

A photograph of a rugged mountain peak covered in snow, set against a soft, pinkish-orange sky at dawn or dusk.

One Big Idea: “You Gotta Think Holistically...”

This is One Big Idea that can make a real difference in a variety of areas, from academics to professional work to project and committee activities among others. Thinking holistically requires you to understand that things are interconnected, and that multiple dependencies tend to be part of most situations – I’ll suggest that there may be more dependencies to consider, as situations get more complex.

One way to illustrate this One Big Idea is to think about the fact that you can take a strategic, high-level view of something, or a very tactical, execution-focused view of the same issue. What becomes interesting is to look at these apparently opposing perspectives with a holistic lens – to realize they are actually not on a “one or the other” spectrum, but rather, interconnected, together forming the full picture of the question you may be deliberating.

Here’s another way to look at this: people approach questions, challenges and “problems” in different ways. One set of options for example, involve two extremes: a bottom-up or a top-down approach.

What does this refer to, you ask?

When confronting an issue that requires analysis, do you dive into the details, take a very tactical, “hands-on” approach and build up to considering some of the broader implications of the matter? Or do you like to take a view from 10.000 meters, “above the trees” to see the context and the bigger picture that surrounds the issue?

There is no right or wrong answer per se, though there are situations or issues where one approach may work better than the other.

This One Big Idea however, suggests that there is value – whatever your inclination – in taking a holistic approach – in consciously looking at the interconnected nature of things and in ensuring that you bring the other view in our example (tactical versus strategic) to your thought process.

“Craig man”, said an old friend and colleague to another many years ago, “you gotta learn to think holistically!” (Thanks Alex, a piece of advice that some of us have internalized to very good effect!). A memorable exchange because it brought intellect and depth of analysis together with a very pragmatic financial markets view of the world, over Greek mezze and ouzo.

If you are a tactician drawn to execution, take a moment to consider the bigger picture; if you are a strategist and an “ideas person”, take a moment to think about how to actually operationalize, or deliver on, your vision. Take a holistic view of the issues you are looking to understand.

Taking the higher-level perspective even for a brief moment takes nothing away if you are drawn inexorably to detail and execution. It does however, allow you to put the matter in context, look for (inevitable but often undetected) linkages, dependencies and correlations between the question you are contemplating, and the wider context in which it exists. Even observations you may have made on completely unrelated topics can come into focus and can prove helpful, even transformative.

What Does it Mean?

The notion of holistic thinking is treated in some environments like a discovery – something novel that is to be brought into focus and encouraged, whilst in others, it is the most natural way of looking at the world.

No need to debate the variety of perspectives on this question.

Thinking holistically is One Big Idea that can transform your approach to the human experience in (allow me the poetic licence please!) every area of life.

Are you meant to lead the design and launch of a new product or service? Are you charged with writing a piece on some dimension of current geopolitical realities in your part of the world? Are you facing financial hardship as a result of excess debt, lost employment or a bad investment? Are you compelled to look to a new career path? Do you have a technical challenge related to a solution deployment at a client? Are you working on a key academic paper, or considering what to do next as you progress in your studies?

Taking a tactical and highly focused approach to questions or challenges of this type can lead to excellent, concrete and actionable solutions or conclusions.

Absent the effort to rise above the trees to see the forest however, such an approach could lead to a path, decision or outcome that is far from the best one that could have been identified with a more consciously holistic view.

Do you manage a team at work? Consider understanding the tactical versus strategic preferences of your team members, and see what happens when you combine team members who naturally take a strategic focus with those who hone in on the more tactical elements of their remit. Create the holistic perspective in your teams and watch what happens.

Even at the “top of the house” in a business, in an organization or a team, it may serve you very well to ensure that the most senior members of the leadership team are complementary in their focus on strategic versus tactical, and in so doing, come together to bring a holistic lens to the issues they are addressing.

The idea of thinking holistically involves a recognition that things are inherently interconnected and that there is a dependency somewhere in the equation – that the full picture can only be fully appreciated by taking those connections into account. One level of that connectivity involves the strategic and tactical elements that we cite here as an example.

Let’s get Practical...

How useful can this One Big Idea possibly be?

Well, I don’t know! It depends on you – but here are a couple of ways it may prove helpful:

Are you designing a field experiment applying the Scientific Method and does your hypothesis require both a detailed data collection effort and a rigorous design process for your experiment? I wonder if thinking about interconnectedness and the “broader context” could help you identify an element to the analysis that you initially had not considered, or an experiment from another discipline, that solved one or two of the process challenges you may be facing?

Are you looking at financing options for a new venture in your business? If you started with the “strategic” view by considering conventional and non-conventional financing sources and programs, thought about how a successful deployment of the new solution would help the broader enterprise, that’s great. What about implementation details such as the regulatory and compliance requirements of putting into place a cross-border financing program that require you to check for money laundering or terrorism financing

risk? Tactical considerations can reinforce – or completely derail – strategy and vision. Holistic approaches can be critically important.

Are you preparing to write an academic paper that seeks to analyze a contemporary issue in economics or trade? Great! You can hone in directly and prepare a compelling paper, or you can step back a bit, and think about linkages between (say) geopolitics, trade and economics, adding a macro or “strategic” lens to your research or analysis, or you could drill down a level or two, going “tactical” to consider your thesis and its implications for cross-border supply chains. Thinking holistically, what interesting and unique “connections” can you identify to add dimension to your work?

Are you running a not-for-profit and preparing your vision and strategy for the Board? Great! Think about specifics like the ratio of donations and funding that cover overhead costs, consider how best to engage with your top supporters and how to increase support from less active donors, or how to increase your “net promoter score” as a reflection of ecosystem support – but also think about the state of the overall donor-funded not for profit sector: how is it impacted by current conditions, and how does your mission align or resonate with current priorities? Add the holistic view to strengthen your vision with a powerful plan, and your plan with a compelling vision.

Are you managing a portfolio of investments for a firm or for your clients? Yes, absolutely think about asset allocation options, a search for non-correlated assets to change the risk character of your portfolio – but think holistically: where are investment priorities headed and how will the evolving choices of investors – both retail and institutional – shape your approach? What will be the impact of ESG – Environmental, Social and Governance – considerations be on your portfolio composition?

By the Way...

This One Big Idea may feel complex or may seem like “swimming against the current” if you have a strongly-held preference or even one that has been unconsciously

established over a period of time. Attempting to think holistically against the grain of your current approach may be challenging; doing so, but poorly, could be more damaging than helpful to whatever you are working to accomplish.

Complement your approach, look for input and contributions from people who more easily see other elements of the holistic perspective than you do, and patiently progress until you can internalize this One Big Idea, and embody it yourself in your thoughts and in your actions.

And just to have a little fun, go ahead and Light a Thousand Candles with this Idea – but remember to look above the flames, to see the context in which you are lighting those candles. Think holistically about the impact of thinking holistically...

