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STRATEGIC THINKING AS "SEEING"

I can think of no better place to discuss strategic thinking than Finland. No-one can accuse the Finns of being conformists or of being ordinary, two characteristics I find antithetical to strategic thinking. Perhaps it is the harsh climate that does it - but we Canadians share that climate without particularly sharing those characteristics - so it must be all that time the Finns spend in saunas.

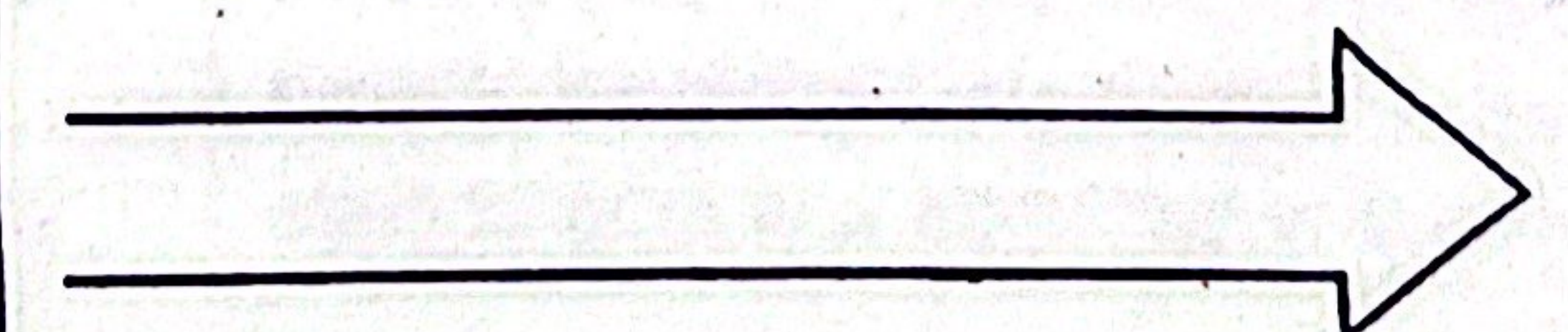
In any event, this was a most stimulating conference, for its wonderful and varied ideas as well as its warm hospitality and lively exchanges, and I came away knowing a good deal more about strategic thinking than when I arrived. I prepared some introductory notes for the conference, and then revised them for the closing sessions; what follows are these comments, slightly edited.

I think it best to begin with what I believe strategic thinking is **not**. It is not simply following an "industry recipe", not copying a competitor's strategy or continuing to do what was always done -- at least not unless those have been carefully considered choices. In other words, strategic thinking is not mindlessness, not imitation, not thoughtless persistence. Nor is it purely cerebral: separating oneself from the subject of one's strategy and working it out ever so cleverly on paper or in a computer, as so much of today's literature urges managers to do.

