

Pies or Pie Charts?

Astonishingly simple recipes to outthink, outpace and outmanoeuvre your competition

John Acton

ISBN: 978-1-914151-57-6

Published by:

The Endless Bookcase

Suite 14, STANTA Business Centre, 3 Soothouse Spring, St Albans, Hertfordshire, UK,
AL3 6PF.

www.theendlessbookcase.com

Paperback Edition:

Also available in multiple ebook formats.

Copyright © 2025 John Acton

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

John Acton has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

“The winners in today’s marketplace are those who can successfully out-think, not out-muscle, the competition”

– Michel Robert, The New Strategic Thinking

Contents

Introduction	1
Part 1	
Why is Strategic Thinking important, yet so rarely deployed?	5
The Nine Danger Signals	5
The Nine Danger Signals of Strategy	6
Key Takeaways	18
Get Started.....	19
Growing Too Fast – Push That Reset Button.....	21
Warning Symptoms That You’re Growing Too Fast.....	21
What to do if you’re growing too fast?	23
Key Takeaways	24
Get Started.....	24
Critical Thinking: What? Why? How?	25
What is Critical Thinking?	25
Why Critical Thinking?.....	26
Most Importantly: How to Achieve Critical Thinking.....	27
Process Consulting and Critical Thinking.....	29
Key Takeaways	31
Get Started.....	32
Engaging the Leadership Team.....	32
Many Heads Are Better Than One.....	33
Corner Office Syndrome	34
Key Takeaways	34
Get Started.....	34
Who has the Answer?.....	35
We have no answers at all	35

Key Takeaways.....	36
Get Started	37
Part 2	
The Current Business Model	39
A Novel Business Model Canvas	40
A Good Starting Place	44
Key Takeaways.....	44
Get Started	44
Current Profile – Success and Failure	45
The Twelve Questions of Success and Failure	46
The Two Most Important Questions.....	49
Don’t Guess	49
Key Takeaways.....	50
Get Started	50
Know Your Sandbox	50
What Is Your Business’ Sandbox.....	51
Why the Sandbox Isn’t Your Marketplace	54
Sandbox Influencers	54
Sandbox “Rules”.....	56
Changing Your Sandbox	57
Key Takeaways.....	58
Get Started	58
To Compete or Not to Compete?.....	59
Understanding Your Competitive Landscape.....	60
Six Vital Questions About Your Competitors	62
COCD	68
DIY – the curveball	68
Key Takeaways.....	69
Get Started	69
Future Business Arena (FBA)	69

Uncertainty and Decision Paralysis	70
The Six Macro-Elements of the FBA.....	71
The Six Micro-Elements of the Future Business Arena.....	79
Key Takeaways	84
Get Started.....	85
SWOT+	85
Strengths and Weaknesses	86
Opportunities and Threats	92
Vulnerabilities	95
Key Takeaways	96
Get Started.....	96
 Part 3	
Driving Force – The Power of Driving Force	99
Ten Strategic Components	100
Conclusion.....	108
Key Takeaways	109
Action Steps	109
Driving Force – The Power of Knowing.....	111
Changing Your Driving Force	112
Key Takeaways	114
Action Steps	114
Driving Force – Areas of Excellence	115
Technology or Know-How	115
Natural Resources	117
Strategy Driven by Production Capacity.....	119
Strategy Driven by Capability.....	120
Strategy Driven by Product and Service	123
Strategy Driven by Marketing and Sales Method	124
Strategy Driven by Distribution Method.....	127
Strategy Driven by Customer or User Class	129

Strategy Driven by Market Type	130
Strategy Driven by Size, Growth and Profit.....	131
Future Strategic Profile (FSP)	131
Key Takeaways.....	133
Action Steps.....	134

Part 4

The Three Lenses.....	137
Lens #1: Future Business Model	138
Lens #2: Areas of Excellence	142
Lens #3: Defensive and Offensive Strategic Objectives	143
Making sense of the three lens output	145
Nailing Your Critical Issues	146
Key Takeaways.....	147
Action Steps.....	149
The Power of the Strategic Filter.....	149
How to design a strategic filter.....	150
Key Takeaways.....	151
Action Steps.....	151

