



Thinking Strategically as a Team

July 9, 2025

Presenters



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What is UBC?

University Business Consulting (UBC) is an **internal George Mason management consulting** practice committed to identifying and capitalizing on **opportunities for innovation**, turning data into **insights**, and **increasing efficiency** across George Mason University.

Using our **experience in higher education, project management, facilitation, analytics, and strategic planning**, we work alongside our George Mason clients to devise solutions that **support them in reaching their goals** across the university.

UBC is located within the Office of the President.

<https://consulting.gmu.edu/>

TODAY'S PURPOSE IS TWOFOLD:

First, to give you simple, powerful tools to help you think and act more strategically in your day-to-day work.

And second, to show you what strategic thinking looks like in action – by walking you through a session that was intentionally designed using those same principles.

Goals for Today

1

Understand 5Ws and H (Why, What, Who, When, Where, and How) of strategic thinking

2

Explore practical tools and frameworks that support strategic thinking, including SOAR, SWOT, the Impact/Effort Matrix, and Start/Stop/Continue

3

Apply strategic thinking to real situations in your own life, both personal and professional

5Ws and H



01 | WHY
Purpose and
Impact



02 | WHAT
Focus and
Priorities



03 | WHO
Stakeholders
and
Influence



05 | WHERE
Context and
Environment

04 | WHEN
Timing and
Sequencing



06 | HOW
Execution
and
Culture

**“The greatest danger in times of
turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to
act with yesterday’s logic.”**

Peter Drucker



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Why Strategic Thinking Matters

Strategic thinking helps teams navigate uncertainty by:

Focusing on what matters most:

Cutting through noise to clarify priorities

Aligning work with purpose and mission

Adapting with intention:

Responding to change with clarity, not chaos

Balancing flexibility with long-term direction

Influencing outcomes instead of reacting to them:

Anticipating roadblocks and opportunities

Proactively shaping the future instead of waiting for it

Why It Matters — Especially Now



Short-Term Pressures

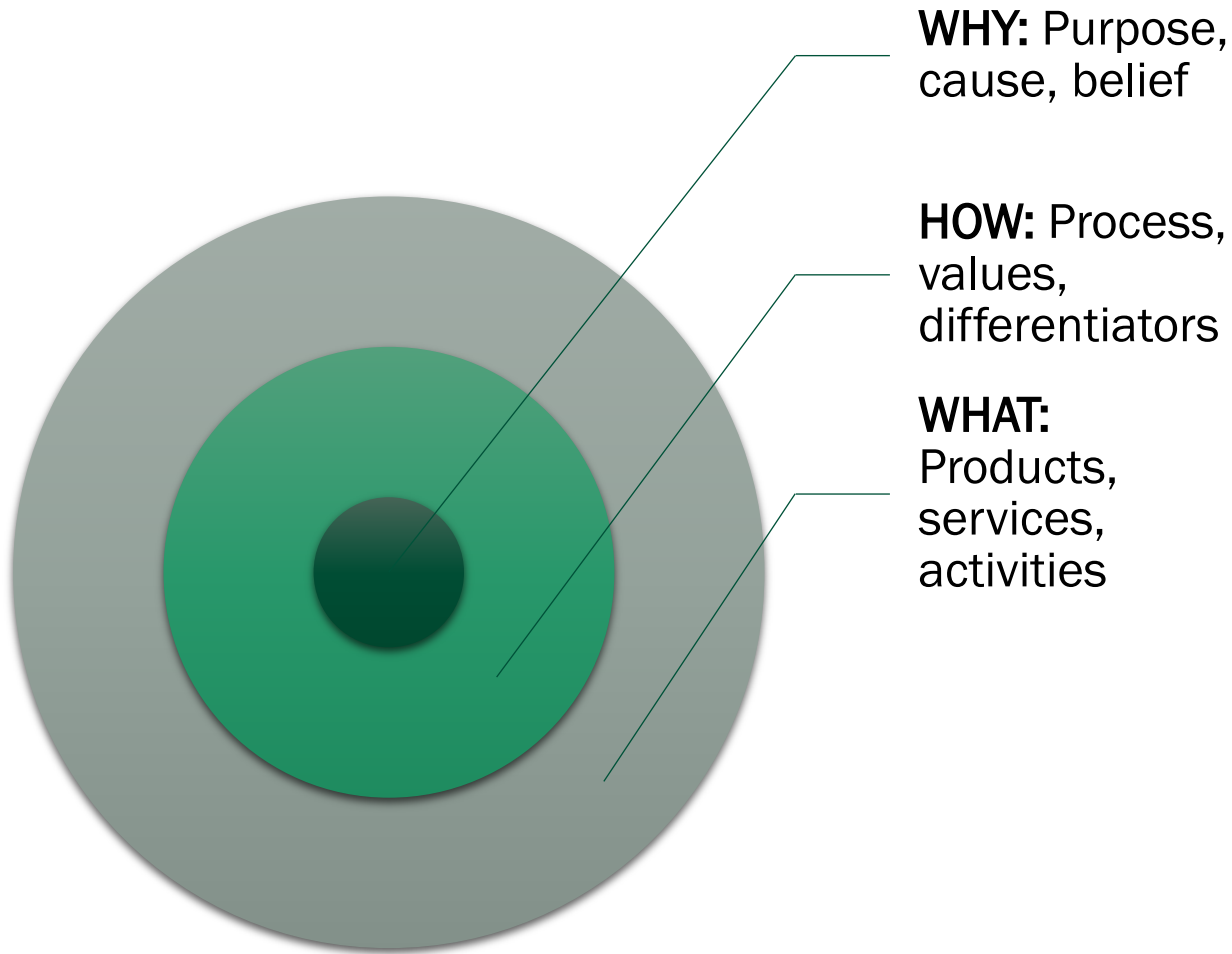
- **Enrollment volatility** (especially post-pandemic and in light of declining demographics)
- **Shifting student expectations** around value, flexibility, and experience
- **Rapid technology shifts** (AI, digital learning platforms, online delivery models)
- **Budget constraints and cost-cutting cycles**
- **Increased competition** from credentialing programs, bootcamps, and alternative education providers
- **Staff burnout and organizational change fatigue**



Long-Term Direction

- **Rethinking the student experience** to attract and retain diverse learners
- **Reimagining curriculum** to reflect changing workforce demands
- **Building flexible and hybrid learning ecosystems**
- **Aligning culture efforts** with lasting institutional change
- **Strengthening community partnerships and workforce pipelines**
- **Developing sustainable models** for financial, technological, and human capital

Simon Sinek's – The Golden Circle



- Start with WHY! – it is the purpose, cause, or belief.
- Rather than going from the clearest to the fuzziest thing, you work from the inside out.
- Aligns decision-making, drives engagement, and allows teams to say *no* to distractions.

[Simon Sinek TedTalk](#)



Why is the “WHY” so important?

“People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” – Simon Sinek

- Strategic thinking starts with a purpose. If we don’t know why we are doing something, we cannot assess whether it is worth doing it, or how to prioritize it.
- Strategic “WHY” Questions:
 - Why does this matter?
 - Why now?
 - Why this approach versus another?
 - Why would stakeholders care?
 - **BUT ALSO:** Why should we *not* do this?

Why is the “WHY” so important?

