

Changing Your Altitude: Thinking Strategically, Setting Goals, & Taking Action

Use this method to jumpstart the change you want to see in the year ahead.

By Jennifer Meder & Jessica Kohnen

How much time today did you spend reflecting on your long-term personal financial goals? How about strategizing ways to reduce your family's carbon footprint?

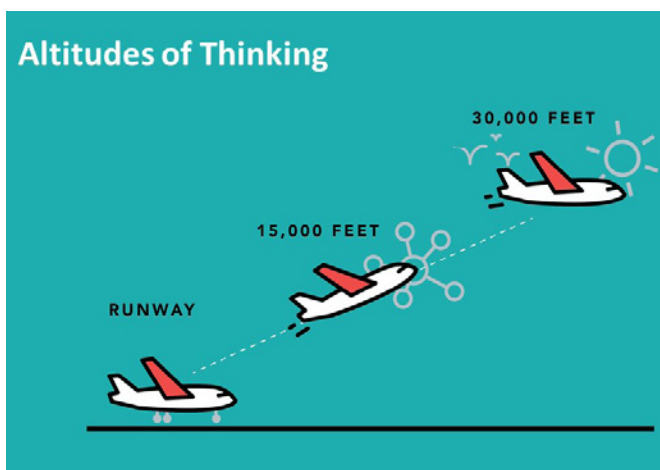
It's likely you barely had time to hit the ATM or take out the recycling. And the pace is no doubt similar in your professional life, where we all tend to tackle whatever lands in front of us versus what will best accomplish our larger ambitions.

The demands of nonprofit work can keep even the most visionary leaders mired in the day-to-day, making it a challenge to look up, reset, and optimize where we're headed. Carving out time for high-level strategic thinking and planning is hard. Even harder is to queue up the actions required to execute a plan. Both, however, are vital to organizational success – and professional fulfillment.

A method to pause the madness

The winter stretch is an ideal time to pause, step back, and set a strategic course for the upcoming year. A proven way to approach the task is what we call altitudes of thinking. It's a practical method you can apply to any area of professional or personal goal-setting – and it can be transformational.

The power of this technique is that it helps define both big-picture goals and the actions that will bring them to fruition. It can be a formal group activity you undertake at a team retreat or something you do on the back of a napkin



as you're scarfing down a sandwich before getting on the train. In either case, it's an effective, doable way to jumpstart the change you want to see this year.

Start at 30,000 feet: Visualize success

Research shows that Olympic athletes who visualize a successful outcome before competition greatly improve their performance. Likewise, the first step in achieving a goal is to elevate your thinking to the 30,000-foot level and visualize what success looks like. What's the ultimate goal? Is it to establish collaboration with a new partner? Complete a languishing project? Recruit new board members or grow your volunteer base?

The ability to visualize an outcome before it happens is a skill that must be developed and honed, because thinking strategically isn't the brain's preferred state. It's hard work, and it takes practice. A great way to start, however, is simply by completing the following statement:

"Wouldn't it be great if, by this time next year, we"

EXAMPLE: 30,000-FOOT THINKING

Wouldn't it be great if, by this time next year, we've built a collaborative culture?

Take the 15,000 view: Identify pathways

Once you've established what success looks like, bring your thinking down a level to define your roadmap. Taking the 15,000-foot view is about creating a blueprint for achieving what you've visualized. This is where you'll think about what you could, should, and might do to propel yourself in the right direction. If you're familiar with Tony Buzan's mind-mapping approach to brainstorming, this is a great time to put those techniques to work.

EXAMPLE: 15,000-FOOT THINKING

What areas do we need to think about to help us build a collaborative culture?

- Core values
- Internal communications
- Giving and receiving feedback
- And so on

Touch down: Take action on the runway

In the altitudes of thinking model, the runway is where the rubber meets the road. Your personal runway is about the day-to-day when you must choose how you spend your time in order to move toward your visualized goal.

In your planning exercise, this is where you identify the actions you'll take on a daily or weekly basis to get you to where you want to go. Each of these granular actions will connect to an idea you generated at the 15,000-foot view.

There's a science to making your action items stick: Follow the three M's. Strive for runway actions that are:

Meaningful. Will your action make a difference? Is it worth doing? Actions must recognize what else is happening to meet the mission, and they should connect directly to your cause.

Motivating. Runway actions should be challenging but not daunting. Focus on tasks that are enough of a stretch to inspire you and be rewarding but that aren't so overwhelming that you feel paralyzed or demoralized when you think about the action.

Measurable. How will you know when the task is done? Each runway action should be quantifiable (specific and time-bound) so you'll know when you've achieved it.

EXAMPLE: RUNWAY THINKING

What meaningful, measurable, motivating changes can we make to our internal communications to help us build a collaborative culture?

- Assess current communications by the end of March. Note internal communication methods and frequency.
- Gather feedback at the April retreat about ideas to improve internal communications.
- Create an internal communications workgroup of five to seven staff members to refine ideas identified at the April retreat and bring to the May management team meeting for consideration.
- And so on . . .

Now move your deadline from one year to one quarter

Once you've identified your strategic goal, mapped your course of action, and patted yourself on the back for doing so, it's time for a bit of psychological sleight of hand. Keeping up the momentum and staying on track will require diligence and time-management tactics to keep your runway from becoming gridlocked. Setting an interim deadline can keep you on course.

There's interesting research that shows we tend to lose our sense of urgency when we think we have an entire year to accomplish something. When we focus on a 12-week time horizon, we procrastinate less, reduce avoidance activity, and do more of the things that matter.

“The winter stretch is an ideal time to set a strategic course.”

So, with your 12-month vision firmly in place, think about an interim goal you could achieve in the next 12 weeks to move your vision forward. Keeping your eyes on that prize is the key to sustained progress. 

Jennifer Meder (jennifer@hellohyve.com) and Jessica Kohlen (jessica@hellohyve.com) are founding partners of hyve (hellohyve.com), a Mid-Atlantic-based consulting firm that supports organizations to set clear strategic direction, build accountability, and strengthen teams so people feel valued and know their work has purpose. By providing insights, building tools, and crafting people practices, they help move great missions forward faster.

Looking Deeper

If you're interested in a deeper exploration of strategic thinking and planning using the altitudes of thinking model, view Jennifer Meder and Jessica Rohnen's webinar **Thinking Strategically, Setting Goals, Taking Action** (snpo.org/webinars).

Pause, Think, & Take Action

Refer to articles at NonprofitWorld.org to turn your strategic thinking into action.

Powerful New Communication Tool for Your Meetings: Engaging Both Sides of Your Brain (Vol. 26, No. 3)

Creating a Values-Based Road Map (Vol. 23, No. 2)

Before You Plan Where to Go, Find Out Where You Are (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Ten Steps to Excellence: Mission to Action (Vol. 23, No. 4)

Do You Know Where Your Goals Are? (Vol. 26, No. 5)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

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How Can Your Board Participate in Strategic Planning? (Vol. 30, No. 2)

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