

Introduction to Strategic Thinking

A practical, high-energy one-day workshop for leaders and managers at all levels

DURATION	GROUP SIZE	FORMAT	TAILORING
One full day (09:00–17:00)	8–16 participants	In-person, experiential	Fully adaptable to your context

Overview

Strategic thinking is one of the most sought-after capabilities in modern leadership. It appears in almost every competency framework and development conversation. And yet it is almost never explicitly taught.

Most managers expected to think strategically have absorbed fragments — a SWOT here, a PESTLE there — but they don't have a clear mental model of what strategic thinking actually *is*, why it differs from the operational thinking they do every day, or how to practise it consistently under the pressure of a full inbox and back-to-back meetings.

This practical one-day workshop changes that. Through a live business simulation, a rotating tools carousel, scenario planning, and a structured strategic choice exercise, participants build the habits of mind — and the practical toolkit — to think and operate at a genuinely strategic level.

Learning objectives

After completing this workshop, participants will be able to:

- Explain clearly what strategic thinking is — and how it differs from operational thinking
- Apply four core strategic analysis tools with confidence: SWOT, TOWS, PESTLE, and the Impact vs. Effort prioritisation grid
- Use scenario planning to stress-test strategy against multiple possible futures — not just the most likely one
- Apply the day's tools and frameworks to a real strategic challenge — generating, evaluating and presenting strategic options with confidence
- Recognise and resist the common traps that pull leaders away from strategic thinking
- Leave with a specific personal commitment and peer accountability structure to sustain the learning back at work

Format

This is a highly practical, energetic workshop. The day moves between short conceptual inputs, structured exercises, and facilitated discussion. The centrepiece is **The Balloon Factory** — a live business simulation in which participants run competing companies through five rounds of changing market conditions, making real strategic decisions under uncertainty. Competitive shocks, regulatory change, supply chain disruption and a fundamental shift in what customers value all arrive across the rounds. It is consistently the most memorable session of the day.

Every exercise is applied to participants' real organisational context — not fictional case studies. The insights they generate belong to them from the moment they leave the room.

Workshop outline

1 Welcome and scene-setting: Future Headlines

- ✓ Groups design a newspaper front page from five years in the future — their organisation's biggest success story. Sets a future-oriented mindset from the opening minute
- ✓ Establishes the core habit of strategic thinking: starting from a desired future and reasoning backwards

2 What is strategic thinking?

- ✓ A short, practical definition: strategic thinking as a mode of thinking, not a planning process — long-term horizon, external focus, synthesis over analysis
- ✓ The four habits of effective strategic thinkers: zooming out, questioning assumptions, seeing patterns, holding ambiguity
- ✓ Exercise — Zoom In / Zoom Out: participants analyse a live work challenge at tactical, operational and strategic levels and feel the difference between them

3 The Balloon Factory simulation

- ✓ Participants run competing “balloon companies” across five simulated business years, making real strategic decisions under uncertainty and changing market conditions
- ✓ Market shocks arrive round by round: a new well-funded competitor, regulatory change banning a key resource, a supply chain crisis, and a fundamental shift in what customers value
- ✓ Makes visceral the core strategic lesson: optimising for today at the expense of tomorrow is a losing strategy. The debrief connects directly to participants' real organisations

4 Core strategic tools carousel

- ✓ SWOT analysis — done properly: evidence-based entries, cross-referenced to identify genuine strategic priorities rather than long lists of assertions

- ✓ TOWS matrix — turning SWOT into strategic options: SO, ST, WO and WT strategies generated from the cross-referencing
- ✓ PESTLE scan — identifying the macro-environmental forces with the highest strategic impact and drawing out the “so what?” implications for the organisation
- ✓ Impact vs. Effort prioritisation grid — distinguishing quick wins, major strategic projects, and the work to stop or avoid

5 Scenario planning: thinking about the future

- ✓ Why planning for one future is a strategic liability — and how to hold multiple plausible futures simultaneously
- ✓ Scenario Sprint exercise: participants identify the two most uncertain forces facing their organisation, build a 2x2 scenario matrix, and develop four plausible futures
- ✓ Current strategy tested against all four scenarios — distinguishing robust bets from fragile ones. Links directly back to the Balloon Factory experience

6 The Strategy Lab: putting it all together

- ✓ Teams work on a real, live organisational challenge — either a shared case or, more powerfully, an actual strategic issue from their own context
- ✓ Using at least two of the tools from the carousel, teams define the problem clearly, generate two or three strategic options, and stress-test each against the scenarios developed earlier in the day
- ✓ Each team pitches their recommended strategy to the room in a boardroom-style presentation — making the case for their approach and fielding challenge questions from their peers
- ✓ Brings the whole day to life: participants experience the full arc of strategic thinking — from environmental analysis to insight to decision to communication — applied to something that genuinely matters to them

7 Embedding strategic habits

- ✓ The common traps: firefighting, tunnel vision, planning for one future, confusing activity with strategy
- ✓ Stop / Start / Continue: individual reflection and peer sharing to identify one concrete behavioural change
- ✓ Strategic buddy pairs: a named accountability partner and a scheduled check-in to sustain momentum
- ✓ The weekly question: a 10-minute Monday morning practice — “What am I not seeing that I should be seeing?” — to keep strategic thinking alive as a daily discipline

Who is this workshop for?



This workshop is designed for anyone expected to think or contribute at a strategic level who hasn't had formal development in how to do so. In practice, that's most people in management. It is particularly well-suited to:

- Mid-level and senior managers stepping up to broader, more strategic roles
- High-potential leaders being prepared for greater responsibility
- Functional leaders in HR, finance, operations or marketing who need to engage more credibly in strategic conversations
- Teams preparing for a strategy review, planning cycle or organisational change
- Cross-functional cohorts who will benefit from a shared strategic language and framework

The workshop delivers the most value when participants come from the same organisation and when there is a genuine strategic question the group is wrestling with — this can be woven directly into the exercises, making the learning immediately applicable.

*“Strategy is not a planning cycle. It’s a daily practice.
This workshop is where that practice begins.”*

For a no-obligation discussion about running this workshop for your organisation, please call us on
01582 463460