

Building a Model to Measure Strategic Thinking from the Perspective of Arab Chiefs Executives -A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Strategic Thinking represents a contemporary approach and an advanced intellectual way that contribute to coordinate the organizational capabilities, competition, and the future of organizations, This can be done through the application of business insights and opportunities and the study of visible and invisible relations to the overall organizational activities and their interaction with the highly competitive and fast changing business landscapes.

The purpose of the current study is responding to the need of building a model measuring the strategic thinking from the perspective of Arabs Chiefs Executive by using qualitative approach in an attempt to find ways to address problems to deal with rapid changes and forces in the Arab business environment.

Keywords: Strategic Thinking, Focus groups, Levels of measurement, Dimensions of measurement, Measurement indicators, and Measurement model of strategic thinking.

Introduction

Competition among business organizations have become a strategic goal. Winning against this competition requires non-traditional techniques and methodologies to ensure the diagnosis of influential environmental variables that reveals trends and methods of their competitors.

Strategic Thinking represents a contemporary approach and an advanced intellectual way that contribute to organizational capabilities, competition, and the future of the organization, through the application of business insights and opportunities intended to create competitive advantage for an organization. And also through the study of visible and invisible relations to the overall organizational activities and their interaction with the highly competitive and fast-changing business landscapes (Salih, 2007).

In recent years, the term “strategic thinking” was identified as one of the most crucial management research issues in the near future (Zahra, O’Neill, 1998 cited in Bonn, 2001). Moreover, Previous Studies show the weaknesses in practicing strategic thinking; According to Garrett (1995), 90% of surveyed managers, did not practice the strategic thinking because of their lack of training.

Many studies indicated that empirical research in three industrialized countries specifically identifies lack of strategic thinking among executives, which in turn detracting the economic performance (Bonn, 2001; Essery, 2002; Jones, 1991; Mason, 1986; Thkur& Hoffman, 1987; Zabriskie&Huellmantel, 1991; Julian &Swiercz, 2011).

A study conducted by Bonn (2001) indicated that the majority of senior executives at many Australian large manufacturers indicated lack of strategic thinking which significantly contribute to major organizational issues.

In Arab countries a number of studies were conducted on the strategic thinking: (Abu Naim, 1994) - Egypt, (Salih, 2001) – Iraq, and (Shdeifat& Al Harahsheh, 2005) - Jordan, These studies noted limited practices in exercising strategic thinking and of the present clear picture of strategic thinking and its level of practice as well as the absence of objective indicators to measure.

The combined results called some researchers (Mason, 1986; Thakur & Hoffman, 1987 ; Bennis, 1989; Stumpf, 1989 ; Pearson, 1990; Jones, 1991; Zabriskie&Huellmantel, 1991 ; Liedtka&Rosenblum, 1998; Hartman & Crow, 2002; Goldman, 2005;

Jelenc&Swiercz, 2011) to recognize the weakness in practicing the strategic thinking and a lack of a measurement which is indeed to represent an intellectual problem; and the reasons of this problem go back to: (Jelenc&Swiercz, 2011:2; Pisapia et al., 2011:2; Hussey, 2011:210).

- The belief that Strategic Thinking is very elusive to define, measure, or learn how to think strategically.
- While the primacy of Strategic Thinking was supported by the literature, assessment tools were not readily found to measure the leaders' ability to perform these skills; hence they were not widely studied.
- There are plenty of strategic managers who do precisely the same job as when they were called strategic planners.

Similarly, Garratt (1995) Bonn (2005) Salih (2007) Al-Hawary and Younis (2010), called for more research in Strategic Thinking.

