



Being Strategic: *The Antidote to Fear* Erika Andersen

“This story shall the good man teach his son”

It's just before dawn on the morning of the 25th of October, 1415, near Agincourt, France. King Henry V has a small English force, many of them ill, all of them bone-tired. They are hugely outnumbered by the well-rested and well-fed French army before them.

Henry's men are afraid and demoralized, assuming the battle will go to the French and they will all be slaughtered. They bemoan the fact they have so few men, and start to murmur about how desperate their situation is, looking at each other with wild eyes.

Then Henry steps up and inspires his men by creating a clear vision of the possibility of a glorious and well-remembered victory. William Shakespeare captured the moment in these immortal lines:

This day is called the feast of Crispian:
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say 'To-morrow is Saint Crispian:'
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars.
And say 'These wounds I had on Crispin's day.'
Old men forget: yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember with advantages
What feats he did that day: then shall our names
Familiar in his mouth as household words
Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter,

Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd.
This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remember'd;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.

The English went on to win the battle, and the war.

This is the essence of what I call being strategic:
doing a clear and accurate assessment
of the current situation, then articulating
the possibility of a successful future.

And for us?

We are living through difficult and complex times, and we're reminded of that at every turn. Each time we turn on the TV, open a newspaper, get online, we see frightening statistics repeated again and again.

Like Henry's men at Agincourt, it's all too easy to murmur and become terrified, become the victims of fear. And fear narrows your vision, makes it hard to see anything beyond the current threat. In the grip of fear, we see only what's in front of us—focus only on defense, protection, or escape.

When a threat is immediate and physical, this fear response is completely appropriate, and is our body's way of keeping us alive: if a saber-toothed tiger is trying to make you into dinner, you want to be utterly focused on saving yourself.

Unfortunately, we're wired to respond to fear in the same ways even when the threat is very different. As it is now.

And the antidote to fear? Henry V knew it. Pull people out of their panic and self-protective impulses by first acknowledging the difficulties, then raising their eyes and hearts to a possibility of success. At that point you can take advantage of their newly available and hopeful energy to make that possibility a reality.

Unfortunately, we're wired to respond to fear in the same ways even when the threat is very different. As it is now.

This is the essence of what I call being strategic: doing a clear and accurate assessment of the current situation, then articulating the possibility of a successful future. And at that point, when you see clearly where you are and where you hope to go, staying strategic means making core directional choices—as Henry did—about how to achieve that future you’ve envisioned.

Here’s how this translates into our current situation. Every day I’m seeing business people make panicky, fear-based decisions. Cutting essential staff, slashing R&D, reducing budgets to the point that it’s difficult to carry out the work of the organization, increasing organizational oversight—not trusting people to make reasonable and necessary decisions. And these aren’t businesses on the brink of collapse, these are basically sound businesses whose executives *fear that they will collapse* if brutal measures aren’t undertaken. This is fear taking the upper hand.

I’m seeing it with individuals as well; lots of people have decided to “hunker down and ride it out”—not giving their best, hoping they won’t be fired...and thereby increasing the chances they will be fired. And those who have actually lost their jobs? Some are throwing off fear, but many others are feeling demoralized and hopeless, becoming paralyzed.

I see it in myself. Even though my business and my life seem to be going well, I can feel the pull of fear—*shouldn’t* I freak out? Shouldn’t I behave defensively vs. proactively? Isn’t that the wise and reasonable thing to do in these times?

No. It’s not.

The wise thing is to stay balanced; to see what is actually happening and then get clear on where you want to be when this begins to turn around—as it will. I want to help you do that. Consider this manifesto a potion: an anti-fear draught meant to help you navigate through these times.

Let's start by agreeing on a definition. There are lots of different definitions for "being strategic" out there, ranging from "outsmarting the competition," to "thinking long-term" to "focusing on what you do best"—and these are only a few of the dozens I've heard over the past few years! So let me offer a definition that I think incorporates the best and most useful elements of this mindset and skill set we call "being strategic":

Consistently making those core directional choices that will best move you toward your hoped-for future.

The wise thing is to stay balanced; to see what is actually happening and then get clear on where you want to be when this begins to turn around—as it will.

It's a simple phrase, but when we behave in this way, it provides a powerful and practical antidote to fear—and to the paralysis and poor choices that arise from fear. This approach to being strategic implies that you're still thinking about moving toward your hoped-for future; that you're not completely consumed by the spectre of potential disaster; that you're leading, rather than just hunkering down. I'll spend the rest of this manifesto talking about how to operationalize this definition.

