

# Strategic Leadership and the Narrow Mind: What We Don't Do Well and Why

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Strategic thinking is the heart and soul of strategic leadership. And strategic leadership is, by definition, an extremely valuable, decisive asset since it orients organizations toward their goals, influences the actions and lives of many people, and ultimately determines what is achieved. In military matters, strategic leadership usually equates to success or failure, to victory or defeat. Unfortunately, strategic thinking and leadership often appear to be in short supply in a world where large organizations grow, multiply, and operate in a complex environment for very high stakes.

This paper will examine why strategic leadership is such an elusive skill and will offer some ideas to pursue it. First, we will examine some biological and cultural limitations affecting our ability to think and lead in a strategic environment. We will then explore possible ways to reduce the impact of these limitations on strategic thinking and leadership.

## The Birth of the Narrow Mind

We are often too busy celebrating how smart we are and what amazing things our intelligence has produced to focus on the limitations of our minds. However, the challenges and problems that the world we have built poses for us are such that we need to understand ourselves and our shortfalls to be able to cope. A review of the origin of our minds is especially useful for this purpose. To see roughly how human intelligence was shaped, we must focus on the world of early man.<sup>1</sup> Compared to today's standards, we can say that it was a simple world. Our hunter-gatherer ancestors dealt with a limited time horizon, characterized mainly by the influence of hunting seasons on their nomadic movements. They had simple but intense social interaction since they lived primarily in small groups of 20–30 individuals, with rare but regular interaction with an extended tribe of up to 500 individuals. They were exposed to a limited number of contacts, mainly with familiar people. Small-group dynamics were embedded in their behaviors, since group life meant survival. Man had a simple economy, focused on two main activities, hunting and gathering, supported by the manufacture of essential tools and, for the

latest species, *Homo sapiens*, a few ornaments. People were very active physically. Gathering, tool making, and roaming were mingled with periods of intense, high-adrenaline, rewarding physical and intellectual team-hunting activities. They lived in constant contact with the natural environment.

Exposure to illnesses, accidents, and the environment resulted in a very short average life and a rapid aging process, and occasionally much suffering. We can say that our forebears, those who survived the many challenges, led a hard but simple life in the very environment that molded them. They were exposed to a limited number of interactions and processed limited information, mainly available in familiar patterns and in a limited time frame. When they couldn't explain something, they would turn to deities, which seems very much the case today. Why should we care about these "ancestral roots" so distant both in time and to our lifestyle? First of all, because they are not distant at all. In terms of evolution, they are in fact quite recent. Once a hunting-gathering lifestyle was acquired, humankind maintained it for well over 99 percent of its further evolutionary history—about two million years. The gene pool selected through those thousands of generations has necessarily been carried on until today since the "explosion" of human culture has been extremely brief in relation to evolutionary times. Surviving hunting peoples, left by isolation in Paleolithic stages of cultural development, have an intellectual potential and gene pool identical to ours.<sup>2</sup> A few thousand years, from the Neolithic transition to agriculture to the information revolution, couldn't undo what had been established in thousands of millennia.<sup>3</sup> We still acquire knowledge through simple patterns. We break complex problems into simple parts that can be handled in our very limited short-term memory in order to understand them through reasoning (analysis).<sup>4</sup> Then, we relate the elements to establish their relationships and understand them as a whole (synthesis) and, possibly, figure out the best way to intervene in the process to influence the outcome.<sup>5</sup> We can cope, slowly, with a limited number of variables, preferably with one at a time. It's hard for us to envisage indirect consequences, especially beyond the second order. There is an overwhelming trend to see the world from our personal point of view. Our judgment is heavily influenced and sometimes totally overridden by our emotions,<sup>6</sup> making effective understanding even more difficult—at times impossible. Evolution has not tailored our brain to highly complex systems. It has given us basically a sometimes sharp, narrowly focusing instrument—a limited "wet computer" extremely dependent on hormonal levels.

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While our “hardware” may have not changed much, everything else has. We live in an environment that has increased in complexity many times over a very short period of time. The industrial revolution and the subsequent technology explosion have brought about a larger change in human lifestyle than any that occurred in the 100 previous generations. The postindustrial information age seems to be fostering an even more rapidly changing world. And all this makes humans interact with an environment we are not engineered for: one of ever increasing complexity.<sup>7</sup>

The industrial culture’s answer to this complexity was to simplify through specialization and through compartmentalizing knowledge. Impressive advances were achieved by the simple focusing power that specialization implies. But too often this approach led to a fascination that kept us from seeing the forest for the trees. We missed many of the unintended consequences and failed to think through solutions for the problems we were creating.