The purpose of the current study, is to respond to the calls of previous studies mentioned above, by building a model to measure the Strategic Thinking from the perspective of Arab CEOs by using the qualitative method in an attempt to help in solving part of the problem of this vital issue on the Arab level at least. So it is expected to be an intellectual contribution to this study that contains:

- *Diagnosis of the levels, dimensions and indicators to measure the strategic thinking within the conceptual model.*
- *The use of the model that will be adopted in training on Strategic Thinking and implementation of strategic education and learning programs.*

Strategic Thinking: Theoretical Framework

Concepts and Characteristics

Strategic Thinking arose as a reaction to strategic planning. The 1970s witnessed the advent of strategic planning as a key tool proposed by consultants to aid corporate management in determining the future of their organization. Most strategic planning systems, however, relied on historical data numbers that were generated internally. These systems required long and exhaustive analyses with a heavy numerical base. The result was an extrapolation of history into the future.

However, the beginnings of 1980s showed an interest in strategic thinking which incorporates an assessment of both the internal and external environment when the data is highly subjective and consist of the personal perception of each member of the management team. The process involves a qualitative evaluation of the business and its environment and are both introspective and non-introspective. The skill required to meet these requirements is a qualitative analysis (Robert, 2000; Salih, 2001).

At the outset, it must be pointed out the lack of a single concept for strategic thinking; One of the concepts, is a perspective, relies heavily on intuition, with only a modest amount of analysis (Morrisey, 1996; Wells, 1998), define as a mental process with a global trend or set of attitudes, that should be seen as an opportunity to transform the corporation and change the rules of the industry to its advantage.

Robert (2000: 56), stated that strategic thinking as a kind of thinking that goes on the heads of CEOs and a key to making the people support them as it is an attempt to transform the CEO vision into profile or picture of what the company will look like at some point in the future.

Abraham (2005: 6) describes Strategic Thinking as the process offinding an alternative way to execute an activity instead of the current way or adopting a different work model that differ from competitors that submit customer value.

According to Zand (2013), Peter Drucker describes ST as meta-thinking – that is, offering executives, with valuable insights for improving the process of strategic analysis. Built into his pattern of thinking, there are three techniques that he used to consider almost every problem:

1. Asking penetrating questions for people who understand current and future realities so they can generate and evaluate a creative set of strategic options.
2. Reframing the prevailing view of the situation in simple, understandable terms that enable a review of priorities and adjustment of actions to better adapt to the competitive environment.
3. Questioning the assumptions underlying current views – consider alternative assumptions and diligently probe their context and strategic implications.

Jelence and Swiercz (2011) believed that process is an oriented definition that present the essence of the strategic thinking concept. According to him strategic thinking is a process in which a person is perceiving, reflecting, feeling, realizing and acknowledging signs that affects the future of the firm, giving them meaning and acting upon them by shaping the impressions, perspective and behaviors accordingly.

In view of the above, we can describe the concept of strategic thinking for the purposes of the study as:

Advanced mental process, consisting of skills, capabilities and characteristics that is the responsibility of the strategic apex and practiced at all levels (individuals; groups, organization) in a way to measuretheir effectiveness as aset of dimensions and indicators. Some of literature identified the distinguished characteristics of Strategic Thinking as follows: (Liedtaka, 1998; Salih, 2001; Weiner & Brown, 2006; Salih, 2007; Fairholm&Card, 2009)

1. Uses mental models which considered the most dynamic in the interpretation of environmental change and complexity.

2. Is used by strategic top because it is responsible for the formulation of the organization's vision and strategic orientation.
3. Focuses on the synthesis of ideas, rather than analyzing them.
4. Defines the strategic intent that directs the abilities of employees, which leads to a better work for the organization.
5. Seizing the suitable opportunities by building a contingency strategy.
6. Views itself as an organizational philosophy rather than a technical expert
7. Concentrate on the flow of information and the quality of relationships that emerges rather than information controlling.
8. Works in organizations with ambiguity and qualitative nature activities rather than organizations that hold a control and Quantization activities.

The Importance and Multi level perspectives of Strategic Thinking

The importance of strategic thinking comes from being a methodology to address and plan against future challenges that are inevitable and necessary.