“People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” – Simon Sinek

- Strategic thinking is about understanding why we are doing something, not just how to do it or how to prioritize it.
- Strategic “WHY” is the reason why we are doing something. You need to know or have an understanding of your WHY before you can bring other people on the same path. Your WHY will empower others to think strategically as well.
- Why does this matter?
- Why now?
- Why this approach versus another?
- Why would stakeholders care?
- **BUT ALSO:** Why should we *not* do this?

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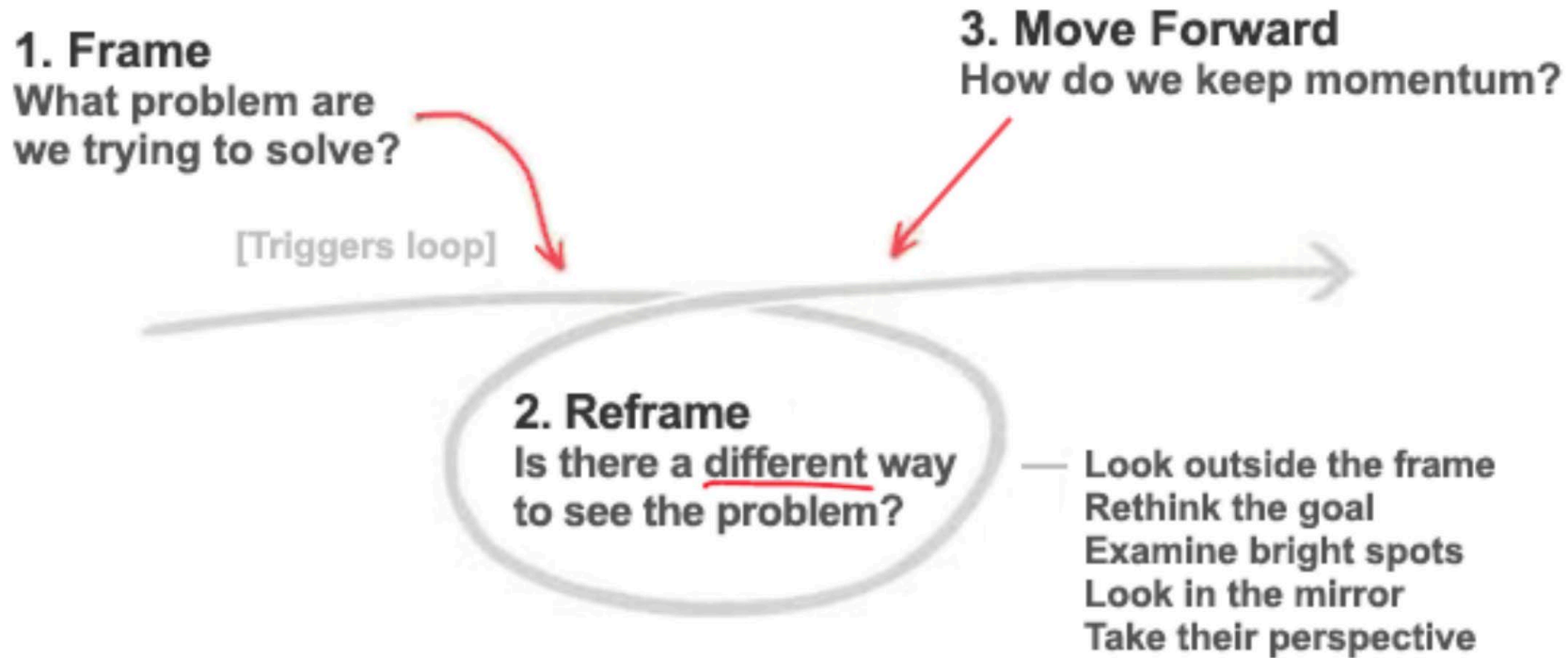
“Strategy is about making choices.”
Michael Porter

What Does It Mean to Think Strategically?

Strategic thinking means making intentional decisions with the long view in mind; aligning today's actions with future goals and organizational mission.

Tactical vs. Strategic Thinking	
Tactical Thinking	Strategic Thinking
Short-term focus	Long-term vision
Task execution	Purposeful planning
“What needs to be done today?”	“Where are we going and why?”
Reactive	Proactive and adaptive

Seeing the Problem Differently



Source: ©2020 *What's Your Problem?* by Thomas Wedell-Wedellsborg

Problem Reframing Approach

Frame Problem – *What is it and who is involved?*

Look Outside Frame – *What are we missing?*

Rethink Goal – *Is there a better goal to pursue?*

Examine Bright Spots – *Are there positive exceptions?*

Look in Mirror – *Am I contributing to the problem?*

Take their Perspective – *What problem are they trying to solve?*

Move Forward – *How do we keep momentum?*

What Strategic Thinking Looks Like in Action

Situation	Strategic Thinking Response
A project deadline is tight	What is the core outcome we need? Can we adjust scope without losing value?
Your team is swamped with requests	Which of these align with our broader goals? Can we pause or delegate?
A new tool is being rolled out	How does this change support our long-term ways of working?
You are asked to give feedback	What is the impact of this feedback in 6 months (not just today)?
Strategic thinking shows up as questions, framing, and choices.	

What Makes Strategic Thinking Hard?



TOO FOCUSED ON
URGENT TASKS



LACK OF CLARITY
ON GOALS



FEAR OF BEING
WRONG



THINKING IT'S
“NOT MY JOB”

Real-World Example :

Which of the following are examples of strategic thinking? (*Choose all that apply*)

- A. A staff assistant notices that a monthly team report takes a long time to compile. They follow the process exactly as written each month.
- B. The same staff assistant notices duplicated effort and recurring data issues in the reporting process. They suggest combining two steps, propose using a shared template, and bring it up at the team meeting to save time and improve data quality across the board.
- C. A coordinator receives a last-minute request and quickly completes the task to meet the deadline.
- D. A team member notices that their department is receiving the same student inquiry over and over. They propose updating the website and creating a short explainer video to reduce incoming questions.
- E. A colleague volunteers to organize the holiday party and carefully manages every detail to ensure it runs smoothly.

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"Who, in your opinion, could make an impact by thinking more strategically?"

Who Should be Thinking Strategically?

Strategic Thinking is *not just* for the managers, supervisors, or formal leaders.



Anyone, regardless of position or title, can think strategically.

