



SHAPING A STRATEGIC THINKING CULTURE AMONG HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERS IN THE CONTEXT OF INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

Nowadays, the field of education is developing in all countries around the world. Higher education remains a key component of this educational system. In order for higher education leaders to successfully manage their institutions, they must continuously acquire a wide range of skills that are in line with the demands of today's innovative era. Through constant self-development, leaders can bring significant benefits to the advancement of their institutions. One of the essential skills that any leader must possess is strategic thinking. Leaders with this skill are able to make decisions with a long-term perspective, which is one of the critical factors in the development of educational institutions.

Keywords: Higher education, strategic thinking, higher education leaders, management, strategy.

Introduction

Nowadays, the concept of competition exists in every field around the world. The field of education is currently one of the fastest-developing sectors. The concept of innovation has become familiar to all of us. Frequent innovative changes in every sector are also encouraging organizations to work more based on innovation. In the 21st century, carrying out any task based on a clear and well-structured strategy has proven to be more effective than acting without a plan.

Due to the growing competition in the field of education, higher education institutions are constantly striving to develop and create opportunities that other institutions cannot offer. Through this, they gain a competitive advantage over other institutions.



Naturally, the question may arise: why is it important to develop a culture of strategic thinking in today's world? To briefly address this question — as mentioned above, in a rapidly changing environment, it is crucial for leaders to be prepared for unexpected changes, to set long-term goals, and to make quick decisions. Leaders with strategic thinking skills can thoroughly and accurately analyze situations and resources, and make forward-looking decisions.

Strategic thinking is an essential skill for leaders in higher education. One might ask why this is so important for them. A leader who thoroughly studies the existing problems within their educational institution can develop clear strategic solutions to eliminate them.

The concept of strategic thinking is a very broad one. According to the book “Strategic Management: A Competitive Advantage Approach, Concepts and Cases” by Fred R. David and Forest R. David, strategic management is defined as the art and science of formulating, implementing, and evaluating cross-functional decisions that enable an organization to achieve its objectives.

A leader's strong strategic thinking ability has a significant impact on improving the quality of education. Through this, the leader makes strategic decisions that positively influence the development of the higher education institution. This, in turn, contributes not only to the progress of that particular institution but also to the advancement of the entire education system.

According to the book “*Strategic Thinking Skills*” by Professor Stanley K. Ridgley, strategic thinking is about unraveling the mysteries of the chaotic world around us and harnessing powerful forces to our own ends. It means utilizing tools of analysis and tactics to take decisive and prudent action that gives us the best possible chance of achieving our objectives — whether those objectives are personal or professional.¹

Through strategic thinking, a leader can accomplish various tasks. For example, suppose several issues arise in the operation of an educational institution — one of them being a significant drop in student attendance. Rather than addressing the issue solely through reprimands, a leader can develop new ways to engage students and encourage them to participate in classes. In both scenarios, the problem is the same, and the goal is to solve it. However, the approaches taken in each case are different. When leaders act based on a clear strategic plan, they are

¹“Strategic thinking skills”, professor Stanley K. Ridgley, 2012



more likely to achieve success. This is because the strategy outlines how long the task should take, which methods should be used, and who is responsible for each part of the work.

Managers with experience and skills in creating and implementing strategies acknowledge that implementing an effective strategy is a more complex challenge than creating one. They emphasize, “Determining which direction to take is not a difficult task for us, but mobilizing the organization to move in that direction is a complicated task.” Implementing a strategy is considered more difficult than developing it because it involves executing large-scale actions, managing numerous solution options to problems, possessing leadership skills, fostering initiative and management, solving major issues, and overcoming resistance to change. The announcement of a new strategy does not mean that the executors will immediately accept it and begin implementation.²

