



# Strategic shifts that build executive leadership

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## KEYWORDS

Strategic leadership;  
Mid-level leader;  
Leadership development;  
Middle management;  
Self-talk;  
Organizational influence

**Abstract** Organizations are challenged to develop leaders who can think strategically about the business and solve systemic problems. How can mid-level leaders develop this capability? Herein, we describe five strategic shifts in perspective that are essential for mid-level managers in transitioning successfully to strategic leadership positions. All five shifts improve mid-level leaders' ability to look beyond tactics to see wider opportunities and enable strategic impact. The shifts are iterative and build on each other. We offer a new model that guides managers in shaping strategic leaders using these five perspective shifts to impact the organization positively and substantially. Further, we provide specific techniques that mid-level managers can employ to shift their perspectives and build personal strategic capabilities. Finally, we share specific 'Try It' exercises that mid-level managers can engage in to learn about the preferred concepts.

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## 1. The need for strategic leaders

Jean is stuck. She has been promoted but is working later than ever. Her manager loves her work. Her team respects her and comes to her with their challenges and conflicts. Jean revels in the support she gives her team. She enjoys the responsibility, but she is starting to burn out. Juggling her new position and supporting the continuous challenges

from her team is overwhelming. She feels like she can barely do her job at this level, let alone seek another career step. She has even considered returning to a single contributor role. Jean cannot make the strategic shift.

Mid-level leaders struggle to transition from the everyday tactical to thinking more broadly about the business. This strategic shift in perspective requires leaders to move beyond their traditional tasks toward focusing on improving the business and increasing their impact. As the economy continues to become more dynamic and change-oriented (Kotter, 2012), businesses are increasingly asking middle managers to do more with less and to think

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strategically about the business (Schoemaker, Krupp, & Howland, 2013). Yet, managers such as Jean lack the skills to make this transition. Only 15% of U.S. and Asian companies feel they have sufficient managerial talent in the pipeline (McKinney, McMahon, & Walsh, 2013). The picture gets more complex when we consider the impetus to increase the number of women in senior managerial roles. Women are stranded in middle management, comprising 52% of that workforce; only 4.6% of Fortune 500 CEOs are female (Warner, 2014). The leadership potential of leaders like Jean is getting stuck in the talent pipeline.

The solution lies in building the capability of mid-level managers such that they can transition to higher-level leadership. This involves moving beyond tactical concerns toward understanding the wider purview of the business' needs. Leaders employing a strategic approach develop an organization-wide, systemic viewpoint that communicates benefit and value. We have worked with over 200 mid-level leaders in peer leadership communities and one-to-one coaching as part of a leadership development experience. Participating companies range in size from large technology firms to mid-size multinationals. Our experience working with middle and senior leaders across these diverse organizations suggests Jean's challenge is not an isolated one.

The process of building strategic leadership currently focuses on developing essential skills, such as decision making and understanding stakeholder needs (Schoemaker et al., 2013). While these skills matter, our work shows that the transition from mid-level leadership to senior leadership requires

five key shifts in perspective that combine skills with these much-needed perspective changes (see Figure 1). Mid-level leaders must learn to alter their view of how work gets done before they can implement the essential skills necessary for executive leadership.

## 2. Five key strategic shifts that build executive leadership

### 2.1. Shift your perspective of you

The first key shift is to expand how the mid-level leader perceives his/her own ability to influence. Often, mid-level leaders feel it is not their place to influence and they worry they will make a mistake (Schoemaker & Gunther, 2006). They struggle to influence the outcome or share their ideas across multiple levels (Ashford & Detert, 2015).

#### Exercise 1.

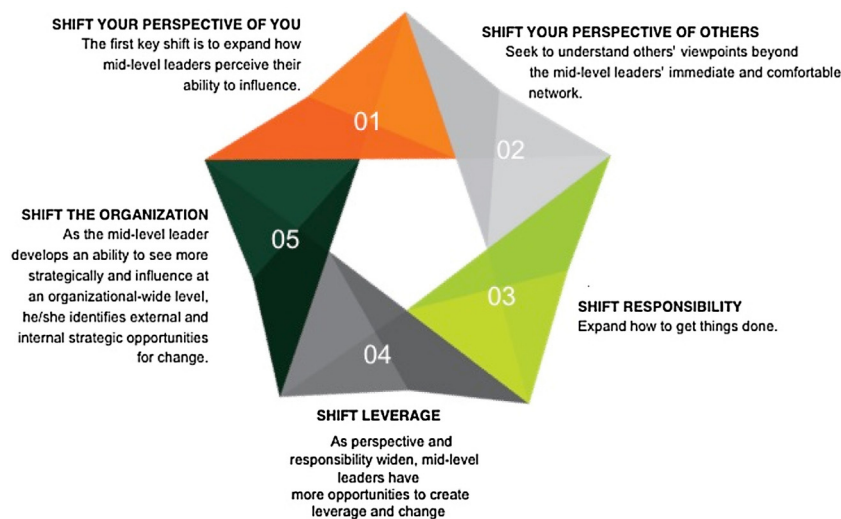
##### Try it

Imagine yourself as a strategic influencer, someone that has significant responsibility and is helping to create the business strategy.

Where does resistance appear? What assumptions underlie that resistance?

Shifting perspective requires mid-level leaders to identify the pieces they have the ability to control. Then, they must discern which pieces necessitate the influence of others (e.g., asking peers from other departments to provide resources, asking one's manager to offer stretch assignments). Mid-level leaders can assess their strengths and

Figure 1. Five strategic shifts



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