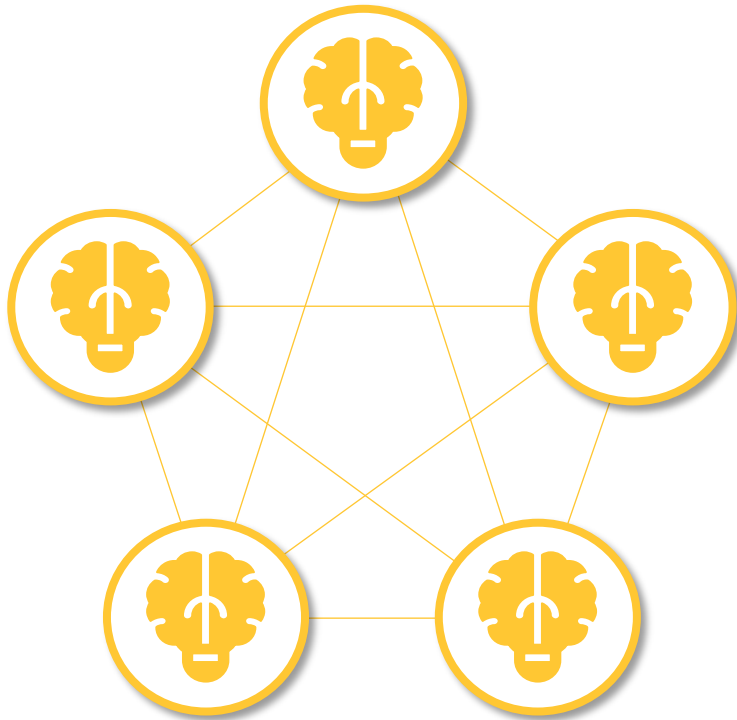


Authority is helpful, but insight, perspective, and initiative are often more powerful in the early phases of strategy development.



People closest to the work often have the clearest vision of needed change.

Strategic Thinking *Can* and *Should* be Distributed



- Creates a **culture of ownership and shared vision**.
- The more distributed thinking, the **more agile and innovative** the team or the institution becomes.
- Teams that encourage contributions from all levels tap into **more diverse thinking**.

You as a Strategic Thinker

Strategic thinking shapes your day-to-day work for the better. It allows you to...

- ✓ Anticipate challenges instead of reacting to them.
- ✓ Align your work with bigger goals – making what you do feel more purposeful.
- ✓ Identify and propose improvements that boost efficiency or impact.
- ✓ Grow your influence, even without formal authority.

Strategic Thinking Enables You To...	What That Looks Like in Daily Work
Work proactively	Plan ahead, anticipate roadblocks, and reduce last-minute scrambles.
Make better decisions	Evaluate trade-offs and act with long-term impact in mind.
Communicate with impact	Present your ideas with clarity, context, and confidence.

The Role of the Sponsor



Sponsors enable strategic thinking. They...

- ✓ Champion new ideas upward
- ✓ Provide access to resources or visibility
- ✓ Help mitigate risk or resistance



Sponsors are often senior leaders, but they can also be peers with influence or trusted mentors.

Leaders as Enablers, Not Sole Strategists

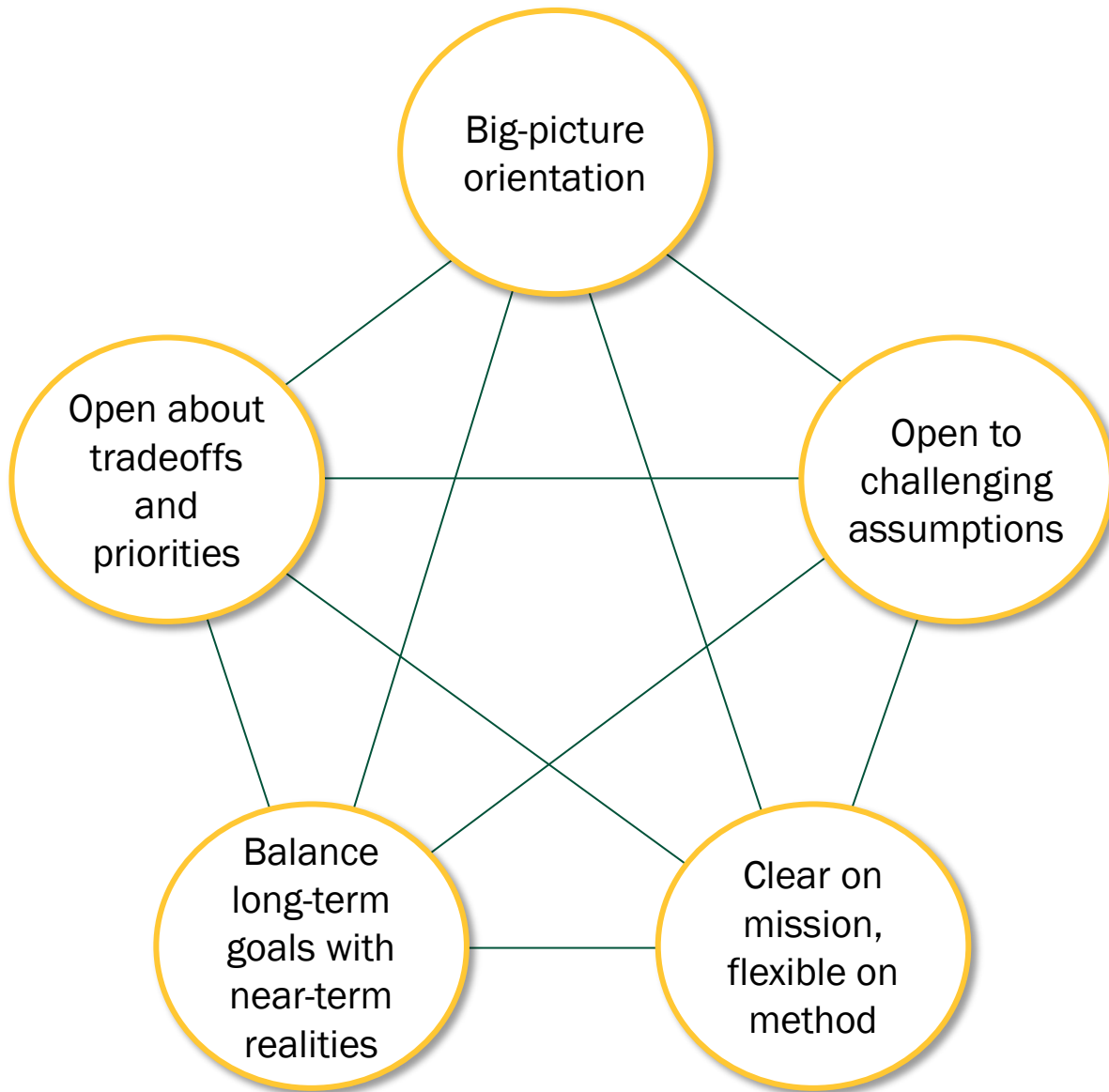
What great leaders do to foster strategic thinking:

- ✓ Encourage curiosity and questions
 - Create a culture of asking “Why are we doing this?” or “What are we solving for?”
 - Invite reflection and discourse.
- ✓ Share the bigger picture
 - Regularly connect team efforts to institutional or organizational goals.
 - Help individuals understand how their work contributes to broader outcomes, both short-term as well as long-term.
- ✓ Create space for idea generation
 - Hold regular strategy huddles or “innovation sprints”.
 - Protect time for thinking, not just doing (e.g., Retreats, Strategy Sessions, Reflection).
- ✓ Reward insight, not just execution
 - Recognize and reward people who propose improvements or raise tough questions.
 - Celebrate strategic contributions, even if they don’t result in immediate change.
- ✓ Model strategic behavior
 - Talk about long-term thinking, trade-offs, and alignment out loud.
 - Show vulnerability: admit uncertainty, ask for input, and be open to changing course.

The Benefit of Empowering your Team

Outcome	Leader's Role
Empowered team	Gives people autonomy and voice.
More innovation	Invites ideas from all levels.
Better decision-making	Leverages diverse perspectives.
Greater engagement	People feel their input matters.
Shared ownership of goals	Everyone feels part of the bigger mission.