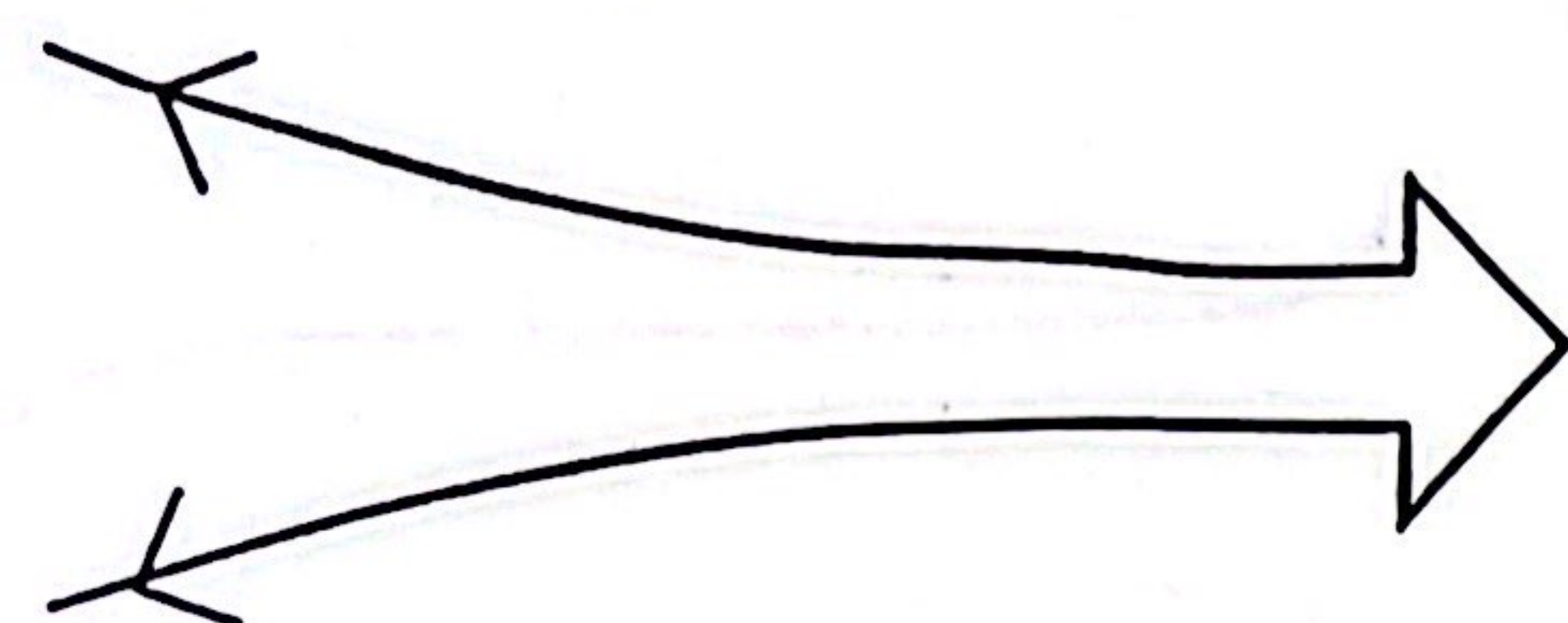
differs from ordinary thinking. In fact, because I believe strategic thinkers are appropriately described as "visionaries", I shall characterize the various ingredients of strategic thinking by "seeing" rather than "thinking". I present below three pairs of ingredients together with a seventh that knits them altogether into a framework of strategic thinking.

Almost everyone would agree that strategic thinking means **seeing ahead**.

