



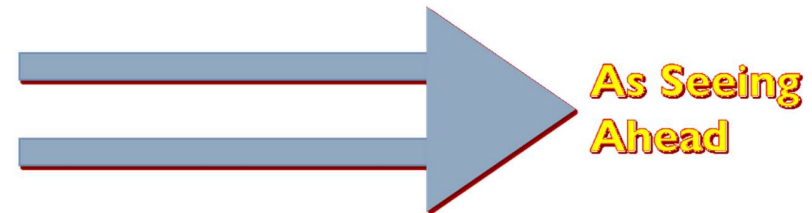
## Strategic Thinking as “Seeing”

14 September 2018

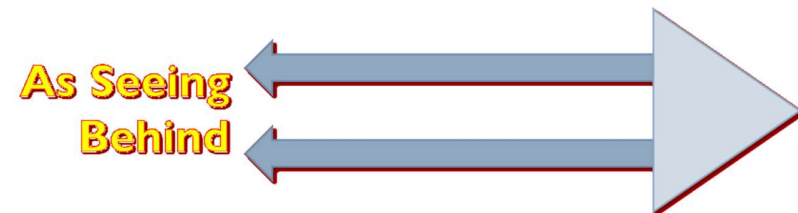
Maybe we think too much and see too little. What, then, does strategic seeing mean?

Let’s begin with what strategic thinking is not. It’s not following an industry recipe or copying a competitor’s strategy or continuing to do what was always done—at least not unless these have been carefully considered. In other words, strategic thinking is not mindlessness, not imitation, not thoughtless persistence. Nor is it purely cerebral: separating self from the subject of strategy and working it out cleverly in a meeting.

Most people would agree that strategic thinking means **seeing ahead**.



But we can’t see ahead unless we **see behind**, because any good vision of the future has to be rooted in an understanding of the past. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, life may be lived forward, but it is understood backward.



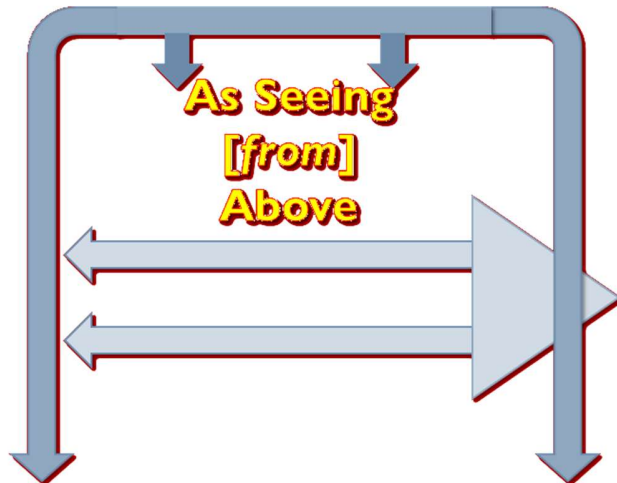
Of course, even the best knowledge of the past may not help to see the future. We need to foresee discontinuities rather

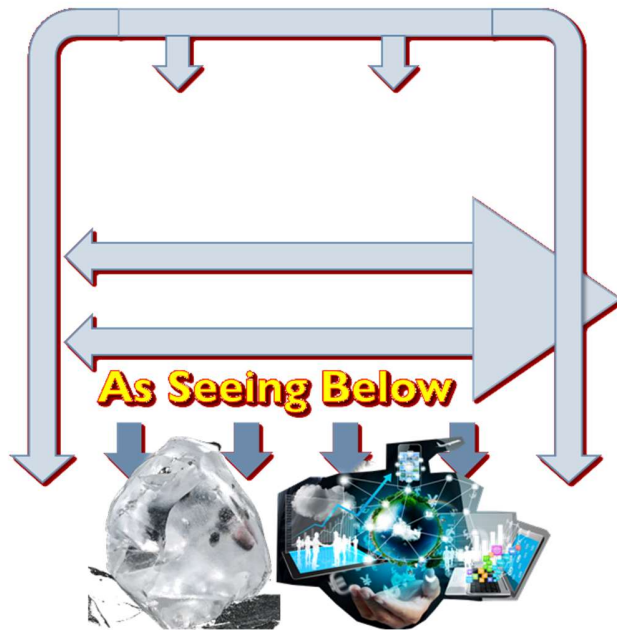


than extrapolating trends. And for this, there are no techniques, not much more than informed, creative intuition.

Some people think that strategic thinking is about “distinguish the forest from the trees”. The only way to do this is to hover above those trees. To them, therefore, strategic thinking is **seeing above**.

But can anyone get the “big picture” just by seeing above. The forest looks like a carpet from a helicopter, yet anyone who has taken a walk in a forest knows that it doesn’t look like that on the ground. Strategists can’t understand much about forests if they stay in helicopters, nor much about organizations if they stay in head offices.

