

The owl in strategy: look sharply, don't keep staring

Jeroen Toet | Jester Strategy



Where the ostrich buries its head in the sand, the black swan takes us by surprise and the canary warns us early, the owl stands for something else: wisdom. Reflection. Analysis. Experience. The ability not to rush along with the fads of the moment, but first to look, listen and understand properly. The owl has been a symbol of wisdom for centuries. In Greek mythology, the owl was associated with Athena, goddess of wisdom, strategy and the art of war. Not the brute force of the hawk, then, or the outward display of the peacock, but keen sight in the dark. The owl sees what others miss. It waits. It observes. And it strikes only when the moment has come. A useful bird in the boardroom. Because good strategy demands not only speed, decisiveness and enterprise. Sometimes it also demands first stepping back, taking time to reflect. Recognising patterns. Asking the right questions. Not only looking at what is on the dashboard today and tomorrow, but also at what is shifting beneath it. The strategic owl asks questions such as: do we really understand this problem? Which assumptions underlie it? Do we have the full picture, or are we overlooking things? And what are we actually learning from earlier choices?

Reflection is something you have to keep organising

In many organisations, reflection is something everyone considers important, yet almost no one really organises. The diary of many a manager and director is full of quarterly figures, projects, risks, budget rounds, investment proposals and operational issues. A great deal is decided, aligned and monitored. But truly thinking together, especially about the longer term, too often happens too little. And when it does happen, it is frequently in the form of a big strategy round once every few years. Suddenly a new vision, multi-year strategy or point on the horizon has to appear. Everyone heads off for a two-day off-site, sticky notes go up, people talk about ambitions and core values, trends, craft a vision and set out the broad lines for the years ahead. But before long, everyday reality takes over again. A missed opportunity. Precisely today, in times of uncertainty, it is important to pause more often on the question of whether the course is still right – and, above all, the assumptions beneath it. Which signals are growing stronger? Which choices are turning out better or worse than expected? Which uncomfortable truth are we perhaps avoiding?

Look forward, not only back

Much reflection in organisations is about looking backward. What went well? What went wrong? Did we hit our targets? Which projects are behind schedule? Useful, certainly, but strategic reflection demands more. The true owl looks not only at the fresh tracks on the ground, but also at movement in the distance. Owls are, after all,



highly long-sighted. Strategic reflection is therefore also about looking ahead. Which developments could change our playing field? Which customer needs are emerging beneath the surface? Which technology still looks marginal now, but could cause disruption – or, indeed, great opportunities? Which societal or geopolitical shifts call for different choices?

To do so, you have to organise conversations outside the regular reporting line. With the board, but also with the management layers below it, people from operations, customers, regulators, shareholders, partners and sometimes precisely outsiders from other sectors. Not to let everyone have a say in everything, but to widen the field of view. Because the higher you rise in the organisation, the greater the risk that reality reaches you filtered through several layers. Bad news is packaged more neatly. Doubt is converted into confident-sounding slides. Complexity is summarised in three bullet points. And signals from the shop floor often only reach the boardroom once they have already become a problem. A wise owl therefore does not rely solely on the view from the highest branch. It makes sure it also hears what is going on down in the forest.

Experience is valuable, but not sacred

The owl also stands for experience. Experience helps you to recognise patterns, to distinguish hype from substance and not to panic at every trend. In a boardroom that is incredibly valuable. Especially when the outside world is turbulent and everyone is insisting that everything must change. But experience is not necessarily the same as wisdom. Experience can also make you lazy. Or defensive. Or too sure of yourself. Anyone who has worked in a sector or a company for a long time has no shortage of examples of things that didn't work before. "We tried that ten years ago." "Our customers don't want that." "This market doesn't change that quickly." "Interesting technology, but not that relevant for us." Sometimes that is right, and such expertise saves an organisation from costly wrong turns.

But sometimes it is also the way in which the past holds the future hostage. That is why such an owl sometimes needs a counterforce. Fresh eyes. People who ask different questions, who hear or see different signals. Younger colleagues who take different customer expectations for granted. People from other sectors who have seen comparable patterns before. Or contrarian thinkers who are not impressed by how things have always been done. The art is not to throw experience away, but not to declare it sacred either.

Beware of 'paralysis by analysis'

The greatest pitfall of the strategic owl is that it stays put. Just one more analysis. One more benchmark. One more scenario. One more sensitivity calculation. Before you know it, thoroughness has turned into procrastination and depth into indecision. That is what we call paralysis by analysis. It happens not because people are cowardly or unwilling. On the contrary. It arises precisely in serious organisations, with clever people, complex interests and a sincere desire to do the right thing. Nobody wants to take a foolish decision. Nobody wants to jump too soon. Nobody wants to be told afterwards that the risks were not thought through enough.

Strategically, however, there is rarely a moment when all the information is complete. Certainly not for major choices. Waiting for complete certainty is then, in effect, the same as not choosing. And, as with the ostrich: not choosing is also a choice. You just call it analysis instead. So do not ask the owl: do we know everything for certain? Ask instead: do we know enough to take a sensible next step?



Balance thinkers with doers

Every boardroom needs thinkers. 'Owls' who probe, structure, can step back, bring a sense of history and don't leap straight into action. But if there are only owls around the table, strategy quickly becomes an intellectual exercise. That is why you also need enough doers. People who shift uncomfortably in their seats and ask: so what are we actually going to do differently? What is the first step, and who will pick this up? What are we going to stop? Which budget is going to shift?

It may sound less lofty than reflection, but it is just as essential. Strategy without attention to execution is a thought experiment. And execution without reflection is often aimless busyness. The combination, then, is worth its weight in gold. A good strategic process therefore needs rhythm. Time to slow down and moments to decide and press on. Room for analysis and practical decision criteria. You don't want the hawks to strike too soon or rashly, but nor do you want the owls to keep staring endlessly.

Make reflection practical

Reflection need not be heavy, slow or academic. It can, in fact, be organised very practically. Schedule fixed strategic reflection moments between the big strategy rounds, for example. Each quarter, discuss not only performance, but also the key assumptions underpinning the strategy. For major decisions, have it explicitly recorded which assumptions are crucial, so that you can later test whether they still hold. Always tie reflection, then, to concrete choices and the assumptions beneath them. Don't end with "interesting insights", but with: what does this mean for our priorities, options, risks, investments or experiments? That way you prevent reflection from becoming an (endless) pause button.

So make sure you have an owl – but not a little statue of one

The owl is perhaps one of the most likeable birds in strategic ornithology. It stands for something every boardroom could use more of: wisdom, calm, depth and the ability to look beyond the fads of the moment. But wisdom is only valuable if it leads to better choices. Reflection must not end in endless postponement. Analysis must not take the place of responsibility, or of daring and enterprise. And experience must not turn into an excuse to explain away new signals.

In short: be an owl. Take time to look. Organise reflection. Use experience, but let it be contradicted too. Involve people with different perspectives. And, above all, make sure that thinking and doing keep each other in balance. Because an owl that sees sharply but never dares to fly is, strategically speaking, ultimately just another bird on a branch.

About the author

Jeroen Toet is a managing consultant at Jester Strategy. He is co-author of the book [Scenarioplanning in de praktijk](#). Using foresight methods such as scenario planning, Jeroen helps organisations – ranging from Fortune 500 companies to SMEs, and from (G4) municipalities to housing associations – to get a grip on uncertainty and to give structure to the strategic conversation in the boardroom.



Jester
strategy