To me, therefore, strategic thinking



But in fact, you cannot see ahead unless you can **see behind**



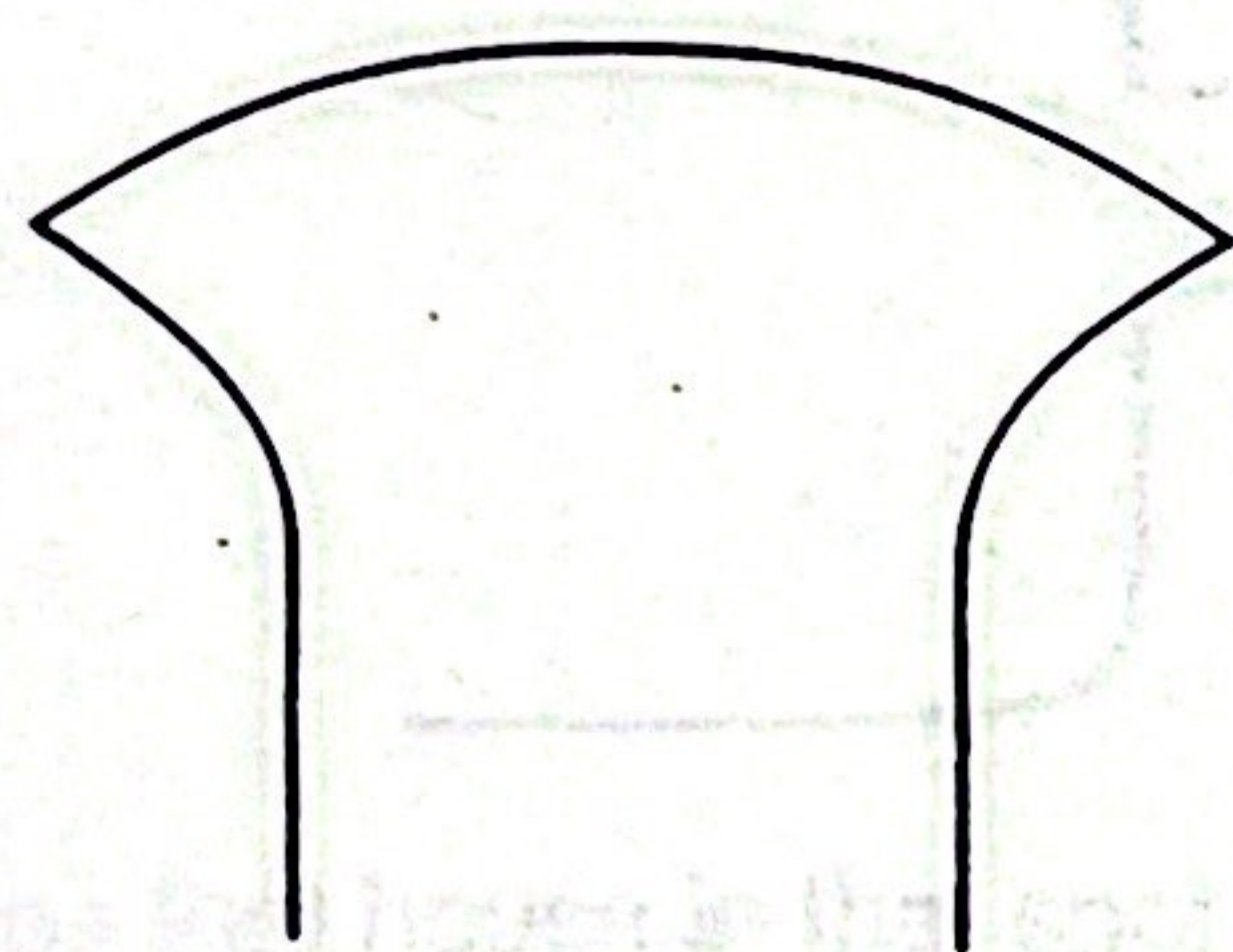
because any good vision of the future has to be rooted in an understanding of the past. To paraphrase Kierkegaard, life may be lived forward, but it is understood backward. That is not to say that strategic thinkers extrapolate the past - I have already argued that they do not do this, at least not mindlessly - but simply that one cannot see the future with an ignorance of the past. That is what makes the statistics of Pertti Kettunen's paper so intriguing.

Of course, as he makes clear, even the best knowledge of the past may not help to see the future. What is key then, as Timo Santalainen stresses in his paper, is not to extrapolate trends but to foresee discontinuities. And for that there are not techniques, not much more than informed, creative intuition.

In his discussion of "the interpretive view", Henrik Gahmberg emphasizes the importance of understanding the past - "strategy as signification of memory". And during the conference, Claes Gustafsson introduced the wonderful metaphor of sitting on a train. Facing forward offers the viewer a broad perspective of the general scene as the details accelerate in, while when facing backward, he or she struggles to construct the pieces of a fragmented world that came together only after they

have whizzed past. I suspect my poor memory has spoiled his lovely metaphor, but I wonder if the message is that strategic thinkers, because they have to sit forward and backward simultaneously, should not take trains at all!