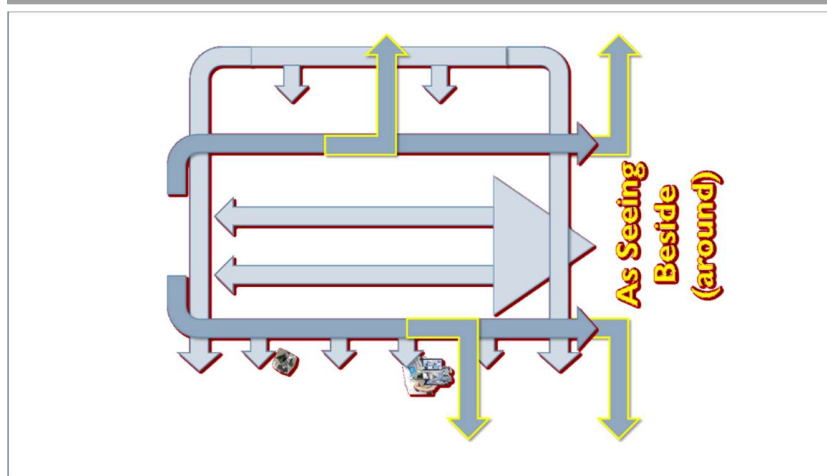




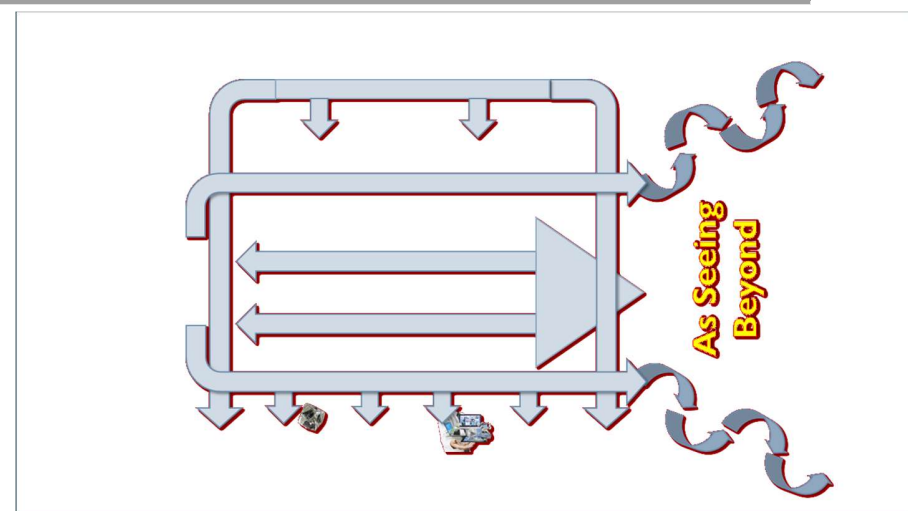
I prefer the metaphor of finding the diamond in the rough: see the gem of an idea that changes an organization. And that does not come from the big picture at all, but from a lot of hard and messy digging. Indeed, there is no big picture (let alone precious gem) readily available to strategists. It must be

constructed from the details that they dig up—or the brushstrokes painted one-by-one. Thus, strategic thinking is also inductive thinking: seeing above must be inferred from **seeing below**.

Yet you can see ahead by seeing behind and see above by seeing below and still not be a strategic thinker. That takes creativity, even ordinary creativity. Strategic thinkers see differently from other people; they pick out the precious gems that others miss, paint their own pictures, challenge conventional wisdom—and thereby differentiate their organizations. Such thinking has been referred to as lateral thinking, and so we can call it **seeing beside**.



There are many creative ideas in this world, far more than we can handle—just visit any art gallery. And so, to think strategically requires more than just seeing beside. Those creative ideas have to be placed into context, to be seen to work in a world that is to unfold. Strategic thinkers, in other words, also **see beyond**.

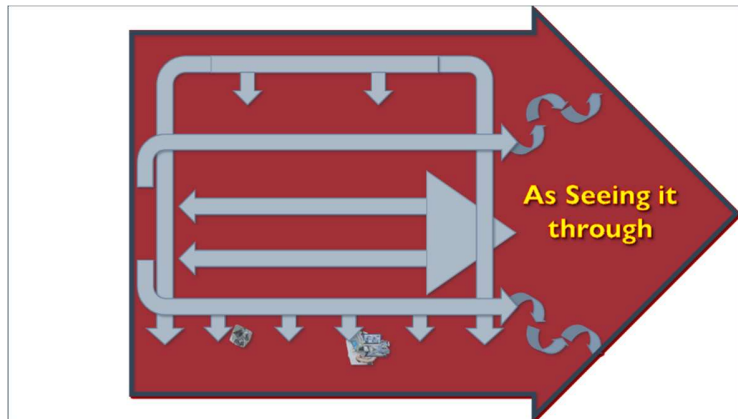


Seeing beyond is different from seeing ahead. The latter foresees an expected future by constructing a framework out of the past. The former constructs the future—it invents a world that would not otherwise exist.

But strategic thinking is not finished yet, because there remains one last necessary ingredient. What is the use of doing all this seeing—ahead and behind, above and below,



beside and beyond—if nothing gets done? In other words, to deserve the label **strategic**, thinkers and organizations must also **see it through**.



Put this all together and you get the following: strategic thinking as seeing

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