Characteristics of Strategic Teams

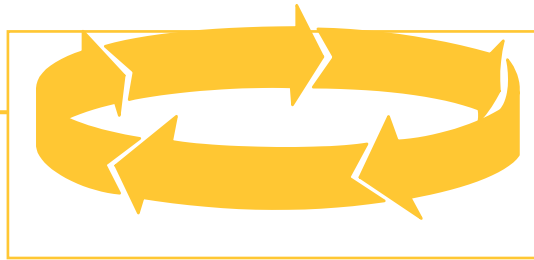




“There is no time like the present”

When is Strategic Thinking Important?

SPOILER: Always. But some moments make it more critical....



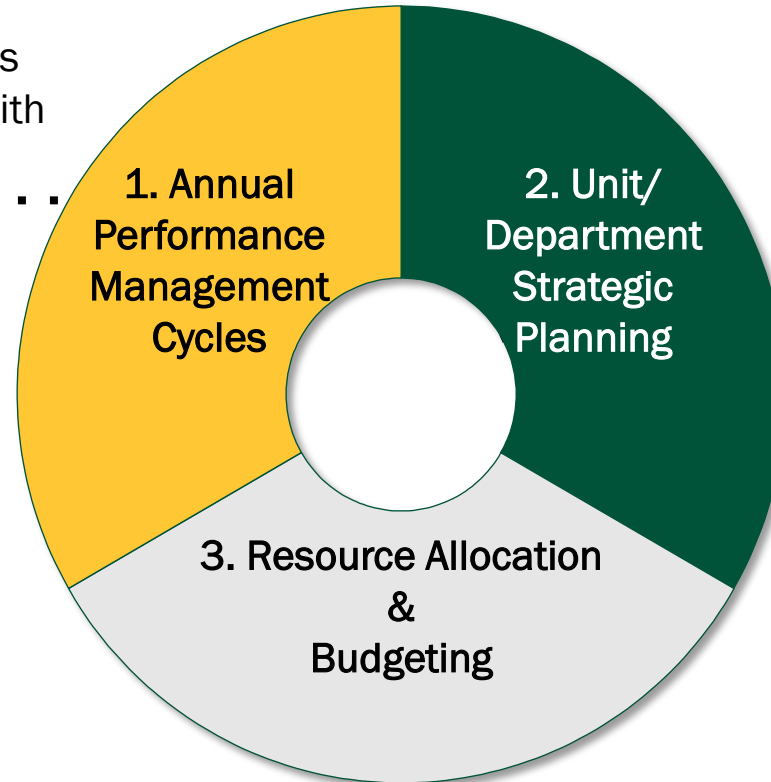
Strategic thinking should be **ongoing**, not **episodic**.

It isn't just for annual retreats or special initiatives.
It is a mindset that helps individuals and teams navigate change, opportunity,
and complexity – all of which happen constantly.

Internal Forces that Demand Strategic Thinking

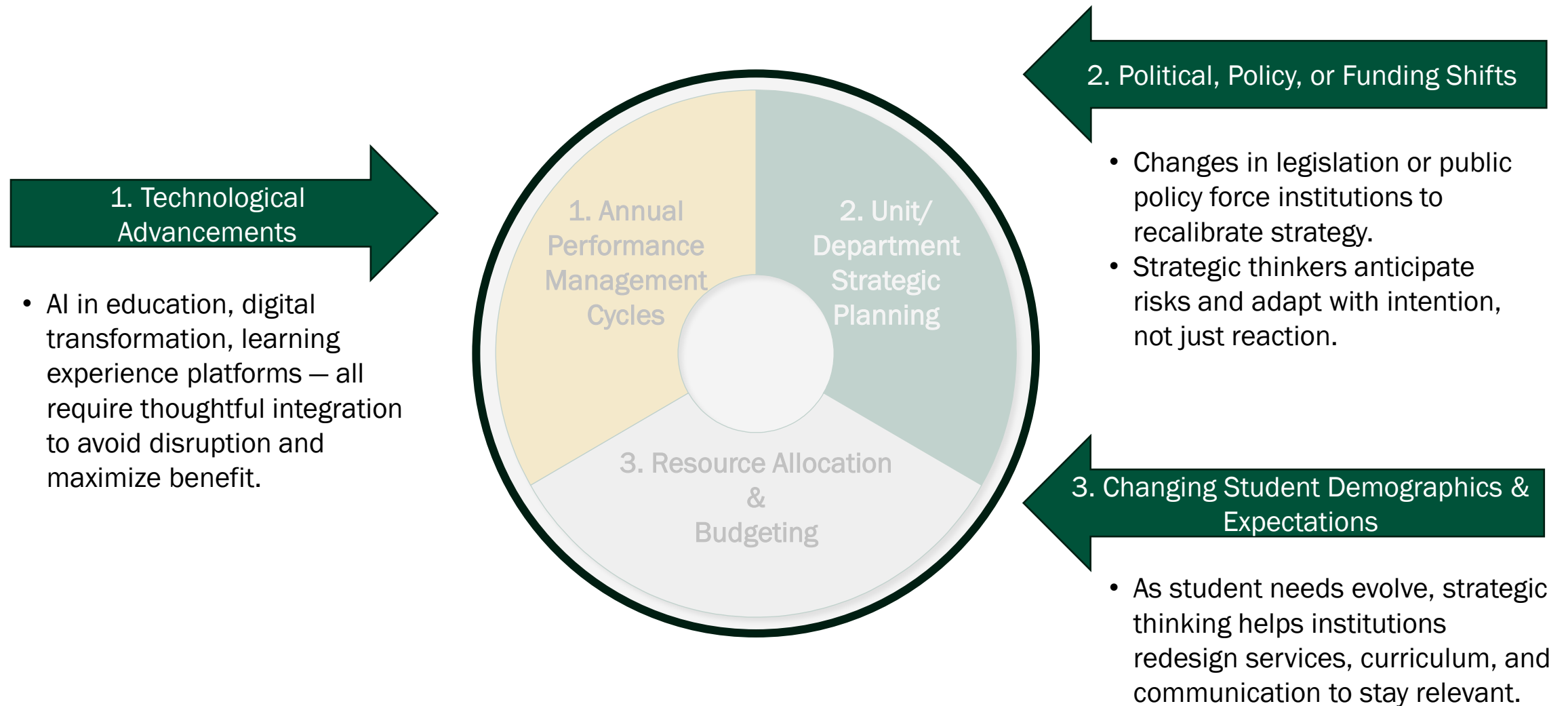
- Reflect not only on what was achieved, but why, how, and what's next.
- Use it as a time to reframe goals and align personal objectives with institutional priorities.

- Every budget decision is a strategic choice. How funds, people, and time are allocated reflects priorities.
- Teams that think strategically make trade-offs that align with longer-term value, not just short-term fixes.



- Great moment to step back and ask: “What problem are we trying to solve?” and “Where can we have the most impact?”
- Strategic thinkers look beyond status quo and make space for bold, aligned moves.

External Forces that Require Strategic Thinking



Strategic Thinking is most Beneficial When ...