Thus, technological advance in specific fields has meant devastating environmental impact elsewhere. Taylor’s “scientific management” of work meant widespread alienation. Organizational “rationalizations” resulted in huge centralized structures, where individuals felt little responsibility or sense of belonging. And value systems, the very glue of society, seem to be in a permanently unstable balance, as diffused phenomena such as drugs, crime, violence, and the breakdown of the family too often remind us.

Modern culture has produced complexity. The sheer volume of information available today is mind numbing. The number of interactions that any actor, be it a nation-state, a commercial enterprise, a commander, or a single individual, deals with today is far greater than only a few decades ago and vastly incommensurate with previous centuries. The global economy, the telecommunications network, the media, huge bureaucracies, fast and affordable transportation, the political dialectic, technology in all fields and especially information technology, as well as the sheer number of people we interact with, make life far more complex today than ever before.

Any culture, the understanding of the world that any social body shares among its members, grows upon the basis of the biological heritage we discussed. In fact, culture reflects basic human characteristics. Each culture tends to be self-centered and heavily influenced by collective emotions. Prejudice is extremely common, and the average level of analysis (the so-called layman or man-of-the-street understanding) typically scores fairly low. Most of the time, the focus is on particular issues, more than on the “big picture.” Our culture, notwithstanding its impressive technological and scientific achievements, seems to match its evolutionary matrix toward a default narrow-mindedness. Unfortunately, strategic thinking and strategic leadership are not produced in narrow minds. So, what should we do?

## Broadening Trends

The need to broaden thinking abilities, especially for leadership, is certainly not a new one. Many institutions and publications concerned with strategic leadership, especially educational ones, address this issue. Still, unresolved gaps and contradictions appear in many of the “strategies” to promote strategic thinking. I will discuss some of these problems to identify areas where leadership development can be improved.

### “Know Thyself”

The very first gap is the lack of explicit awareness about “the birth of the narrow mind” and of its limitations. Not clearly knowing the limits of the “most powerful factor in the war-fighting equation: the human mind”<sup>8</sup> can lead to large miscalculations at the strategic level. Leadership is basically an “influence relationship with people.”<sup>9</sup> Knowing yourself and your fellow humans is a skill fundamental to it. How can it be done? Certainly not by transforming a professional military education (PME) system into a social-science academia. However, between that and almost complete neglect, reasonable options do exist. It is possible to synthesize the contribution that human sciences, like psychology, sociology, anthropology, and others, bring to leadership education. These fundamentals of leadership would serve as an enabling frame of reference for the traditional curriculum, before the posited lists of precepts or the case studies usually found. New curricula can be designed to effectively contribute to this understanding. And understanding the role of our biological and cultural heritage with regard to small-group dynamics, to ethics, to thinking abilities, and how all this takes place in our huge organizations, is critical. Educating leaders to be highly introspective, to be able to detect the influence of their own emotions on their thinking, and to manage them, though difficult, is possible and is precious to the clarity of strategic thinking. It is also a powerful way to get to know our people since we share the general architecture of our inner world.

### Historia Magistra Vitae (History Is Life’s Teacher)

Another problem frequently found in the teaching of strategic leadership is an insufficient emphasis on assuring an understanding of the major underpinnings of history. The dialectic and contradictory nature of reality, the adversarial nature of processes, and the relativity of value systems are some of the breakthroughs of Western philosophical thought that cannot be ignored by strategic leaders. Again, strategic leaders don’t need to be philosophy majors; however, we must ensure we don’t develop leaders with a “black or white,” narrowly moralistic vision of the world, or with the inability to comprehend the role actors play in complex processes, beyond personal biases.

## Leadership and Ethics

Ethics already has special attention in our leadership-development curricula. However, operating in complex environments where events and people usually interact in less than a clear-cut manner and where values appear to be relative increases the risk for ethical uncertainty. Stepping up to a more comprehensive, less fragile ethic than the “good or bad” one is necessary to induce ethical, and not cynical, answers to the ambiguity and contradictions of our era. The conceptual foundation discussed previously with regard to the understanding of man and history is necessary for ethics education. If we fail to pursue a deeper level of ethical awareness, structured to accept truly candid self-assessments and sharp critical thinking, we end up looking only at the part of the picture that fits our perspective. This is destructive for any strategic decision-making process. A deliberate examination of this ethical issue seems to be overdue in the mainstream of leadership development.

## The Nuts and Bolts of Strategic Thinking

When we get to the “mechanics” of strategic thinking, there is a lot to be said. Very little effort is spent in promoting “strategic leaders-to-be” awareness of *how* they think, instead of simply the *what*. Group discussion of issues is certainly a good way to broaden perspectives. But what is usually not addressed is how to best do it and what the factors and the principles that influence the thinking process are. While a detailed study would be necessary to establish what to teach for this purpose, we will discuss a few major issues to illustrate the concept.