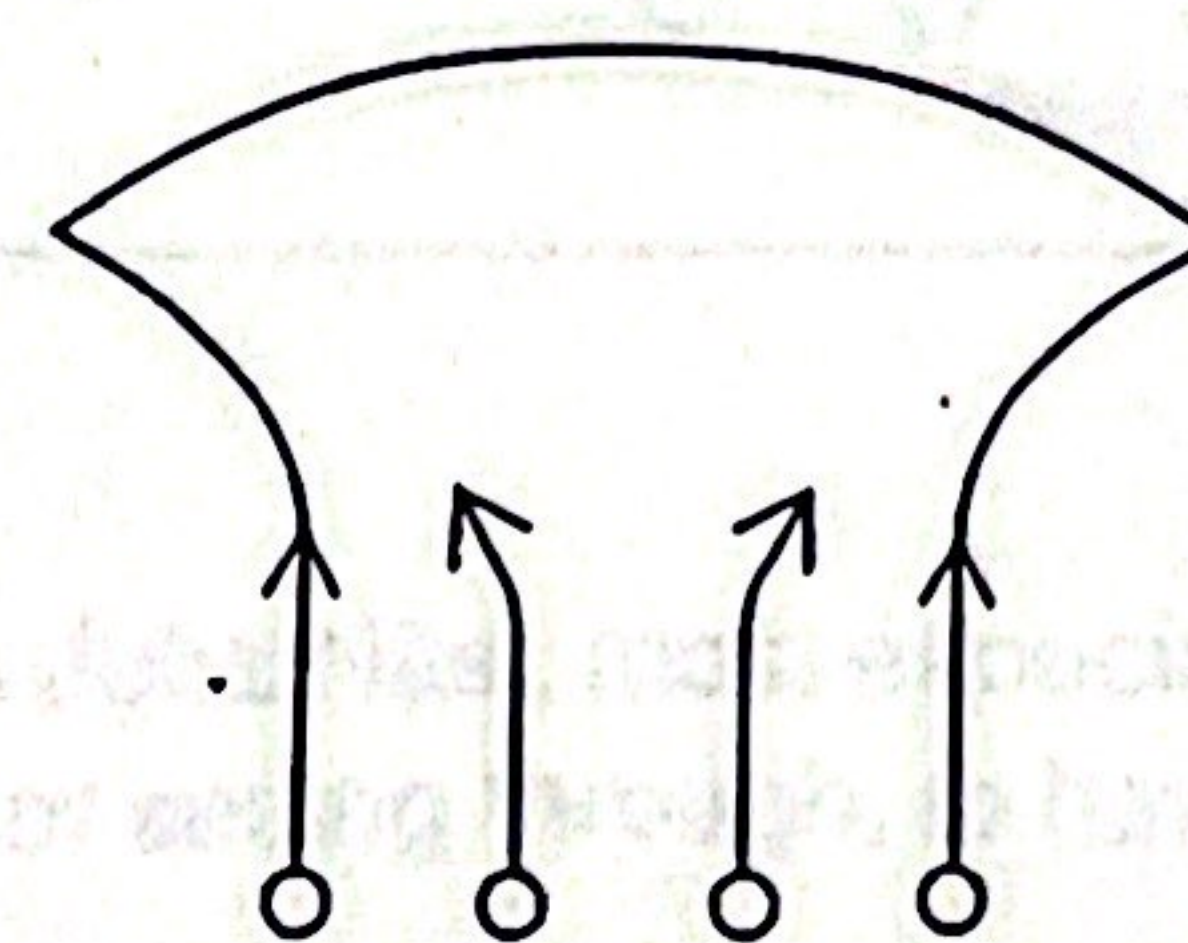
Many who comment on strategic thinking in fact believe they should take helicopters. Or at least I assume so because they talk so much about being able to distinguish "the forest from the trees", and the only way I know to do this is to hover well above those trees. To them, therefore, strategic thinking is **seeing above**.