Moment	Why Strategic Thinking Matters
Annual reviews	Links personal performance to mission and priorities
Budget discussions	Aligns resource use with high-impact goals
Organizational change	Minimizes disruption, maximizes adaptation
Crisis or uncertainty	Allows for calm, principled decision-making
New leadership or direction	Clarifies what to preserve and what to evolve
Stalled momentum	Identifies why things are stuck and unlocks new paths

"Context is decisive."
Werner Erhard



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WHERE Strategic Thinking Happens: The Context

“Where” matters.

- It shapes the context, environment, and **scope** in which strategic action happens.

It is not just *what* you think or *why* you act. It is **where** you bring strategic thinking to life.

“Where” includes:

- Your **communication spaces**: chat, email, meetings, 1:1s
- Your **environments**: GMU, your team, the broader higher ed landscape
- The **scale** of the initiative: individual, team, department, university

Strategy must be **grounded in context**; where you act determines what is possible and who you need to bring along.

Strategic thinking isn't abstract, but rooted in place, people, and purpose.

Strategy in Action: Everyday Moments



Strategic thinking does not just happen in boardrooms.



Examples:

Chat: A simple "Why are we doing this?" can unlock clarity.

Email: Framing an update around goals instead of just tasks.

Meetings: Turning a check-in into an opportunity scan.

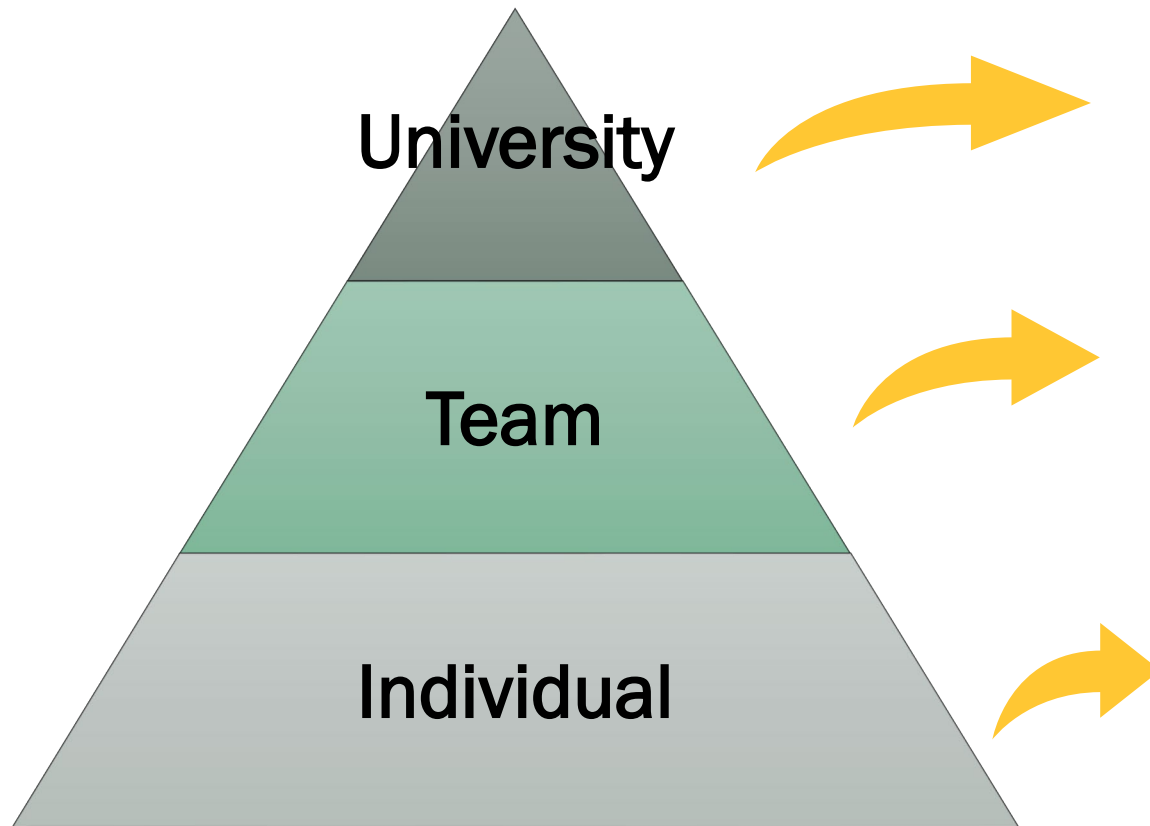
1:1s: Helping a teammate connect their work to long-term priorities.



Strategic thinking happens in all kinds of spaces; some planned, some unexpected. Create space for it intentionally.

Strategy at Every Level: From Tasks to Institutions

Start where you have influence.
Then look for ways to scale your impact.



You contribute insights to a strategic initiative or town hall.

You introduce SOAR during a team planning session.

You reframe a task to align with a long-term goal.

“Culture Eats Strategy for Breakfast”



What does this mean?



Strategic success depends on cultural alignment



What kind of culture supports strategic thinking on your team?

Where Are You Thinking Strategically Today?

Where in your daily work do you already bring strategy?

Where might you be missing an opportunity to be more strategic?

What *level* are you most comfortable at and where do you want to grow?

"Ideas are easy. Execution is everything."
John Doerr



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Strategic Tools Preview

Tool	Best Used When	Key Questions
SOAR	You want to focus on strengths and future potential	What are we doing well? What do we aspire to?
SWOT	You need a comprehensive scan of internal/external factors	What are our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats?
Impact-Effort Matrix	You want to prioritize tasks or initiatives	Which efforts have the highest return for lowest effort?
Start/Stop/Continue	You want quick feedback on what is working	What should we start, stop, and continue doing?

SOAR

A strategic planning framework with an approach that focuses on strengths and seeks to understand the whole system by including the voices of the relevant stakeholders. SOAR conversations center on what an organization is doing right, what skills should be enhanced, and what is compelling to those who have a 'stake' in the organization's success.

- **Strengths** – What can we build on?
- **Opportunities** – What are our stakeholders asking for?
- **Aspirations** – What do we care deeply about?
- **Results** – How do we know we are succeeding?

Strengths

What can we build upon to support the work in this Challenge?
What makes us unique in this area?

Opportunities

Where is there growth for our research portfolio?
What is the community asking for?
What do stakeholders (university, the world?) need?

SOAR

Aspirations

Where would you like to see investment and/or future research in this Challenge take us?
Where do we want to go?

Results

What outcomes (3-5 tangible results) can be achieved?
How do we measure success (using what data)?

Example: SOAR Activity Responses...

What we heard from you...



Aspirations

“We want to impact a wider range of students”

“Greater financial assistance and offerings to students that choose mason”

“Improve the student wage hiring system”

“Partner with a diverse range of university stakeholders to develop cross-campus projects”

“Multi-campus presence, regional engagement”

“Research generating knowledge contributions”



Results

“All program attendees graduate with college credits”

“New administration role is created and hired for the department”

“10 new corporate and community partnerships”

“60% of program graduates attend annual alumni events”

“At least 50% of program attendees graduate with a job at one of our corporate partners’ organizations”

SWOT

A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning technique used to evaluate the **Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats** involved in a project or business venture. It is a framework for assessing both internal and external factors that can impact success.