**Deductive Reasoning.** Learning to think from big to small (deductive reasoning) instead of the other way around (inductive reasoning), common at the tactical level, is a must for strategic leadership. The strategic leader must be a big-picture seeker and must be able to use broad frames of reference to interpret events and devise plans. John A. Warden III, considered one of today’s strategic thinkers, highlights effectively the need for this approach in his introduction to his “Five Rings” model.<sup>10</sup> The way people think depends both on personality<sup>11</sup> and culture.<sup>12</sup> Understanding individual tendencies and focusing on compensating for personal weaknesses, either in the inductive or deductive modes of reasoning, are very important for effective thought. Our military culture seems to need more work on the deductive, big-picture mode. Emphasis is needed in leadership-development curricula on this aspect.

**Frames of Reference.** Once the ability to look for the big picture is acquired, strategic leaders need to seek out as many different ones as possible. They need to become experts and habitual users of different frames of reference, capable of relating them together and to their own, so that they can continuously evolve and improve. Developmental theory sees leadership development “as adaptive changes to the soldier’s leadership frames of reference as he progresses through successively higher organizational levels.”<sup>13</sup> To progress, the soldier has to get used to understanding other points of view,

other frames of reference. Most of the time, frames of reference are “transparent” to the untrained user. Strategic thinkers, however, need to be conscious managers of the ones they operate with. We cannot start teaching these abilities to colonels. Education promoting this unnatural skill should be formally integrated into the early stages of the continuum of military education with a proper progression.

**Convergent Thinking.** Learning to “think big” and to habitually refer to different frames of reference greatly increases the power of analysis but doesn’t necessarily affect synthesis. Leaders must also be good at “convergent thinking”<sup>14</sup> when all the available elements are correlated and synthesis is brought to bear on goals. Open-ended group discussions, though a potentially excellent approach to different perspectives, are not enough to develop synthetic thinking: some shared practice is required, beyond the process that takes place in everyone’s brain. Synthesis does not mean “school solution” or “the solution” to the discussion. It does mean attempting to build, dialectically, a big picture, that can legitimately be agreed or disagreed upon. Not proceeding beyond the analysis level risks leaving many in the “thinking small” mode (lots of details, no big picture).

**Thinking “Know-How.”** In some fields, principles, procedures, and techniques are used to assist the thinking process in complex, ambiguous, volatile, and uncertain environments. Such an environment often exists, for example, around the scattered and burning remains of an aircraft accident. From them, the investigators must put together a detailed reconstruction of a complex sequence of events, maybe started years before in a factory, or in the hearts and minds of people now dead. Principles such as “never jump to conclusions,”<sup>15</sup> search and collect all facts and data before even thinking of inferences, look out for one’s own and for the witnesses’ biases, and others, are the conceptual fundamentals of a professional investigator. In the corporate world, creative thinking and problem solving techniques have also been devised. Leadership development is much more than learning techniques. Nevertheless, when thought is employed on matters of strategic relevance, there is no excuse for not exploiting the existing “thinking know-how.” Leadership development curricula should then make sure leaders are able to use such know-how.

**Conflict Management.** “Conflict management” is related to everything we have discussed so far. We saw how we still share the gene pool of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. The basic patterns of our social interactions originate in the small group dynamics of the hunting band. There, conflict was generally defused by close personal ties, by mutual reliance for survival, and by constant verbal and nonverbal communication. But we now work in complex organizations, interacting constantly with people we barely know and often don’t see, and whom therefore we don’t really care much about. Our culture is based on individualism, on competitiveness, on the mononuclear family. In this environment, effective communication is much harder, and its likelihood decreases enormously. We then search for our “lost band,” reverting to an artificial, con-

tradictory creation of a network of “they-us” dichotomies: “fighters versus heavies,” “rated versus nonrated,” “field versus the Pentagon,” “Air Force versus other services,” and so on. This occurs in sports and at the political, institutional, national, and international levels. Conflicts, based on the lack of the group trust upon which our survival once depended, flourish. To operate effectively in this environment, leaders must thoroughly understand the dynamics of conflict and how to either reduce it or exploit it for the good of their organizations. Communication is the primary tool for conflict management, and leadership-development courses must assure that its potential and its traps are well understood. Other techniques for managing conflict can and should be acquired, together with the aforementioned broad background of an understanding of human nature. In particular, leadership expertise should include a thorough comprehension of the “negative feedback ring” or the “conflict spiral.” This is the very common phenomenon that often takes place when the *perception* of other actors’ behavior is even marginally negative. It occurs when trust declines, often for a lack of understanding of the other’s perspective, due to a lack of communication or to cultural biases. The negative feedback to the perceived misbehavior prompts further negative response, and conflict soon arises. This dynamic happens from family quarrels to international conflict. Too often, conflicts disproportionate to the actual interests at odds arise because of this process, making it the nemesis of a cost-effective leadership. Self-awareness, the big picture, and the multiple frames-of-reference thinking advocated should help to prevent it. Strategic-leadership development can, and should, enhance the specific understanding of this phenomenon and the capability to influence it.

