

Strategic

Strategic thinking skills can help transportation leaders focus on their operational environment.

■ By Chief Warrant Officer 4 William L. McClain



Thinking

for Transportation Leaders



Soldiers assigned to the 1245th Transportation Company, 1034th Combat Sustainment Support Battalion, escort military vehicles as they prepare to leave on their convoy escort team mission en route to two forward operating bases in Regional Command North, June 18, 2013. (Photo by Sgt. Sinthia Rosario)

The motto of the Transportation Corps, “Nothing happens until something moves,” is a good tool for leaders to rally transportation Soldiers to go out and accomplish great things. Similarly, stating the motto as a concluding remark during official functions validates the significance of the Transportation Corps spearheading logistics into the future. With the Army’s mandate for the Transportation Corps to reduce its personnel and equipment over the next decade, corps leaders will need to do some strategic thinking. The motto will remain relevant only if leaders use good strategic thinking skills now to focus on the overall operational environment in which they function.

Strategic Planning

The first step in understanding strategic thinking is to recognize the role of strategic planning. Every day, strategic planning across the Army occurs shortly before mission execution. For example, at the tactical level, convoy commanders plan their con-

voys using the eight troop-leading procedures. At the operational level, the commander of a transportation movement control battalion plans the reception, staging, onward movement, and integration of personnel and equipment using the military decisionmaking process (MDMP).

At the strategic level, the Chief of Transportation uses the MDMP to plan better transportation leader development and to improve support for deployment and distribution, among other strategic initiatives. It is appropriate, therefore, to ensure that leaders can think strategically to produce viable plans.

Strategic Thinking

Leaders who think strategically display specific personal traits, behaviors, and attitudes. For example, leaders within a transportation formation may be on their way to becoming strategic thinkers if they demonstrate curiosity, flexibility, a future focus, a positive outlook, and openness. However, change is con-

stant, and embracing change starts with establishing the strategic thinking competencies that all leaders in the Transportation Corps need. Examining strategic thinking for individual leaders reveals the competencies that a leader should have in order to achieve sustainable change. These are presented in figure 1.

Scanning. Often people wait until a mandate or serious accident occurs to bring about needed change. Since Transportation Corps leaders do not wait, it is vital that they align their strategic thinking with the Chief of Transportation’s lines of effort through 2020. This involves scanning the Transportation Corps’ strategic priorities for people, materiel and equipment systems, force structure, training, doctrine, and collaboration. Transportation Corps leaders should use strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis to find their strengths and weaknesses. (See figure 2.)

Visioning. Although it is important to assess where the Transportation Corps is, it is equally important that those leading the change effort devote time to the vision. This means making sure a road map is in place to plan the course. To achieve this requires support of the Transportation Corps’ vision: “To be ... a bastion of transportation innovation, adaptive training, and expertise producing people and materiel that permeate all facets of military logistics and operations with relevant vigor and spearhead logistics into the future.”

Effective strategic change requires a vision of what the leader is trying to accomplish. However, for Transportation Corps leaders to be effective leaders of change, they must paint the picture of what the future state will be like, communicate the vision to all involved, and reinforce the vision through words and deeds.

Reframing. A core attribute of strategic thinking is the willingness not to revert or stand still in one’s mindset but instead to teach the mind to focus on the future. The trick is to develop an eye for signs that to-

Competency	Description	Example
Scanning	Assessing the organization.	Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis.
Visioning	Creating a view of what the organization should be.	A vision statement.
Reframing	Finding signs that together present a new pattern that will be useful in strategic planning.	Restate the implicit belief.
Making common sense	Establishing a shared framework of the situation.	Create ways to discuss unbridgeable subjects.
Systems thinking	Discerning the relationships among different variables in a difficult circumstance.	If product cost is an important factor for a consumer, then an increase in price may be perceived as disloyalty.

Figure 1. Five strategic thinking competencies needed for sustainable change.

gether present a new pattern that will be useful in strategic planning.

For example, the October 2011 U.S. Government Accountability Office report to Congress, “DOD [Department of Defense] Has Made Progress, but Supply and Distribution Challenges Remain in Afghanistan,” states that the department is not effectively tracking and managing cargo containers for Afghanistan operations. Based on this information, transportation leaders should question everything and seek to see things differently until a new pattern surfaces.

Until the deployment and distribution process meets or exceeds that of FedEx and the United Parcel Service, transportation leaders must continue observing operations with fresh eyes.

Making common sense. We all know more than we can put into words. When we add the task of creating a shared understanding of a situation, misinterpretation and conflict can occur. Bridging the gap between junior and senior leaders within the Transportation Corps is critical to applying common sense to the operational environment and the challenges ahead and to facing those collective challenges.

Methods of broaching indescribable topics between junior and senior leaders include building a shared understanding through visual images, dialog, metaphors, stories, and other visual and verbal tools. For instance, the quarterly Transportation Corps Connect (live broadcast) is an ideal forum for developing a shared view of the current and future state of the Transportation Corps and discussing ongoing strategic initiatives. This ensures that all past, present, and future leaders have a shared view of the way ahead.

Systems thinking. Many problematic situations confront leaders and organizations today. Dealing with these problems and creating solutions frequently creates doubt about the outcome. One approach that helps explore all possible results is systems thinking. Systems thinking

Strategy	Scanning Question	SWOT Analysis	
People	Are you delivering trained, innovate, and adaptive transporters who understand logistics?	Strengths: Weaknesses: Opportunities: Threats:	Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No
Materiel and equipment systems and force structure	Are you developing modern solutions that meet the customer's needs?	Strengths: Weaknesses: Opportunities: Threats:	Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No
Training and doctrine	Are you providing functional expertise to meet commander and Army requirements?	Strengths: Weaknesses: Opportunities: Threats:	Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No
Collaboration	Are you fully integrated in the deployment and distribution enterprise?	Strengths: Weaknesses: Opportunities: Threats:	Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No Yes or No

Figure 2. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis framework for transporters.

is extremely effective in solving problems by seeing the big picture versus the little picture. In essence, if you focus only on your section and disregard the big picture of the organization, you lose sight of the outcome of your actions.

Consider looking at the One Army School System (OASS) initiative through the systems-thinking lens for a long-term benefit. According to the Transportation Corps Strategic Blueprint, the OASS will allow the Transportation Corps to synchronize the three Army component school systems (active duty, Reserve, and National Guard) into one training capability to give officers and non-commissioned officers the ability to attend the right class at the right time regardless of component.

From a systems-thinking perspective, one should slow down, step back, ask questions, assess the requirements, and see the interrelationships before planning. If the OASS does not provide a balanced and equal training opportunity for students regardless of component, then reframing the landscape is needed.

The Army is transforming, and leaders within the Transportation Corps must understand the Army vision and concept for the next 15 years and be prepared to support it. This begins with competence in good strategic thinking skills. Mastering these skills allows leaders to become true strategic partners. For this reason, leaders in the Transportation Corps must lift their heads above day-to-day work and think, envision, shape, set conditions, and integrate with a strategic thinking mindset.

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