Get clear on the real challenge you need to address.

It's tempting, in scary times, to just default to "we need to do whatever it takes to stay afloat!" And though this may actually be true for some companies, it may not be true for yours. Most companies, even in this economic climate, are not on the verge of bankruptcy. And thinking this way tends to lead to the kinds of panicky decisions I was talking about earlier. As a friend and client of mine said recently of the senior management of his company, "they're burning the furniture and counting the pencils." It's a great metaphor for what happens when people panic—if you "burn the furniture," cutting essential expenses or staff, you'll regret it later. And "counting the pencils," engaging in increased oversight or obsessive data collection, may reduce your immediate anxiety, but won't have any real impact on your success or failure.

Your actual challenge may be, "How can we keep our revenues steady while we invest in new areas of growth?" or "How can we maintain our bottom line if sales decrease?" or even "How can we continue to thrive, even in these difficult times?" Knowing what your actual (vs. fear-induced) challenge is will provide a positive focus for all the thinking to follow. It will turn your brain toward the solution of your real problems, and away from unhelpful globalizing and overstating.

Here's a simple approach for defining your challenge—you can use it to clarify any key challenge you want to focus on addressing: departmental, company, or personal.

DEFINING THE CHALLENGE

- Ask “What isn’t working?”
- Ask “How can we/I...?”
- Ask “Would this feel like success?”

Ask: What isn’t working? This is where you look accurately at the problems you’re facing, neither overstating (“it’s all horrible!”), nor understating (“we’re perfect”). You identify the key factors that concern you. It could be, “my company is doing layoffs and I believe I’m at risk,” or “sales are off 20% year over year.”

Ask: How can we/I...? Once you’ve looked—clear-eyed and unflinching—at what isn’t working, it’s fairly easy to frame the challenge. We’ve found that it helps to put it in the form of a “how can we” or “how can I” question. That helps you state your desired outcome. So, for the challenges above, it might be, “How can I best prepare myself for job loss?” and “How can we strengthen sales while operating as efficiently as possible?”

Ask: Would this feel like success? This is your “checking question.” It gives you a way to make sure you’ve defined the challenge accurately. Just ask yourself, “If I answered my ‘how can we/I’ question, would I feel I had succeeded in addressing this challenge?”

In the first instance above, the answer might actually be “no.” You might decide that answering the question, “How can I best prepare myself for job loss?” would feel too narrow and reactive... wouldn’t feel like success. You might, instead, make your question, “How can I create a strong career path that will serve me even in difficult times?”

Create an accurate picture of your current reality.

Now that you know the problem you're trying to solve, it's important to stay in that clear and accurate mindset as you look at your current situation relative to that problem. As I noted above, when we're afraid, it tends to distort our view of what's happening to and around us in one of two ways: we either over-estimate the negatives (e.g., "the company is going to hell in a hand basket and there's nothing I can do about it") or we deny that the negatives exist (e.g., "No, really, it's fine, we're good—we have great people and a great product, thanks"). Now is the time to make the effort to be as objective as possible about your current situation, both the good news and the bad news—and encourage those around you to do the same. Look at lacks and deficiencies...but also look at skills and capabilities, and at the resources you have at your disposal.

Here's an approach for doing that:

SEEING "WHAT IS"

- Become a Fair Witness
- Pull back the camera
- Sort for impact

Become a “Fair Witness”: In his book, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, Robert Heinlein invents a profession where people are trained to be absolutely impartial in their assessments, and to speak only from their direct observation, without inference or speculation. If you point to a white house and ask a “Fair Witness” what color it is, for instance, he or she will say, “It appears to be painted white on this side.”

In being strategic, it’s important to cultivate this ability. When you’re clarifying the “what is” relative to a challenge you’ve defined, ask yourself whether you’re being a “fair witness.” Are you stating things as they really are, or as you’d like them to be? Are you neglecting or ignoring facts that aren’t comfortable or convenient? Are you assuming some things aren’t important simply because you don’t want to factor them into your thinking? Include, as you think about the “what is,” all those things Heinlein’s fair witnesses would include.

Now is the time to make the effort to be as objective as possible about your current situation, both the good news and the bad news—and encourage those around you to do the same.