Your SWOT

These are internal to the organization.
Describe the strengths and weaknesses based on your
individual position and in relation to your department

Strength	Weakness
Opportunity	Threat

These things
are **good** for
your position/
your unit

These things
are **bad** for
your position/
your unit

These are **external** to the organization. They are related to the
environment that your position/ your unit sits in.

Example: SWOT Activity Responses...

What we heard from you...



Strengths

"Our Alumni network and engagement"

"Connection and engagement with students"

"We consider parent and student feedback to improve"

"The staff diversity, range of backgrounds and life experiences"

"Help provide students with access to financial resources for college"

"Affiliation with the Mason brand to engage with the community"

"Our community connections within Fairfax and the DC area"



Opportunities

"Opportunity to reinvent programs in a post-COVID area"

"Capitalize on the large alumni network"

"Re-vamp/ reevaluate outdated programing to better meet students' needs"

"Provide students with more exposure to non-traditional career paths, or academics beyond STEM"

"Conduct research that shares the impact of this program present at national conferences"

"Leverage technology to improve data, communication, and program metric tracking"

"Increase staff training, maybe increase staff scale"



Weaknesses

"No formal onboarding for first-time staff"

"Lack of clear role-ownership, lack of clear documentation for functional areas and procedures"

"Issues with consistency in communications to external audience"

"Outdated program database"

"Issues with internal communication; lots of moving parts making it difficult to keep everyone informed"

"Too many different communication channels with students and families"



Threats

"Employee burnout and fatigue"

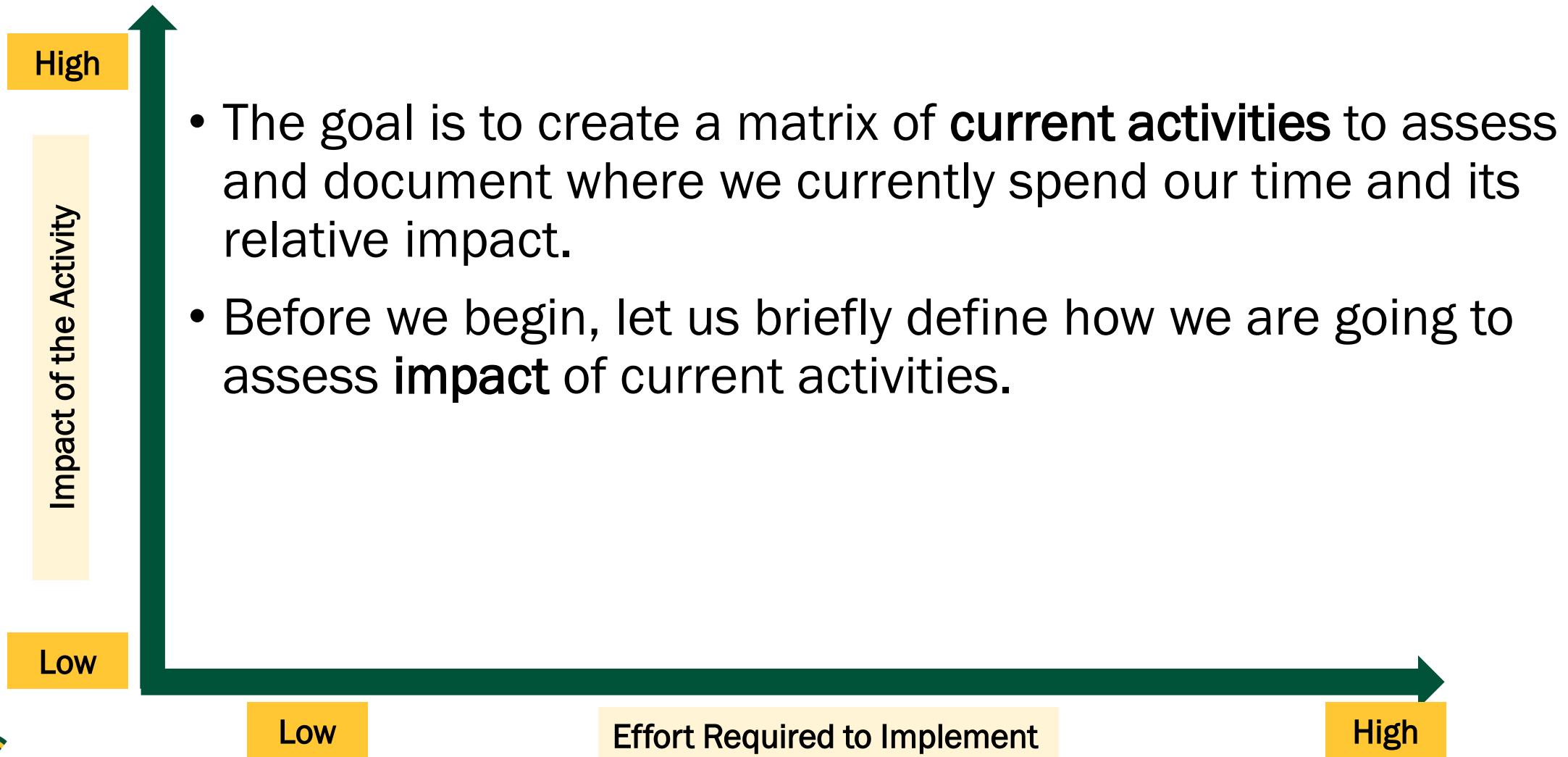
"Competition from similar programs in the area"

"No SOPs, or formal documentation of work processes "

"Inadequate and inconsistent data management"

"Loss of funding or program dismemberment"

Impact and Effort of Current Activities



For Example...

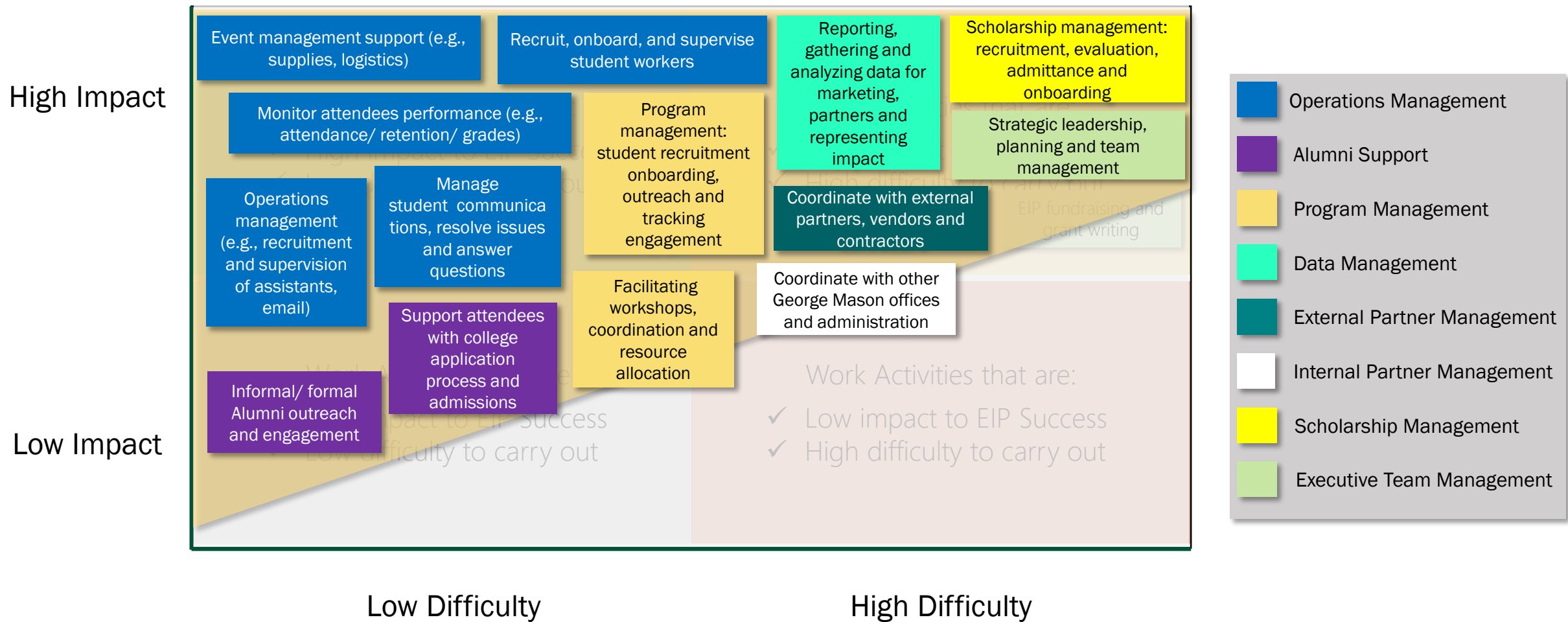
Key takeaway:
*Not everything can
be a high priority*