## Conclusion

The basic, plain truth is that we enter the century of interplanetary exploration with an original Paleolithic mind. So far, our culture has largely ignored the limitations and performances of our minds, focusing instead on its noticeable achievements. Complexity is pushing us to the limits of our current cultural capability to cope. But culture is by definition adaptable, and it is in our power to help it. Strategic leadership is the protagonist of this adaptation, and, among its responsibilities, it has the key one to redefine itself. Our discussion is just an attempt, by no means exhaustive, to contribute to this redefinition. It envisages a broader frame of reference, which includes as a foundation a better understanding of man, along with a deliberate nurturing of the thinking processes. A multidisciplinary focus on leadership issues through the lenses of human sciences and problem-solving methods is the tool to do that. This may seem to be “out of the box” thinking. However, Lt Gen Jay W. Kelley stated in his “Brilliant Warrior” paper for the 2025 study that “understanding why humans of different backgrounds and cultures behave the way they do in different circumstances is integral to understanding the sources and nature of human cooperation, friction and conflict. Military professionals preparing for success in the far future

must learn more about leadership and human behavior—their own, their subordinates’, and their adversaries.’”<sup>16</sup> Sparse initiatives in this sense already exist, such as the use of self-awareness personality testing in PME institutions.<sup>17</sup>

But for the necessary quantum leap to occur, an organic vision must be thought out and shared, a new cultural basis established, and a methodology devised. In a word, a new paradigm must arise. Without it we’ll probably remain good at “doing things right,” but we’ll find increasing difficulty in “doing the right things.”<sup>18</sup> And the latter is exactly what strategic leadership is about.

## Notes

1. For a clear, updated discussion of our origins, see Richard E. Leakey, *The Origin of Humankind* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), xiii–xv, 8–9.

2. Joseph B. Birdsell, *Human Evolution: An Introduction to the New Physical Anthropology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

3. Further discussion on the unchanged characteristics of modern humans from at least about 40,000 years ago can be found in Desmond Morris, *The Naked Ape: A Zoologist Study of the Human Animal* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 147; Birdsell; and Leakey, 8–9.

4. For some reference on cognitive behaviors, see *concepts, emotions, inferences, long term memory, short term memory, problem solving, reasoning*, and other terms in Michael W. Eysenck, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Cognitive Psychology* (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Other good references are the comparative study on cognitive processes of Joan Markessini, *Strategic Leadership in a Changing World Order: Requisite Cognitive Skills*, research product (Alexandria, Va.: CAE-Link Allen-Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 1990); and Elliott Jacques and Stephen D. Clement, *Executive Leadership: A Practical Guide to Managing Complexity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Business, Inc., 1991–1994).

5. This last one is a definition of problem solving. It is interesting to note how five major models for human cognitive processes are basically identical to the proposed scheme which, by the way, was well known since the Greek philosophic thought. See Markessini, table 10, 57–59.

6. Eysenck, 131.

7. For references on the future and complexity, see John L. Petersen, *The Road to 2015* (Corte Madera, Calif.: Waite Group Press, 1994).

8. Lt Gen Jay W. Kelley, “Brilliant Warrior,” in *2025 White Papers*, vol. 1 (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University, 1996), 239.

9. Joseph C. Rost, “Leadership Development in the New Millennium,” *Journal of Leadership Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 99.

10. John A. Warden III, “The Enemy as a System,” *Airpower Journal*, Spring 1995, 41–55.

11. An interesting insight about the influence of personality on the way people think comes from the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). See Bill Knowlton and Mike McGee, “Strategic Leadership and Personality: Making the MBTI Relevant,” in *The MBTI and Strategic Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, Industrial College of the Armed Forces, 1994).

12. A good discussion of the prevalent American cultural perspective is in *Air University, International Officer School Handbook*, 1998, 3-2, 3-9.

13. George B. Forsythe, “The Preparation of Strategic Leaders,” *Parameters* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 38–49.

14. Markessini, table 10, 57–59.

15. This was a refrain, almost a class motto, during the Flight Safety Course, Accident Investigation classes at Norton AFB, Calif., 1989.

16. Kelley, 243.

17. MBTI and Kirton Adaption-Innovation Inventory testing are regularly performed in PME institutions.

18. Richard I. Lester and John C. Kunich, “Leadership and Management: The Quality Quadrants,” *Journal of Leadership Studies* 4, no. 4 (1997): 17–31.