Owen Babek states that who is unable to predict the future isn't worthy to live in it (Salih, 2001; Ivancevich et al., 1997). Strategic thinking is also double-loop learning, stimulates organizations to learn quickly and move quickly and efficiently to deal with environmental change (Heracleous, 1998; Torset, 2001). It's also important because it contributes in the discovery of an ingenious and innovative strategy leading to rewrite the rules of the competitive game and the perception of the future (Heacleous, 1998; Abraham, 2005).

Consequently re-inventing the industry, competition and expand market share. Hussey (2001). Achieving strategic thinking to reach a sustainable competitive advantage is done by achieving strategic consensus as well as a collective thinking and achieving an integrated perspective on entrepreneurship, modernization, innovation ideas, and practical applications through the use of brainstorming based on Why-What-How approach. (Johnson & Scholes, 1997; Fairholm & Card, 2009).

Finally, Strategic Thinking forms the base for strategic decision making, without this base, subsequent decision and actions are likely to be fragmented and inconsistent with the long-range health of the organization (Morrissey, 1996).

In summary, the above review of previous research, suggests that Strategic Thinking represents an approach to make the future, and a guide to current activities, as well as a method of activation the innovation, bringing new ideas, a base for strategic decision making and an indicators of sound judgment on organizational effectiveness.

Multi-level perspective is a dynamic attribution of the Strategic Thinking, as for why a multilevel perspective? According to Bonn (2005), based on research (Chatman et al., 1986; Jelinek & Litterer, 1994; Weick, 1995) he argued that the process of practicing strategic thinking requires multiple minds, as it is influenced by the surrounding social environment. Bonn (2005) suggested that understanding strategic thinking in an organization requires applying a dual-level approach that integrate the micro domain that focus on the individuals to investigate the characteristics of a strategic thinker, with the macro domains that concentrate on an organizational context for influencing individual thinking and behavior, such as organizational structure, culture and environment.

At the individual level, strategic thinking includes: understanding the organization and its environment holistically, creativity and vision that guide the future of the organization, while at the organizational level the organization requires the creation of structures, systems and processes that lead to the fostering of strategic dialogue between the organization top team, and to get advantage from the ingenuity and creativity of every employee in the organization.

An understanding of strategic thinking would, therefore, benefit from a research design that investigates the characteristics of an individual strategic thinker as well as the dynamics and processes that take place within the organizational context. For example, to obtain an accurate picture of the effects of different compensation and reward systems on Strategic Thinking, we need to look at their impact on individual managers and on the way this influences the wider organizational climate and structure. Consequently, a framework for Strategic Thinking needs to integrate the micro-domain's focus on individuals and groups with the macro-domain's focus on organizations and their context. In other words, it needs to acknowledge the influence of individual characteristics and actions on the organizational context and the influence of the organizational context on individual thinking and behavior. Clearly, the individual characteristics of strategic thinker are only of added value if supported structures and co-existing processes in each group and organizational levels are being used. Similarly, structural forms and processes in the group and organizational levels reinforce the emergence of appropriate individual characteristics associated with Strategic Thinking.

In spite of our agreement with (Bonn, 2005), we could add that the multi-level perspective contributes in achieving synergy, which refers to the ability of two or more units or companies to generate greater value working together than they would working apart, this study found that most business synergies take one of six forms: (Goold & Campbell, 1998):

(Sharing know-How, sharing in tangible resources, unity of negotiation, coordinating strategies, vertical integration, combined business creativity).

Driven by the above, the researcher presents multiple level of strategic thinking:

1. Strategic Thinking at the Individual level: Individual Strategic Thinking involves the application of experience based on judgment to determine future directions. (Morrissey, 1996:2) This comes throughout: Bonn (2001:64-65).

- Ability to a holistic perspective of the organization and its environment that requires an understanding of how different problems and issues are connected with each other, how they affect each other and what effect of one solution in a particular area on the other.
- Searching for new approaches and envision in a better ways of doing things.
- Invest the individual talents and energies in building an ambitious vision for the future of the organization.