High Impact	<p>Work Activities that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ High impact to Success✓ Low difficulty to carry out	<p>Work Activities that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ High Impact to Success✓ High difficulty to carry out
Low Impact	<p>Work Activities that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Low impact to Success✓ Low difficulty to carry out	<p>Work Activities that are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Low impact to Success✓ High difficulty to carry out
	Low Difficulty	High Difficulty

Low Impact



For Example...



Start/Stop/Continue



START

What new actions or behaviors should we try?

- Weekly priority check-ins
- Asking "why now?" more often



STOP

What is no longer working?
What is not aligned?

- Overcommitting without focus
- Reacting to every new request



CONTINUE

What is working well and should continue?

- Debriefing after key meetings
- Sharing goals at team meetings

Strategic Tools Summary

Tool	Best Used When	Key Questions
SOAR	You want to focus on strengths and future potential	What are we doing well? What do we aspire to?
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Change Management



Today's
- how?
Team 1/
- what as from page
- no answer
- type sheet -> p



Kurt Lewin's Unfreeze-Change-Refreeze Model

- Create awareness of the change need with key stakeholders.
- Identify possible change resistance.
- Build motivation and urgency to change.

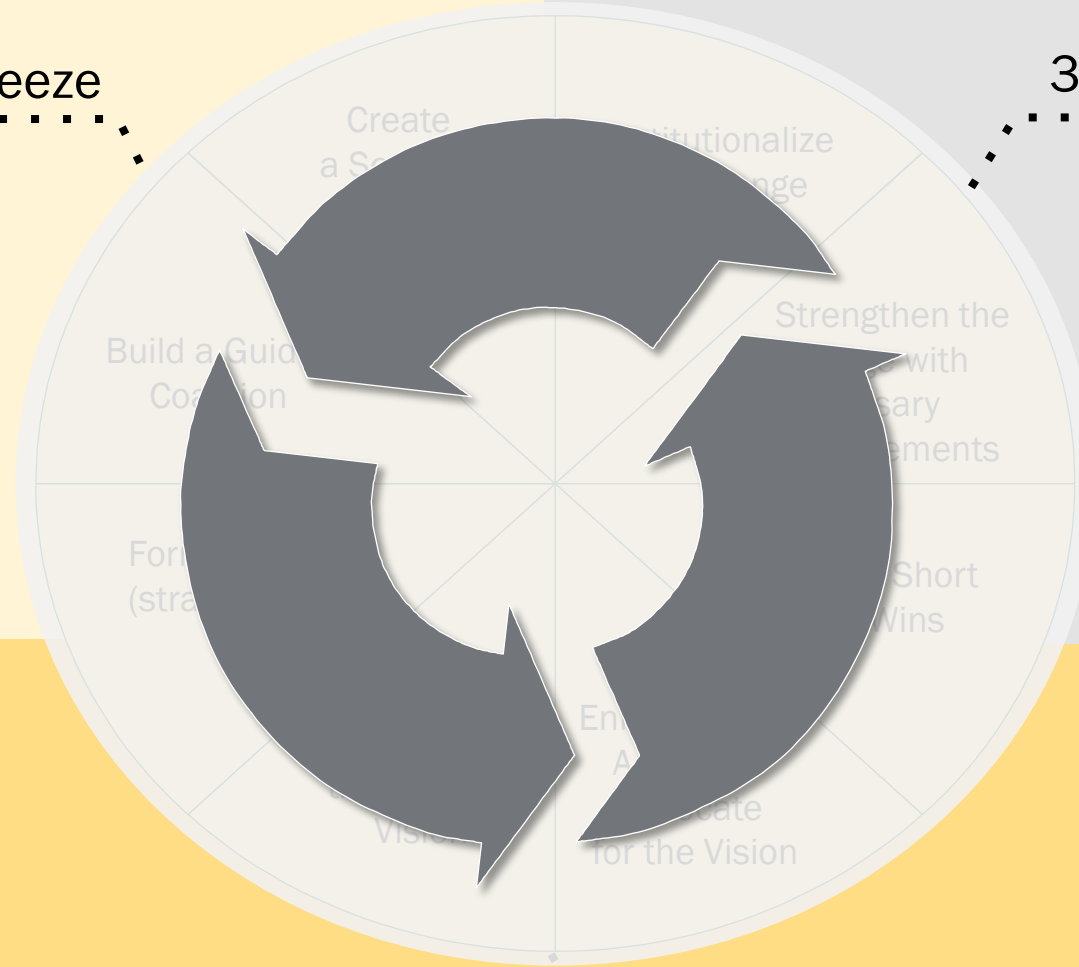
1. Unfreeze

- Design & implement the change vision with actionable initiatives.
- Provide support resources to involved parties.
- Generate small wins to build momentum.