But I wonder if anyone can get the true "big picture" by just seeing above. The forest looks like a rug from a helicopter, and anyone who has taken a walk in one (or had the good fortune to ski in Lapland, as did I after the conference) knows that forests don't look much like that from the inside. Strategists don't understand much about forests if they stay in helicopters, nor much about organizations if they stay in head offices.

In fact, I prefer another analogy: finding the diamond in the rough. Is that not what strategic thinkers have to do - find the gem of an idea that changes an organization? And that does not come

from the big picture at all; it comes from a lot of hard and messy digging. Indeed, there is no big picture (let alone precious gem) readily available to any strategist. Each must construct his or her own, or perhaps I should say paint his or her own, out of the details dug up. Thus, strategic thinking is also inductive thinking: seeing above must be supported by **seeing below**.



This point was, I believe, made clear in Reijo Luostarinen's discussion of international business, for which he picked up the idea of finding the diamond in the rough. Likewise, Kari Lilja, Keijo Räsänen, and Risto Tainio built up their picture of "the Finnish way" of strategic management through their probing into its detail, especially its roots in the forestry industry (and long before helicopters were invented!). There can thus be "collective" strategies too, national and otherwise. This point was also brought out very well in Sten-Olof Hansén's paper on his own experience with strategic vision at Farnos, and especially his wonderful interventions at the conference.

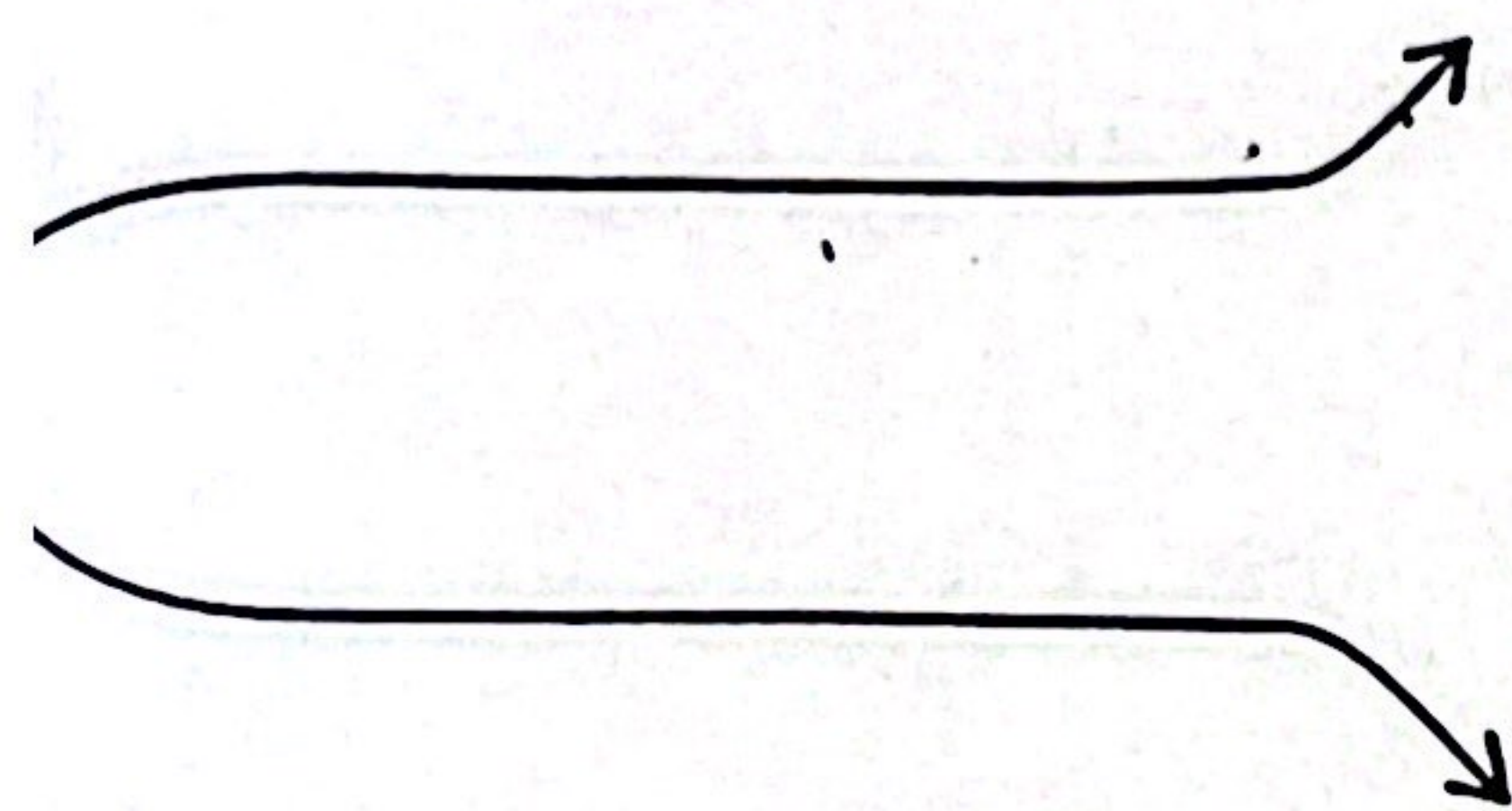
I believe, however, that you can see ahead by seeing behind, and see above by seeing below; and still not be a strategic thinker. It takes more. For one thing, it requires creativity. Strategic thinkers see differently from other people; they pick out the precious gems that others miss. They