2.Strategic Thinking at the Groups level: The need for Strategic Thinking at the groups level come; from the following evidence: Bonn (2005:342)

- The limitation of individual thinking capacity: Strategic Thinking is not purely an individual mental activity, but it is influenced by the decision-makers participation in social interactions as well as the social and institutional context of the organization. Hence, an understanding of Strategic Thinking in complex organizational settings requires that we go beyond a focus on individuals and carefully examine the group context and its influence on an individual's Strategic Thinking ability.
- Building Representational systems; the processes within the group determine representational systems which explain the group's collective frame and the shape of the group as a reference to guide its members and to develop a "negotiated belief structure" during the decision-making processes. As that the group's perspectives are not identical, so individuals unable to select an action that fit with those of other organizational members and to create meaning in a co-operative setting.
- Creation of negotiated mental models and belief systems: The process of group interaction in the decision-making process go beyond the representational systems, which have been developed at the individual level and facilitates the creation of negotiated mental models and belief systems. Consequently, Strategic Thinking within a group is not a total of all group members' Strategic Thinking ability, but a function of the interplay between the Strategic Thinking abilities of individual members, and the preserved diversity in negotiating belief structures for senior managing groups, and organizational influences. The literature has identified two areas, which are important for the process of group interaction, namely heterogeneity and conflict.

3. Strategic Thinking at the Organizational level: Organizational Strategic Thinking is the coordination of creative minds into a common perspective that enables your organization to proceed into the future in a manner fulfilling to all concerned. The purpose of Strategic Thinking is to help in facing challenges, both predictable and non-predictable in future rather than preparing for a single probable tomorrow (Morrissey, 1996:2-4).

The previous concepts show that Strategic Thinking at the organizational level contributes to the formation of shared understandings. The most important approaches of formulating common understandings, as identified by Bonn (2005), are:

- Organizational Culture.
- Organizational Structure.
- Reward and compensation system.

In the light of the previous review, the researcher can prove the following: if the organization wants to activate the Strategic Thinking and get the highest benefit from it

and thus making decisions that effectively contribute to the success of the organization; then it should generate interaction shared between the three levels of thinking (individuals, groups, and organization). Because relying on one level without other levels will create a non-integrated low performance.

The dimensions and indicators of Strategic Thinking

Table (1) Survey summarizes the dimensions and indicators of Strategic Thinking as identified in literatures

Researcher and year	Liedtka 1998	O'Shannassy 1998	Wells 1998	Robert 2000	Bonn 2001	Salih 2001	Jelenc & Swiercz 2011	Pisapia & Ellingtn 2011	Dragoni et al. 2011	Total	Percent age%
Dimensions											
System perspective	*						*	*		3	6
Intelligent opportunism	*									1	2
Thinking in time	*	*					*			3	6
Intent Focused	*	*					*			3	6
Hypothesis Driven	*						*			2	4
Holistic View		*								1	2
Stakeholder participation		*							*	2	4
flexible inputs		*					*			2	4
Outputs		*								1	2
Perceiving			*							1	2
Understanding organization & environment			*		*					2	4
Reasoning			*							1	2
Process				*			*			2	4
Strategic Ambiguity & Risk				*		*	*			3	6
Skills				*					*	2	4
Excellence achievement				*					*	2	4
Creativity					*					1	2
Vision for future					*			*	*	3	6
Foster strategic dialogue					*					1	2
Take advantage of the individual creativity					*					1	2
Dealing with						*				1	2
Information intensive & focused											

Dealing with the complex problems of unfamiliar						*				1	2
Low formal						*				1	2
individual characteristics							*			1	2
dynamics a group							*			1	2
Intuition							*			1	2
Political Sensitivity							*			1	2
Professional Capabilities							*		*	2	4
Reflection logical and rational thinking								*		1	2
Experience									*	1	2
Total										48	100

Methodology of Qualitative Study:

The purpose of this section is to discuss three paragraphs including: the concept of qualitative study, the focus groups in the qualitative study, and the procedures for the qualitative study.