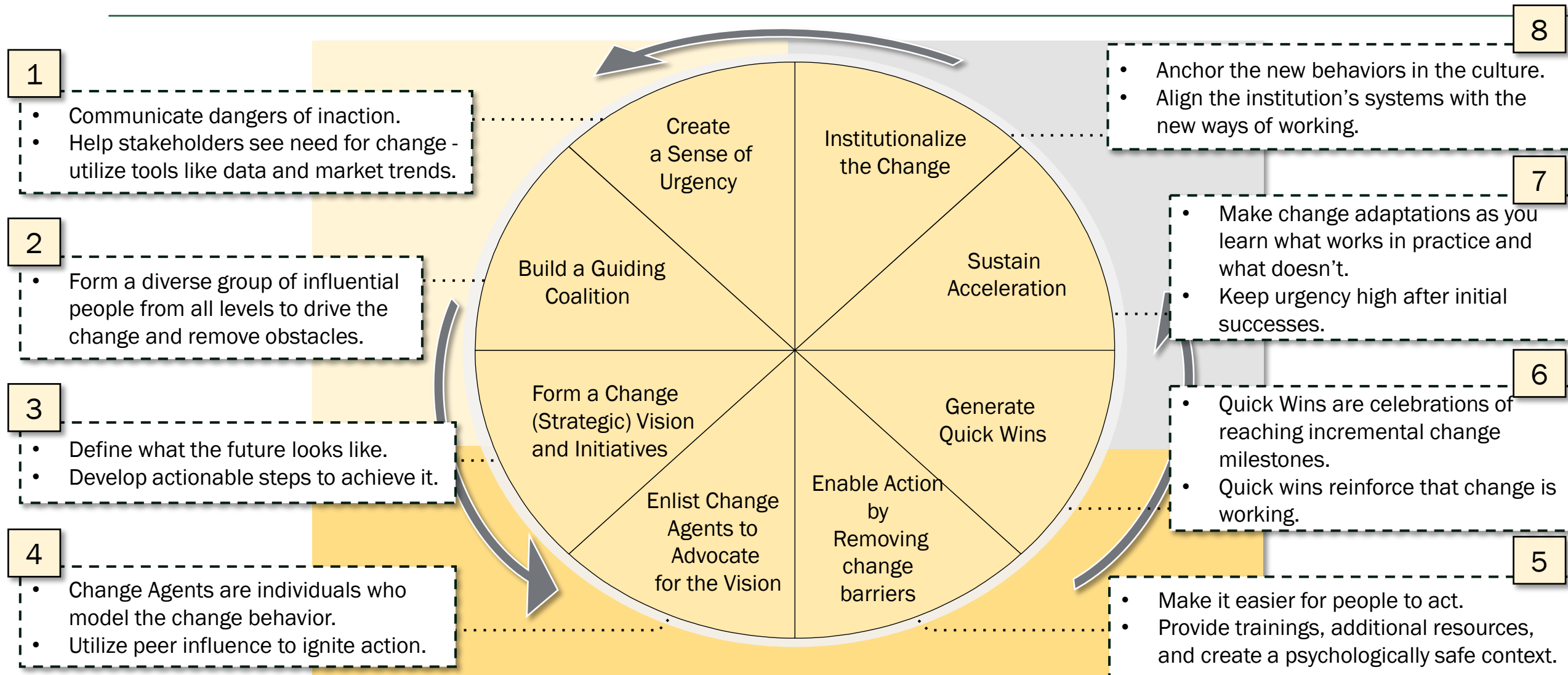
2. Change

3. Freeze

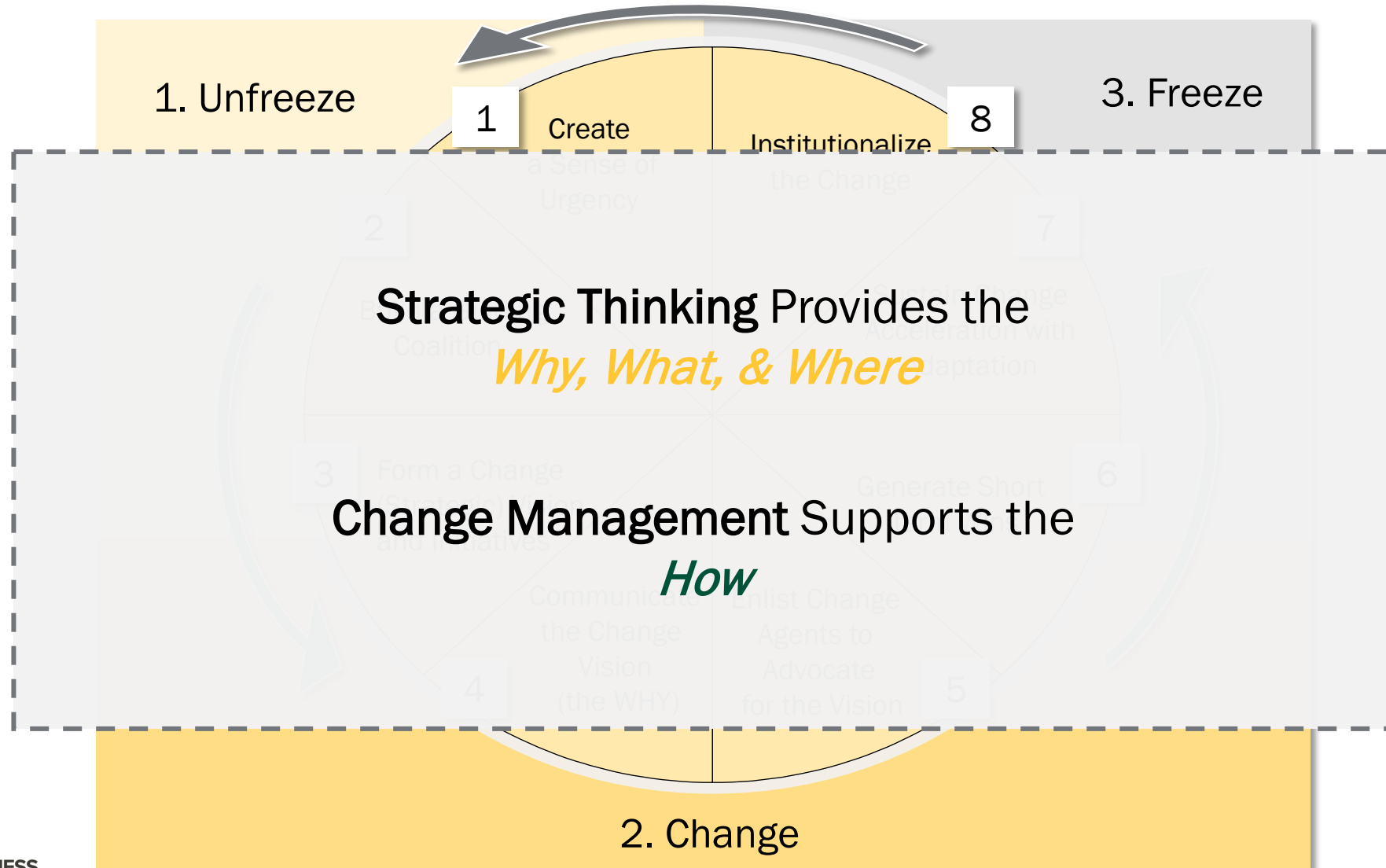
- Adjust existing structures to support and institutionalize the new norm.
- Continue to monitor and reinforce new behaviors.
- Celebrate successes.



Kotter's 8 Step Model:



How does Change Management Relate to Strategic Thinking?





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What Will You Do Differently?



What is one shift you can make to help your team think more strategically in the long term?



What is one specific action you will take tomorrow to model or encourage strategic thinking?

Resource Links

- YouTube Link to Simon Sinek's TEDx Talk:
 - [Start with why – how great leaders inspire action | Simon Sinek | TEDxPugetSound](#)
- UBC Summer Knowledge Series:
 - [Strategic Planning & Implementation](#)
 - [UBC & HR: Change Management Primer](#)

Upcoming UBC Summer Knowledge Series



Design Thinking & Experimentation

August 13, 2025 @ 12 pm

This session is offered virtually and in Merten 1202

Prior session materials are available on our website:

<https://consulting.gmu.edu/summer-series/>

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