are all, in some sense, Arto Lahti's innovative entrepreneurs. Strategic thinkers challenge conventional wisdom - the industry recipe, the traditional strategy, the ordinary world perceived by everyone else who wears blinders - and thereby differentiate their organizations. Since creative thinking has been referred to as lateral thinking, I would like to call this **seeing beside**.

Again, I can cite Sten-Olof's vision for Farnos. Indeed, I believe the best examples of this are the businessmen - Sten-Olof as well as Markku Lahdenpää and Timo Santalainen - who found it worthwhile to take time off from the managerial world of "calculated chaos" to enter the reflective world of scholarship, in preparing papers for this conference, presenting them, and even (heaven help them), listening attentively to the papers of others. Compared to the attitude of so many managers on the other side of the Atlantic, this is truly "seeing beside"! Mention should also be made here of Leo Ahlstedt's long and wise experience with practice, as manifested in his discussion of boards of directors.

There are many creative ideas in this world, far more than we can handle - just visit any art gallery. And so to think strategically requires more than just thinking beside. Those creative ideas have to be placed into context, to be seen to work in a world that is to unfold

strategic thinkers, in other words, also
ive to **see beyond**.



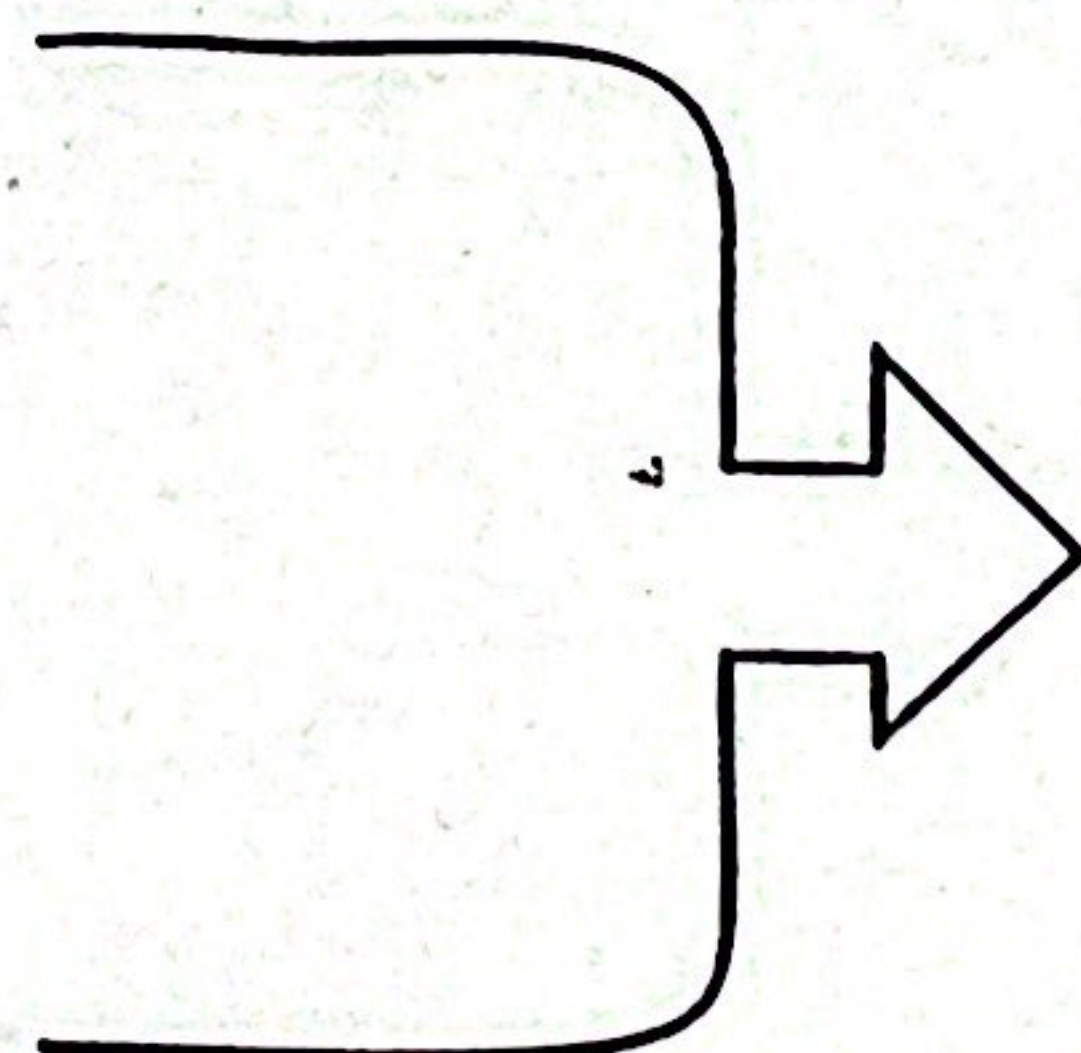
Seeing beyond is different from
seeing ahead. The latter foresees an
expected future by constructing a
framework out of the events of the past
and intuitively forecasts discontinuities.
The former, in contrast, constructs the
future itself - it invents a world that
could not otherwise be.

In this regard, Sten-Olof Hansén
counted the wonderful story about
how he got into a boat in the Turku
chipelago to find a location for a
family house. After looking around for a
while, suddenly he saw the spot. He
said he could picture the house right in
the spot. He could see which trees would
have to be removed and which would
stay, which rocks would be shifted, and
soon. He placed his idea in the context
of an invented future, much as he did, I
would guess, when he conceived a
strategy for Famos.

Fundamental to thinking beyond, in
my opinion, is personal integrity. That is
why I believe that Claes Gustafsson's
sophisticated discussion of morality
and ethics belongs right here. His

'ethical strategist' certainly thinks
beyond, to a better future for all of us. If
we are not led by ethical people - if
those "bottom line" rationalists take over
completely - then none of us shall ever
get a chance to see beyond.