Concept of Qualitative Study:

According to Strauss and Corbin (1990:19) Qualitativestudy: is a kind of research produces results that have not been reached by statistical procedures or by any other means of quantitative methods. Thus represent an attempt to get in-depth understanding of the meanings and definitions provided by the respondents to the position when asked about it (McMillan &Schumacher 2001: 407). Because it depends on the study of the phenomenon in their natural conditions as a direct source of the data, and the researcher himself as an essential tool in collection of this data (Audi&Malkawi,1992:102).

Designing Interviews Guide:

To investigate the dimensions of strategic thinking, a guide was designed for use in several interviews. This guide was presented to a group of specialists in administrative sciences, measurement and evaluation, those specialists have showed their notes, on the basis of these notes, the guide was modified to final form as shown below:

Table (2) Interviews Guide

Level and dimension	Agree on its importance in the measurement		
	High	Middle	Weak
Select the nature of the relationship between the dimensions: Strong positive (+ + +) positive (+ +), moderate (+) Negative (-), no relation (x)			

Focus groups sample:

The study focus groups consisted of 8-10 members who have experience in management, organizational behavior, strategic and financial management. The groups were presented with the conceptual framework of strategic thinking.

The focus group technique has been used in the social research, but possibly it's most obvious usages have been applied to investigate preferences and reaction measure (Shuhaiber& Lehmann, 2014:2).

The size of sample focus groups in this study was (40) trainees from five Arab countries, (Iraq, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain) who participated in training courses in Amman in the Knowledge Kingdom Foundation for Training and Consulting ([www.knowledge kingdom .com .jo](http://www.knowledgekingdom.com.jo)). *Next is description of the characteristics of the focus groups sample:*

Table (3) characteristics of focus group sample

Position Country	Chief executive officer CEO	Chief Officer CO	Department managers	Total
Iraq	1	5	2	8
Libya	2	4	2	8
Saudi Arabia	1	3	4	8
Jordan	2	4	2	8
Bahrain	1	3	4	8
Total	7	19	14	40

Procedures for the qualitative study:

The steps for applying qualitative study on the focus groups were:

1. Dividing participants in to five groups, (8) participants in each group.
2. Identifying the leader of each group (his task was to manage the discussion and distribution of roles), the coordinator (his role was to organize and coordinate ideas), and ideas documentation (his mission was to record dialogues and writing decisions that agreed by the Group) ,time officer (his task is to control the time of

- the debate and not to waste it) and the official spokesperson (his task was to speak in the name of the group and defend their ideas in front of other groups).
3. Distribution of the list of dimensions and indicators contained in table (1).
 4. The dimensions and indicators that got the estimate (high) was Considered as the actual dimensions of Strategic Thinking.
 5. Using the Constant Comparative Analysis (CCA) strategy that was applied widely in qualitative study. The CCA strategy consists of three processes: (1) open codes, (2) Axial codes, and (3) selective codes. (Shuhaiber& Lehmann, 2014:3).

Findings and Analysis:

On the basis of discussions between the members of the focus groups, we got the following:

1. The individual level and dimensions of measuring the Strategic Thinking:

focus groups Agreed on the importance of the individual level in the measurement of Strategic Thinking, and the key dimensions of measuring an individual level, that got the estimates (high) by the groups were (experience, skills, and professional Capabilities), The concept of these dimensions from the viewpoint of Groups:

- **Experience:** The accumulation of knowledge of individuals and their ability to use it in problem-solving and decision-making and the unique contributions. The indicators to measure experience are as follows: (number of distinct ideas, the number of times of contribution in providing innovative and creative solutions to the problems, the number of posts in decision-making process at the level of creating alternatives and / or to determine the most appropriate alternative).
- **Skills:** The ingenuity and know-how to apply the knowledge and experience in practice and turn them into activities, actions and products added value, measured by the following indicators: (Number of times that transfer the knowledge into activities, and the number of times of getting benefits in creating products, and the number of times in generating proactive initiatives).
- **Professional Capabilities:** The capacity for the implementation of the tasks of job-related professionalism, so as to reflect the ability of the high performance and superior at the lowest cost and highest returns, measured by the following indicators: (level of effectiveness of the task performance, the ability to reduce the cost of performance, the quality of the performance, the level of return on performance).