Pull back the camera: Imagine a scene in a movie—all you see is a lamp on a table. Looks pretty ordinary. The camera pans back, and you see that the lamp and the table are sitting in an empty room, with no other furniture. Hmm, what’s going on? It pans back again, and you see the front lawn of the house with a “sold” sign. Suddenly, it all makes sense.

You can do the same thing in your mind as you look at a business situation. A salesperson is consistently missing his targets. It’s easy to assume that he’s not competent. But if, instead, you “pull back the camera” and look at the larger situation around that person, you might see that the new product line isn’t performing as promised—there’s a manufacturing glitch. The high return level is affecting his sale numbers and his customers’ willingness to reorder. Hmm—the broader view gives a very different perspective.

Sorting for impact: If you’ve ever built a house of cards, you know there are some cards that are essential to the integrity of the structure and some that aren’t. Take a card off the top—no problem. Remove a “wall” card near the bottom — good-bye, card house. If you want to be a successful card house builder, it’s important to know the difference.

Similarly, knowing those facts or events that most impact the challenge is an important part of getting clear about “what is.” For instance, in our sales example above, when you pull back the camera to look at the larger situation around the salesperson, let’s say you immediately learn two other things: that he eats a sandwich for lunch every day and that he has a new boss, with whom he doesn’t seem to be getting along. Which of those things do you imagine might be having the greatest impact on the current situation? Most people would immediately put aside the “sandwich” information and include the “new boss” fact in their overall “what is” picture. Sorting the information you receive according to its probable impact on the challenge allows you to see the big picture without being distracted by less relevant details.

Get clear about your hoped-for future.

Now you can look ahead. Given where you're starting from, where do you want your business or your department (or your own career) to be when we've come through this passage? We call this "reasonable aspiration." It's neither a pollyanna-like, unfounded optimism, nor a grim surrender to hopelessness: it's the middle path. It's answering the question: *What do I actually hope and believe we can build, if we make best use of all that's available to us?* The most effective leaders throughout history have done this, and in so doing have turned their followers' hearts and hands from doom to hope. From Henry V's "band of brothers" speech, to Obama's rallying cry of "yes, we can."

We at Proteus use a specific and powerful technique to help people "untangle" from their limiting assumptions in order to be able to envision a successful future. We call it *Envisioning the hoped-for future*; it's a way to engage your brain's ability to imagine new realities while overcoming your brain's almost equally strong ability to generate reasons why a new reality isn't feasible! Here's how it works.

ENVISION THE HOPED-FOR FUTURE

- Pick a time frame for success.
- Imagine yourself into that future.
- Describe what success looks and feels like.
- Select the key elements.

Pick a time frame for success: First, decide on a reasonable time frame for success. In some cases, this may already be determined—for instance, a large project that has a built-in deadline. In other situations, you may have to make your best guess. For instance, if you’re envisioning the hoped-for future of your department, you might pick a date one or two years out to allow time for making substantive changes in staffing or processes.

Imagine yourself into that future: This is the critical step. To overcome your mind’s resistance to letting go of current limitations, you need to create a bit of possible future. Put yourself into a mental time machine. Then, when you emerge, imagine that you’re sitting in the same room, in the same chair, but it’s now the end date you chose above. It helps if you support your envisioning with a statement: “It’s now January 19, 20___, and I’m reflecting on our success over the past ___ years.” Once you feel comfortably settled—in your imagination—in that future date, move on to the next step.

Describe what success looks and feels like: From the point of view that it’s now a specific day in the year 20___, describe what’s happening. As you look around this new world at the end of your time travels, what do you see? Think about key events, feelings, circumstances, and outcomes that indicate to you that you’ve successfully created the future you want. For example, if you’re envisioning the future of your department, you might want to focus on some of the following: the results you’re getting; what it’s like to work in the department—both how it feels and how things actually happen; what other people see (and say) when they look at or interact with you and your people; and how you’re fulfilling your role as the leader. (Some people like to simply visualize these things, while others find it helpful to jot down their thoughts.)

Select the key elements: When you feel as though you have a fairly robust picture of this future you want, select and write down the key elements—those parts of the future that are key to your vision of success. For instance, you might have imagined there would be a better coffee machine in the break room, but that’s not as important to you as your vision of your team consistently sharing important information with each other! As with the “what is,” you’re sorting for impact. Write down the handful of things you feel are the most critical indicators of the future you want to create.

Look at what's in the way.