Part 5

Bonus Tracks	153
The CEO Self-Assessment	153
DIY or DIP?.....	155
The Growth Grid	157
Only 7 Steps to Guaranteed Growth.....	157
Strategy Is Not Complicated.....	166
Key Takeaways.....	166
Get Started	167
Did you ever meet Rudyard Kipling's smarter brother?	167

Introduction

In today's ever-evolving and complex business environment, it is crucial for leaders and their senior leadership teams (SLT) to possess and use Critical Thinking, specifically Strategic Thinking skills, to effectively navigate challenges and drive success. With the pace of change accelerating faster than ever before, leaders must be able to assess situations and make good decisions, as well as consider long-term implications for their organisation.

Critical thinking is the process of evaluating information and ideas in a systematic, objective, and analytical manner. It involves questioning assumptions, interpreting evidence, and tapping into what an organisation's individuals think, feel and believe before arriving at a conclusion. Critical thinking is an essential skill for business leaders because it allows them to make informed decisions based on a thorough understanding of the situation. It helps leaders avoid being swayed by emotional or biased reasoning and instead focuses on evidence-based analysis and the thinking of a broad cross-section of contributors.

One example of how critical thinking is essential for business leaders is the evaluation of new products. When presented with a new product idea, leaders must be able to ask critical questions such as: What is the problem that this product solves? Who is the target market, and what is the competition like? What is the financial potential, and what are the risks and opportunities? What's the strategic fit with our other products? By using critical thinking, leaders can ensure that they are making informed decisions that are grounded in reality, not wishful thinking. After all, there is no place for hope in a business plan.

This book focuses specifically on Strategic Thinking, possibly the most important area of critical thinking. Strategic Thinking involves a long-term perspective and requires an understanding of the broader context in which the organisation operates. Strategic Thinking is vital for business leaders because it helps them anticipate changes in the market and outpace the competition.

One example of how Strategic Thinking is essential for business leaders is when developing a business plan. By using Strategic Thinking, leaders can assess the organisation's strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, identify opportunities and threats, and develop a plan to achieve their goals. This plan should take into account the organisation's long-term vision, the resources available, and potential challenges that may arise. By using Strategic Thinking, leaders can ensure that their business plan is robust and able to withstand changes in the market. However, it is extremely important that the Strategic Thinking is structured and carried out in the correct sequence looking through the correct lens at the correct time. This book will share the astonishingly simple recipe to deliver outstanding Strategic Thinking to sustainably grow any organisation that follows this process.

Before we get into Pies or Pie Charts it's important to clarify the difference between Strategic Thinking and strategic planning. These two terms are often used interchangeably, but they are very different. The essence of Strategic Thinking has been explained earlier. Strategic planning is the process of developing a roadmap to achieve your Strategic Thinking. In other words, once you've done the Strategic Thinking and have your goals, critical issues and deliverables identified. You then need a strategic plan to make it all happen.

If you want a quick litmus test to see if your organisation is deploying Strategic Thinking effectively, try answering the following questions honestly:

- Is your senior leadership team (SLT) "bought into" and aligned with your growth strategy?
- Do you have an effective growth strategy that you're totally happy with?
- Does your SLT all share the same vision for the organisation?
- Can your SLT and fellow Board members each give an accurate and concise description of your growth strategy?
- How do you know? When and how did you last check?
- Do you have a mechanism to filter and allocate resources clearly and effectively?
- How do you prevent resources from being allocated to strategically misaligned activities?
- How do you identify and focus on the few opportunities or issues that will significantly move your business ahead?
- When you have a few strategic options, how do you decide which road to take?
- Do you have a genuine "game-changing" strategy?
- Do you control your market segment or do you play to rules others have set?
- Do you ever feel that you, the SLT and the business are a little cosy and comfortable?

When Strategic Thinking is missing at the top, organisations drift. Without clear direction, teams waste time on short-term fixes, opportunities slip through the cracks, and resources are spread too thin or utilised ineffectively. Momentum stalls, morale dips, and competitors pull ahead. Ultimately, the business becomes reactive rather than proactive—always busy, rarely effective, and constantly playing catch-up. In short, your competitors who are deploying Strategic Thinking will outthink, outpace and outmanoeuvre you and your business.

The book has been divided into five parts.