A leader, after analyzing the current state of an educational institution, thoroughly examines all existing achievements and problems. Now the task of overcoming existing problems and the issue of further improvement of existing achievements will have to be considered by the leader. For example, consider the leader of a higher education institution who has identified several issues within their organization. One significant problem is the insufficient number of professors employed at the institution. The leader must explore ways to increase their number. However, the leader cannot simply recruit professors directly from other institutions. Even if the leader offers higher salaries, those professors may already receive competitive compensation at their current workplaces, making it more advantageous for them to remain there. In such a situation, the leader can attract professors by providing unique benefits and opportunities that are unavailable elsewhere and that only their institution can offer. To achieve this, the leader must have a clear understanding of the set goals and develop precise and well-structured tasks necessary to accomplish them. By doing so, the leader can successfully reach the intended purposes. Strategic thinking has the potential to elevate a leader’s performance to new heights.

There are numerous books on strategy, each offering different interpretations of its meaning. If a leader sets a goal for their institution to be ranked among the top 1000 universities by the year 2030, this constitutes their strategy. In other words,

² “Strategik boshqarish”, G.Yu. Xo‘djamuratova, Toshkent – “Iqtisodiyot” - 2019



a strategy answers the question of what needs to be done. Such a strategy typically spans several years. The questions of what actions to take and how to take them are addressed by tactics. Increasing the number of professors, improving the quality of education, and undertaking all necessary steps to enter the top 1000 universities fall within the scope of tactics. Another important aspect is that although the strategic goal remains singular, the tasks set to achieve it may change from time to time. In such cases, even if the goal remains unchanged, the methods to achieve it may vary depending on the circumstances.

Another example can be given to illustrate the concepts of strategy and tactics. Football is a familiar game to everyone. In this game, both teams enter the field with the aim of winning. Each team consists of 11 professional players. However, the first team defeats the second team with a score of 5-0. While the strategy of both teams is the same—to win—the tactics employed by their coaches differ significantly. The coach who has thoroughly studied the opposing team gives individual instructions to players aimed at neutralizing the opponents' strengths, ultimately leading his team to victory. If we consider higher education leaders as coaches, their teams are the employees working under their supervision, and the two teams represent two educational institutions. Both leaders share the same goal: to place their institution among the top 1000 universities by 2030. However, when the deadline arrives, the first institution achieves its goal while the second faces failure. This indicates that the first leader's chosen tactics and strategic thinking skills are more developed than those of the second leader.

“Strategic Management: Concepts & Cases” by Arthur A. Thompson, Jr. and A.J. Strickland III states that strategy formulation is one aspect of market-driven entrepreneurial activity. Creating a strategic action plan presupposes risk and fearlessness, business creativity and flair that clearly capture the emergence of market opportunities.³

The strategic education knowledge of higher education leaders can be further enriched through specialized seminars and masterclasses. Additionally, experience sharing involving international experts can be highly beneficial.

According to Richard L. Hughes and Katherine Colarelli Beatty in their book “Becoming a strategic leader”, strategic thinking refers to cognitive processes required for the collection, interpretation, generation, and evaluation of

³ “Стратегический менеджмент: концепции и ситуации”, А.А Томпсон, мл. А.Дж. Стрикленд III, девятое издание, 2000

information and ideas that shape an organization's sustainable competitive advantage. It's one of the three processes driving strategic learning in organizations (along with strategic acting and influencing), which means that strategic thinking involves a collective dimension as well as an individual one. In other words, for organizations to develop sustainable competitive advantage, it's not enough to have great individual strategic thinkers. It also takes individuals who influence one another's thinking, deepening and enhancing their collective understanding and insight. That's because the complex and changing nature of the competitive environment increasingly requires bringing diverse perspectives to bear on business challenges.⁴

In conclusion, developing the strategic thinking abilities of higher education leaders remains one of the most important issues of our time. In today's era of innovation, all sectors are rapidly evolving. This, in turn, requires all leaders working in the field of higher education to continuously improve their qualifications, make decisions with future changes in mind, and implement their goals based on clearly defined strategic plans. In other words, they are increasingly expected to carry out tasks that require strategic thinking in every aspect of their work. Therefore, this issue remains one of the most important and urgent issues of the present day.

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