When the groups were asked to determine the nature of expected relations between the three dimensions, they confirmed a strong positive relationship between experience and skill and confirmed a moderate relationship between capabilities and both of the experience and skills was. But this relationship is not linear.

2. The groups level and dimension of the strategic thinking measurement :

Focus groups agreed on the importance of the group level in the measurement of Strategic Thinking, and the key dimensions of measuring a group level, which got the estimates (high) by the groups were (Understanding organization & environment, Creativity, Intuition) The concept of these dimensions from the viewpoint of focus groups:

- **Understanding organization & Environment:** The Group's ability to form a common understanding of the culture of the organization that achieves the highest merge between the organization and its working groups on the one hand and on the other hand the ability of the groups to diagnosis the environmental events surrounding the organization. Which measured by the following indicators (the level of compatibility between the directions of the organization and groups, the level of participation of the groups in building the organization culture, and the level of ability to diagnose of environment events).
- **Creativity:** The ability of groups to generate new ideas that never exist, through synergy and discussing their ideas which measured by the following indicators (number of new ideas, new products generated a number of new ideas, and the number of times the current business development ideas through unprecedented).
- **Intuition:** The ability of groups to anticipate common events from environment and propose ways to face them, as well as the duration of these events. Which measured by the following indicators: (level of environmental events diagnosis, the level of impact of these events (long or short), and the effectiveness of the proposed methods and suggested ways to deal with environmental events).

When the groups were asked to determine the nature of the expected relations between three-dimensions, they showed that there is a moderate relationship between these three dimensions. But this relationship is not linear.

3. The organization level and dimensions of the Strategic Thinking measurement:

The focus groups agree on the importance of the organization level in the measurement of Strategic Thinking. The key dimensions of measuring a groups level, that got the estimates (high) by the groups were (Process, Strategic Leverage, Low formality) The concept of these dimensions from the view point of focus groups:

- **Process:** strategic thinking represents an integrated process that consists of sub process that interactive with each other, which should be taken in our consideration to achieve a logical access to the results and outcomes and as to diagnosis its impact on the future of the organization and performance. And measured by the following indicators (current profile, strategic options, and tentative strategic profile, final strategic profile).
- **Strategic Leverage:** Achieve success through perfecting what they have learned from the driving force and the requirements of excellence and experience curve in dealing with customers and markets and products which measured by the following indicators (The level of intelligence in dealing with the driving force, the effectiveness of the experience curve, and the keys to competitive advantage).
- **Low formality:** The organization uses low levels of formal and expands the area of direct communication and reduces the centralization and bureaucracy which measured by the following indicators: (The extent of the use of organic structures,

the level of promotion of informal relationships, the level of empowerment and delegation practice, the level of risk taking, and the level of adoption of innovative ideas and entrepreneurial).

When the groups were asked to determine the nature of expected relations between the three dimensions, they confirmed a positive relationship between strategic Leverage and low formality and confirmed the relationship between processes, Strategic Leverage and low formality was moderate But this relationship is not linear.

Discussion and model building:

Based on previous analysis and the results obtained, the researcher presents in Table (4) a summary of the final results and the nature of relationships among the main dimensions: Table (4) summary of the final results and the quality and nature of the relationships between the main of dimensions and the number of indicators:

Level	Dimensions And indicators number	The quality of the potential relationships between dimensions	The nature of the potential relationships between dimensions
Individual level	*Experience (3)	Experience ↔ Skills (+++)	Relationship is not linear
	*Skills (3)	Experience ↔ Capabilities (+)	
	*Professional Capabilities (3)	Skills ↔ Capabilities (+)	
Groups level	*Understanding organization & environment (3)	Understanding Creativity(+) ↔ Intuition	Relationship is not linear
	*Creativity (3)	Understanding (+) ↔ Creativity(+) ↔ Intuition	
	*Intuition (3)	Understanding Creativity(+)	
Organization	*Process (4)	Process Strategic Leverage	Relationship is not

level	*Strategic (3)	(+) ↔	linear
	*Low formal (5)	Process ↔ Low Formal (+) Strategic Leverage ↔ Low Formal (++)	

looking at the contents of the table(4) we can deduce that building a model to measure the Strategic Thinking requires the presence of three levels (organization, groups, and individuals), and each level consists of a set of dimensions for the measurement. Finally every key dimension consists of measurement indicators that have been shown above at (findings and analysis).