Part 1 – I expand further on why Strategic Thinking is important, hopefully dispelling the myth that it's difficult. explore what bad Strategic Thinking and planning can lead to. I dig a

little deeper into the what, why and how of critical thinking. Finally, I explain why it's important to involve the wider leadership team.

Part 2 – I walk you through the first critical steps of the Strategic Thinking process. You'll learn how to assess your current business model, your current trading environment and how to assess your unique stakeholder landscape. You will learn how to conduct a wide and deep review of your present and future competition. I systematically take you through how to predict the changes to your future business arena. Then finally, I end where most others try to start with a SWOT analysis. However, you'll learn how to conduct a SWOT analysis properly. 99% of businesses and business coaches do it wrong.

Part 3 – By this stage in the process organisations have collective clarity on where they are and what the future business arena is likely to look like. In part 3 I explore precisely how your organisation will compete and what it is going to look like. Every organisation has a driving force, but most leadership teams don't know what theirs is. I explain why it's such a powerful discovery and how to leverage it to develop a game-changing Future Strategic Profile (FSP) for your business.

Part 4 – Once you and the team have complete alignment on what you want your organisation to look like in the near future, how are you going to get there? I explain the 3 different lenses you and the SLT need to look through in order to make sure your thinking is as wide and deep as possible. Then I share how you should structure all of your incredible outputs in order to nail the critical path to take.

Part 5 – Some final thoughts and additional slices to help you on your way.

One last thing before we get started.

So why the title “Pies or Pie Charts”

At the very core of what I believe to be the most fundamental fact when it comes to Strategic Thinking and effectively executing a winning strategy is – WHO IS INVOLVED. Too many times I've seen Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) come together to review spreadsheets and pie charts produced in isolation by each functional head. After a few hours of debate and defence a compromise vanilla strategy is agreed. The very best the SLT can hope for is incremental growth. Nothing transformational can be achieved this way.

Worse still is when the CEO or Board send for some overpaid firm of consultants to produce a load of pie charts recommending a strategic direction. It might work, it might not, but if it does fail (and it probably will) we can blame the consultant, vow never to use them again and go find another firm of consultants.

At the heart of strategy and execution has to be – WHO YOU INVOLVE. Imagine your SLT for a moment is a huge tray of perfectly baked pies. From the outside they all look pretty similar. Until you sample the pies, slice them open so to speak, you have no idea what's inside. You have no idea what different flavours they have inside. Your SLT, and in fact, all your

people have so much treasure inside. This wealth of experience, know-how, perspective and creativity is hidden in plain sight. Developing your strategy for your business is exactly the same. You have to find out and harness what your SLT and key people “think, feel and believe”. The best chance of success is a strategy developed by the entire SLT plus other key people who are deemed to be your next wave of talent. Not only will it be far richer, but, because they designed it, they’ll be totally committed to seeing it through.

So that’s it – Pies or Pie Charts. Truly harness your key people or stick to functional silo thinking and the annual planning game?

So that’s it, let’s crack on with learning how to think strategically.

Part 1

Why is Strategic Thinking important, yet so rarely deployed?

The Nine Danger Signals

The Strategic Thinking frame outlined later in this book has been used by myself and other DPI partners in well over 3500 businesses since Mike Robert kicked everything off in the early 1980s. That's over 3500 businesses that recognised they could do better at critical thinking. If I look back at my own experiences prior to using DPI in Europe, I can recall feeling that there had to be a better way. The way we did our annual strategic plan felt very clunky, disconnected and regimented. We were following a planning timeline driven by the Finance Director.

Fast forward to 2013. It wasn't difficult to pinpoint a few warning signals that we could advise clients to watch out for; some were obvious, yet very smart leadership teams still do it, time after time. If only I could push the pause button and really nail the danger signals leaders should watch out for. Then it would be kind of self-selecting, they'd be able to scorecard their own situation and bring in help if one or more of the signs were evident in the way they developed the strategy for their business.

Then, in spring of 2015 another DPI partner Nigel Cork and I were heading back from a brilliant but exhausting Strategic Thinking workshop in some remote corner of Switzerland. It was literally planes, trains and automobiles to get there and back. We had a couple of hours to kill while waiting for our flight back to the UK. We went through our collective experiences and came up with nine warning signs or danger signals to watch out for if you're a CEO or on a leadership team. If any of these are familiar to you, then you need to rethink how you go about formulating your strategy.

