work experiences into formal as well as informal training and development.

Literature showed some salient factors which influenced the way individuals learn to think strategically. These factors include work experiences, organizational variables, individual factors and environmental features. The findings in this study were similar to past studies conducted. Goldman found ten significant experiences that contributed to strategic thinking expertise. The ten experiences included family upbringing/education, general work experiences, becoming a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) being mentored, being challenged by a key colleague, monitoring results/benchmarking, doing strategic planning, spearheading a major growth initiative, dealing with a threat to organizational survival and vicarious experiences.

Fressola in her study on how nurse executives became leaders found similar themes: learning from

experience, learning from relationships and self-directed learning. Learning form experience included previous experience, tenure, tacit knowledge, successes and failures, on-the-job assignments, reflection as a learning strategy and emancipatory learnings derived from on-the-job assignments. Learning from relationships included bosses, administrative peers, other staff, family systems and friends. Self-directed learning included formal and continuing education programs, professional organisations and networking, reading, field work, routine work and committees. Learning shaped and reshaped behaviours constantly.

Luoma also found that the knowledge gained from the learning experience could develop into expertise and capability provided there were appropriate organisational structure and human resource practices. Similar to Jarvis experience becomes meaningful when adults are able to explain that experience by reflecting on it. In other words, they learn turn the experience into learning through reflection.

Knowles considered interpersonal relationships as another key factor in adult learning. Adults learn from each other by sharing and exchanging ideas, opinions and information. On a similar note, Wenger postulated that adults learn from one another during social engagements. Shacham and Od-Cohen found that adults developed certain expertise by learning from one another through communities of practice.

CONCLUSION

The findings and conclusions of this study trigger additional research opportunities as follows:

- A comparative study of the experiences of strategic thinkers in various industries should be conducted
- More studies to identify the best means of instruction on strategic thinking and how to enhance the transfer of its learning
- A further exploration of the personal factors that influence the development of strategic thinking should be considered
- A further exploration of the environmental and organisational factors that support the development of strategic thinking would also be beneficial

SUGGESTIONS

This study suggested that a combination of several learning interventions could enhance manager's capability in strategic thinking; however, this study needs to be further tested in a number of different types of organisations and industries to determine the mechanics

and processes involved. Given the fact that the researcher was only able to interview a small group of individuals, it would be interesting to utilise future research to explore further the relevance of this research to other industries within and across Malaysia as well as other countries.

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