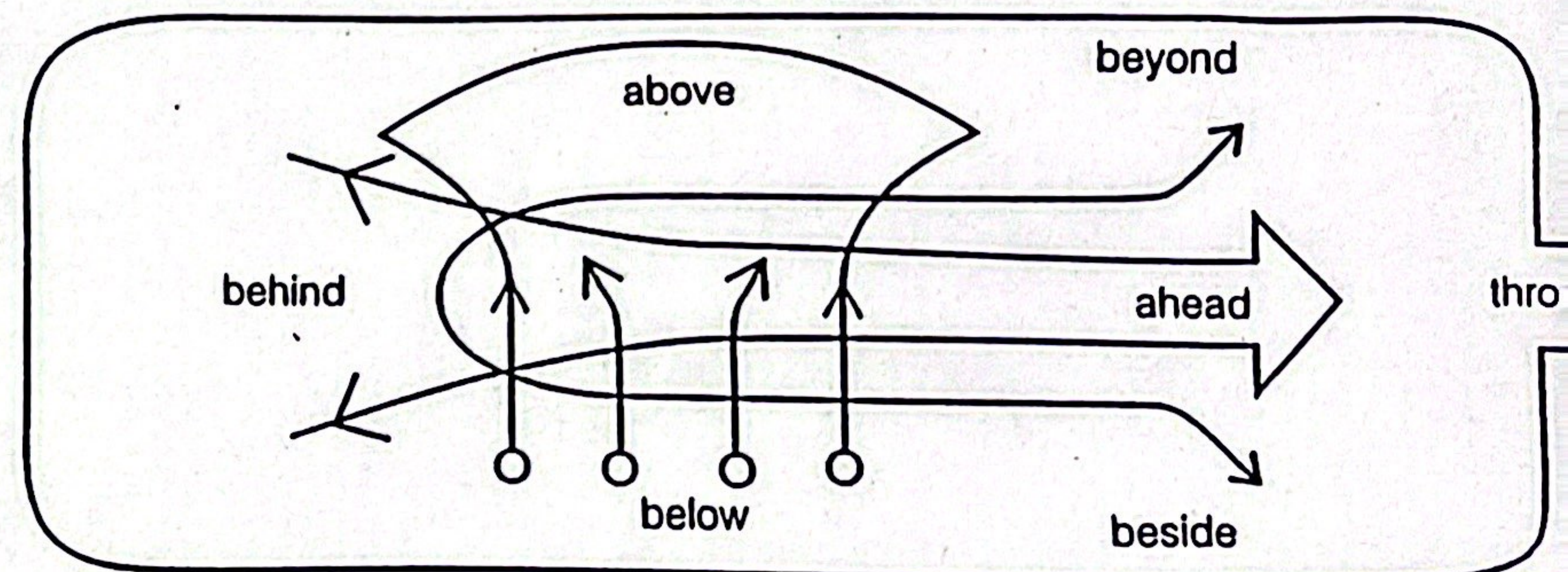
But strategic thinking is not finished
yet, for there remains one last
necessary ingredient. What is the use
of doing all this seeing -- ahead and
behind, above and below, beside and
beyond -- if nothing gets done. In other
words, for a thinker to deserve the label
strategic, he or she must also **see it
through**.¹



To see that house in that spot helps
no one unless that house is actually
placed there. That takes a great deal of
commitment and effort. As Markku
Lahdenpää reminded us in his paper, it
can also take systematic planning, to
program the consequences of the
vision. And, of course, that also
requires consideration of the issues of
control, information, and people, as
reviewed in the papers by Vesa
Mäkinen and Vesa Routamaa, as well
as the efforts of the various functions of
a business, such as marketing, as
discussed in fine detail by Kristian
Möller.

¹Originally, I used the word "thinking" instead of "seeing" throughout this paper, and so this last
ingredient became "thinking through", which means something quite different: the application of
analysis to trace the full consequences of a vision. But while creative visions can be assessed, their full
consequences can never be understood ahead of time. In other words, to attempt to think them through
necessarily to destroy them. So "seeing through" really works better than "thinking through".

Put this all together and you get the following:
Strategic Thinking as Seeing.



I thank Juha Näsi, most especially for seeing beside and beyond, and
certainly for seeing through, to have provided us with this lovely experience.