But what should we call this new filter we'd developed? We came up with "The Nine Danger Signals of Strategy". I did say we were both tired.

9 DANGER SIGNALS SCORECARD		SCORE
1	BUDGETING PROCESS IS DULL	
2	COMPETITOR OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER (C.O.C.D) IS PRESENT	
3	CORNER OFFICE SYNDROME	
4	TOO MANY OPPORTUNITIES	
5	TOO MUCH POWERPOINT	
6	ELEVATOR PITCH FAIL	
7	NUMBER CRUNCHITIS	
8	GOOD IDEAS, POOR EXECUTION	
9	THE IMPLICIT STRATEGY	
TOTAL		

Figure 1.3

The Nine Danger Signals of Strategy

If you're anything like me, you love simple, easy-to-follow self-assessment tools. Well, that's how you should use the 9 Danger Signals. Be brutally honest and assess which of the following exist in your business today:

1. The Budgeting Process is Dull

There are companies in the world whose CEOs care more about the venue and the menu than about unlocking proper wide and deep Strategic Thinking amongst their leadership team. They think more about the hotel in which to hold the retreat and the restaurant they'll be going to for dinner than the process they'll deploy. Rather than: What's really going on right now, what's around the corner and where our business should be heading.

Those CEOs are probably buried in the mire brought about by the first Strategy Danger Signal: The Budgeting Process is Dull.

Of all the danger signals and mistakes that can be made in formulating a growth strategy, this is probably the biggest and most common one out of all of them.

That's the beauty of danger *signals* – they point to an underlying problem that is not yet perhaps entirely visible.

Too often, a company does not have any transversal thinking, no collective joined-up thinking between key functions, no critical thinking, nothing. What they have is, in fact, an “Annual Planning Cycle”.

An All-Too-Common Scenario – The Financial Director and “The Budget”

Here’s a typical scenario that I have experienced and observed in 90% of the companies we’ve been invited to help.

That Annual Planning Cycle is often driven by Finance. So, the Finance Director or CFO will sidle up to the CEO and say, “Okay, boss, it’s that time of year again. What I’ll do is I’ll send out the spreadsheets and I’ll ask each function to prepare a presentation and put the numbers in there...” and so ... the Planning Game begins.

So, for functions such as Sales, Marketing, HR & training and IT etc, they’ll create their action plans for the coming year and enter all their numbers into the spreadsheet. This could be for building a new service or building a new website, training customer service staff on how to do XYZ, etc. They know that the unwritten rule of the Planning Game is to inflate what you really need by circa 20% or, if you are Sales, reduce the target you believe you can actually achieve by, say, 10%. Then everybody vies to win the “powerpoint challenge”. This is a critical part of the Planning Game. Distract the audience, specifically the CEO and CFO/FD, sufficiently away from the numbers with a powerpoint masterclass of promise upon promise of awesomeness.

Whilst rarely successful, it doesn’t stop them trying.

However, the week before the strategy day, the CEO calls up the CFO/FD and says while looking at the spreadsheet, “Okay, FD. What do the numbers look like?” The FD says, “Well, we wanted 10% growth in both revenue and EBIT. According to these numbers, we’re only going to get 5% and 3% growth. The CFO/FD then makes personal recommendations on where costs can be removed and sales targets increased.

The FD or CEO will drive the timeline and the process. They book a hotel somewhere, get everyone together to show their presentations and talk about their numbers. (Or maybe they’ll just go into the boardroom.)

So here’s the fun part. The CEO and CFO/FD know all about the planning game and the powerpoint challenge. They played it themselves for many years. Now the poachers have turned into gamekeepers. They only really want or expect a 10% increase in Sales, but.... “Okay, we need you to increase Sales by 18.5%”. The Sales Director launches into their well-rehearsed mitigation arguments etc. The rest of the room goes into a cold sweat because they know what’s coming. They’re next....

The Marketing Director does the same, but on the opposite tack: They ask for double the budget to execute all these elaborate digital and social campaigns, knowing they’re going to have that budget cut. Next UP.... IT and so on.