Once you have an accurate and clear-eyed assessment of where you're starting from, and an inspiring and realistic articulation of where you want to go, it's important to see—again, as a fair witness—what's in the way. And for all of us, now, the world-wide economic downturn is a huge obstacle. So, as you start to think about how to achieve your vision of the future, it's essential to factor in this obstacle as it actually impacts you: not to let it stop you before you begin, but in a realistic and balanced way. (Then you can create strategies and tactics that will get you over, around, or through it.)

People often resist this step (especially now), because they're afraid it will be demoralizing and they'll lose their momentum. To keep that from happening, frame these obstacles as “the things we need to overcome in order to succeed” versus “the things that are going to keep us from succeeding.”

With that as your mindset, how can you then make sure you're being clear-eyed and accurate about the key obstacles? We suggest you use the same approaches you used during the “what is” step:

FACING WHAT'S IN THE WAY

- Be a fair witness
- Pull back the camera
- Sort for impact

Be a fair witness (again): Your skills as a fair witness will really be put to the test in this step. Depending on your own particular wiring, you may tend to avoid looking at the obstacles, or you may over-balance in the opposite direction and become completely paralyzed by them. The art here is to learn to look at obstacles simply as data, as a Fair Witness would.

Pull back the camera (again): In this part of the process, you pull back the camera far enough to see both point A (your “what is”) and point B (your hoped-for future), and then think about the circumstances, events, or beliefs that could make it more difficult to get from point A to point B. With the camera pulled back, you look at obstacles within you or your team, as well as those obstacles outside of you or your team (depending on whether you’re envisioning your personal future, or your team or company future).

Sort for impact (again): At this point, sorting for impact is simpler than it was at first. Knowing where you’re trying to go makes it easier to see what might get in the way. Here’s one way to sort for impact: Once you’ve pulled back your camera and generated a list of possible obstacles, go back and prioritize the list in terms of potential impact, noting those obstacles that you feel might present the greatest difficulty and are most important to overcome.

Once you have an accurate and clear-eyed assessment of where you’re starting from, and an inspiring and realistic articulation of where you want to go, it’s important to see ... what’s in the way.

Make your “core directional choices.”

Now it's time to choose the path from now to what you hope. That's what strategies are: core directional choices. They're the “main paths” you decide will best take you to the future you've envisioned.

For instance, one of FDR's strategies in the New Deal was “get immediate help to those who need it most.” Not a specific action, but rather a core choice about a direction in which the nation was going to focus its time and energy. You can create strategies that will protect your core during these difficult times (e.g., “Assure that each employee is operating at peak efficiency”) and others that will move you toward your hoped-for future (e.g., “Shift our sales focus to our international markets”).

The mental skills for creating good strategy are those I've discussed throughout this article, with one variation:

DEFINING WHAT'S THE PATH

- Be a fair witness
- Pull back the camera
- Sort for FIT

Be a fair witness and pull back the camera are the same as they've been all along. You get as objective as possible, and step back from the details to take in the whole picture of what you're trying to accomplish, so that you can select the strategies that will most effectively move you in the direction you want to go. The thing that's great about pulling back the camera at this point is that you can finally see the whole picture: where you are now, where you're trying to go, and what's in the way. It's like using the "region" view on MapQuest to get driving directions from one city to another. The question to ask yourself here—just as you do on Mapquest!—is *What's the best way to get from where I am to where I'm going?*

The principle behind **sorting for impact**—which you've used all along as a way to determine which things are most relevant—stays the same in this step, but we add some specifics about *how* to sort. The process we use to determine relevance in this final step is something we call **sorting for FIT**.

When you're trying to decide whether a strategy (and later on, a tactic) is the best choice, use "FIT" as a screen by asking yourself the following questions:

Is this feasible? Do we have (or can we get) the resources or expertise needed to do this—is it realistic? Will it be possible, given the obstacles?

Is this impactful? Will we get a big return for our effort in doing this—is there a lot of "bang for the buck" in moving us toward our vision? Will it get us past or through the obstacles?

Is this timely? This question has two aspects. First, is this something we can do now, or are there other things we need to do first? And second, if we *can* do it now, do we *need* to do it now? In other words, is there a window of opportunity for doing it that will close, or will not doing it keep us from doing other things?