The foregoing researcher can build a model of measurement by pooling levels and dimensions with clarifying the nature and quality of relationships that brought them together as shown in Figure 1.

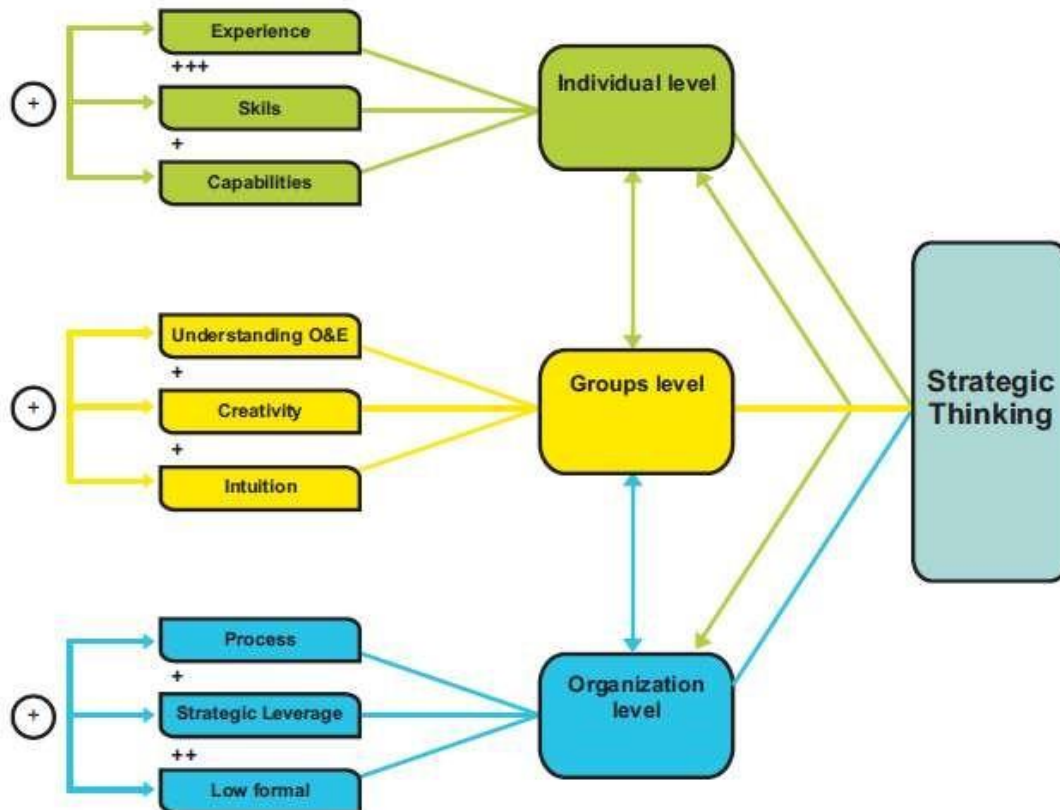


Figure (1) the proposed model for measuring the Strategic Thinking

Recommendations for future studies:

1. Conducting a study to test the validity of the model proposed in this study.

2. Conducting a study to measure the level of Strategic Thinking among Arab Managers Using the dimensions and indicators of the proposed model.
3. Conducting a comparative study to measure the level of Strategic Thinking in different sectors using indicators in the proposed model.
4. Studying the impact of Strategic Thinking in strategic performance.
5. Studying the relationship between Strategic Thinking and strategic agility and its impact on strategic performance.

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