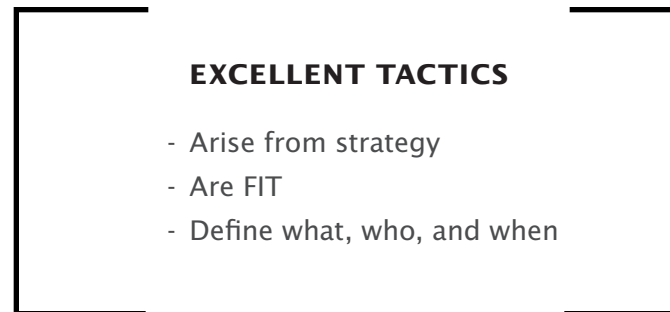
If, in asking yourself these questions, you get three "thumbs up," it's a pretty good bet you've hit upon a useful strategy.

Walk down the path.

Here's where you get specific. Finally! Once you're clear on the strategies you believe will best move you toward your envisioned future, you can use those strategies as a filter for deciding the specific actions—measurable and measured—you'll use to implement them. In the words of Michael Porter, “the essence of strategy lies in deciding what not to do”; having good strategies enables you to “pick your shots” tactically: to decide what to do and what not to do.

For example, let's say one of your strategies is to “assure that each employee is operating at peak efficiency.” To implement that strategy, you'd focus on specific actions that would most effectively promote that choice. For example, you'd make sure that everyone's responsibilities are clearly defined, that those responsibilities will yield the results the business needs, that employees are provided with the skills, resources and knowledge they need to fulfill their responsibilities, and that each person is held accountable for achieving his or her goals.

Here are some guidelines for creating good and effective tactics for implementing your strategies:



Arise from strategy: This is just a confirmation of all we've been talking about in the "path" step. Rather than randomly performing actions that *may* take you in the right direction (think of the tactical flailing you've experienced over the years in situations where the vision and strategy weren't clear and agreed upon), you define your strategies, and then select the tactics that will *best* implement those strategies.

Are FIT: As when you're choosing strategies, in choosing tactics you continue to "screen" for feasibility, impact, and timeliness.

Define what, who, and when. At this point, you're finally *not* pulling back the camera. You want to see every detail, and it needs to be measurable. Agree on what the action is, who's going to be responsible for it, and when it will get done.

Rather than randomly performing actions that may take you in the right direction ... you define your strategies, and then select the tactics that will best implement those strategies.

Reposition in response to reality.

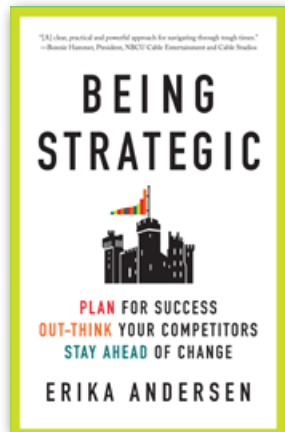
I don't have to tell you that conditions are changing quickly. But one of the benefits of being strategic in this way is that you have a powerful, practical, inspiring plan that you can use as a stake in the ground, and then revise as conditions shift—rather than simply being buffeted about by the winds of change.

You can reposition by using the same steps—update the “what is,” refresh the “hope,” reassesses the obstacles, refine the path—as circumstances shift.

Staying strategic as a leader benefits you and everyone around you. If you have a clear, results-focused, flexible operating map, you're less likely to be at the effect of poor, reactive decision-making from above. (Remember that nature abhors a vacuum—and if you don't have a vision and a plan, you'll have a course of action imposed upon you, for better or for worse.)

Moreover, if you are a manager, and approach your team or company's future in this way, your employees will most likely feel reassured and calmed (especially if they've been involved in the creation of the plan), and can then step beyond their own fear—like Henry's men at Agincourt—to be focused and productive through these difficult times. This is especially true if you continue to involve them in the plan's evolution and keep them updated regarding both difficulties and successes.

And, of course, it will benefit your organization to have a focused and not-fear-inspired map to the future. Just as it will benefit you, if you're applying this approach to your own life and career. Having a compelling vision, and a clear and feasible plan for attaining it, is your best chance of navigating successfully through these stormy times and docking safely on the further shore. 📌



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erika Andersen is the author of *Growing Great Employees: Turning Ordinary People into Extraordinary Performers* and *Being Strategic: Plan for Success; Out-Think Your Competitors; Stay Ahead of Change*.

These books draw on her experience as the founder of Proteus International, a consulting firm that works with CEOs and top executives of many major corporations, including GE, MTV Networks, NBC Universal, Comcast, Union Square Hospitality Group, CBS, Pricewaterhouse Coopers, and Madison Square Garden. You can keep up with Erika on her blog, [The Simplest Thing That Works](#). To learn more about her new book, visit [beingstrategic.com](#).

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