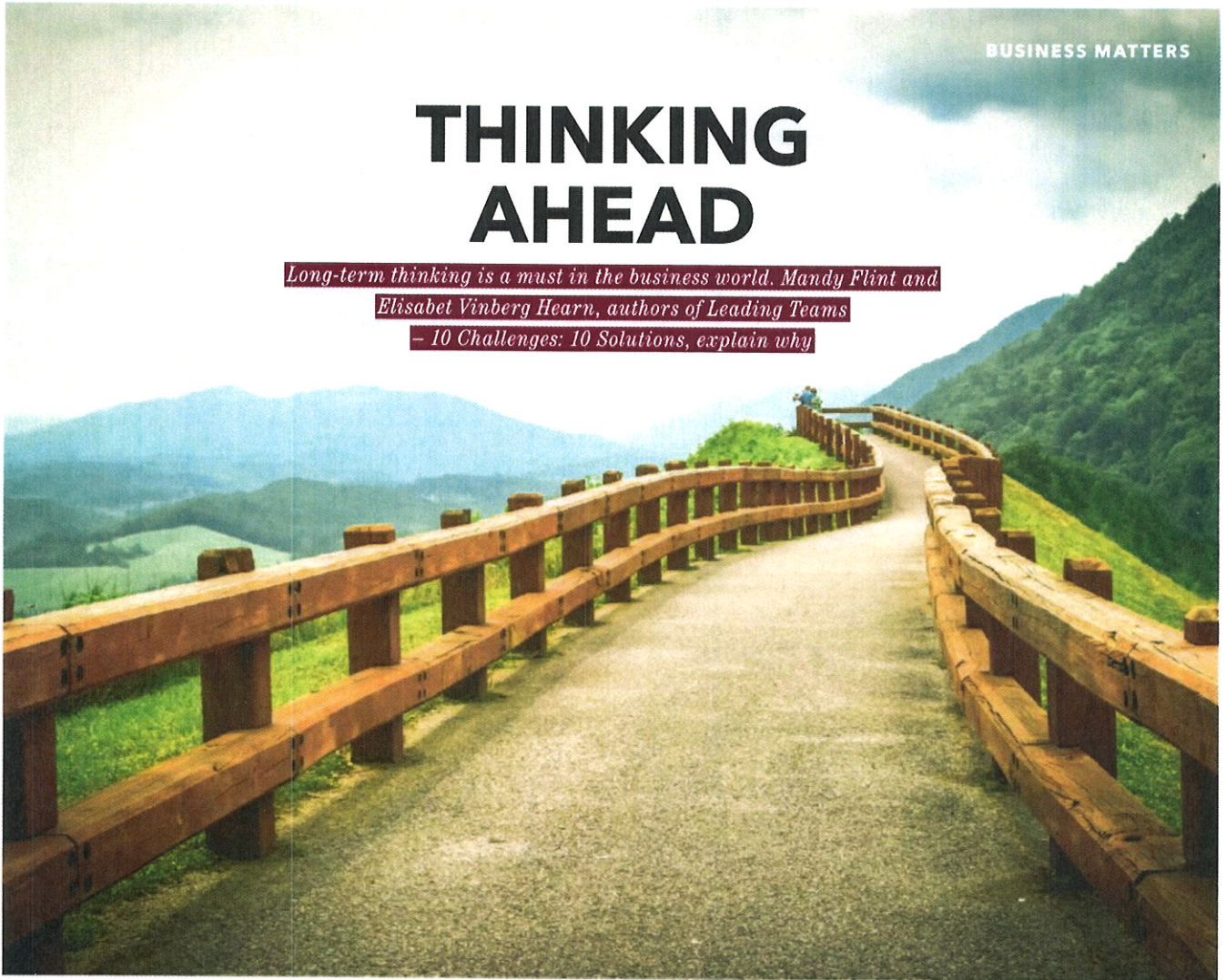


THINKING AHEAD

*Long-term thinking is a must in the business world. Mandy Flint and Elisabeth Vinberg Hearn, authors of **Leading Teams** – 10 Challenges: 10 Solutions, explain why*



We are all busy and therefore easily tempted to think short term. We get that. Short-term focus can yield short-term rewards, which can be both valuable and rewarding. If something is urgent it needs addressing. But short-term focus can't be done at the expense of a longer-term view – we all know that we need this too.

THE IMPACT OF SHORT-TERM THINKING

It's costly to not consider the big picture, the long-term implications of what we do today. It's inefficient to not have proper planning or thought-through solutions. Short-term thinking is by its nature focused on tasks here and now, so people may be busy with activities but losing sight of the purpose and therefore not seeing or taking full responsibility for the end results. Everyone is busy, but not necessarily on the right things, in the right order and for the right reason.

A call centre used a scorecard where one of the measures involved length of call and keeping them as short as possible in order to be able to take more calls. This measurement, although well intended, encouraged employees to rush customer calls to get good individual ratings. The consequence of this was unsatisfied customers who had to call back because their issue hadn't been resolved because the employee had not understood the whole issue the first time around. This of course also generated more calls.

The impact was a negative customer experience, which could lead to attrition, as well as a direct cost linked to calls that could and should have been avoided. This example also highlights what happens when employees only look at isolated issues rather than trying to understand the whole picture of the customer's story, or the impact of their own actions.

LONG-TERM THINKING FOR TEAMS

In a team environment, long-term thinking is simply to STOP and reflect on how you are doing – and to think ahead, asking yourself:

- How have we achieved success so far; what did I/we do to make our team successful?
- Based on our success, what actions and behaviours could I/we take with me/us into the future to ensure more success in the longer term?
- What could we do better going into the future?
- Create a culture of learning: What could we learn from our experiences to take into the future?

And then review all of the above to get the complete picture; what does this mean for today and what does it mean for us in the long term? What do we need to do now and what do we need to think about in a longer perspective?

BUSINESS MATTERS

How do we best balance a focus of short- and long-term thinking?

IT'S A STRATEGY

You and your team probably have goals to achieve for the next week, month and quarter, which require you to focus on the here and now and those shorter-term results. But by encouraging and promoting long-term thinking you can achieve so much more.

With long-term thinking you focus on the impact of what you do, which would, for example, include focusing on the relationships that are crucial for long-term success. This could be clients, suppliers, potential clients and colleagues – just to mention a few. By being respectful and collaborative now you can create a respectful and collaborative relationship over time, which is not just the right thing to do, but it will also make it easier to get them to want to work with you in the future. And with great relationships also come recommendations; clients and stakeholders that seek you out because they have seen your consistent approach over time.

Ultimately, long-term thinking is about being strategic (which, contrary to common belief, is not just a senior management responsibility, on some level it's everyone's responsibility), to think about the effects of actions, to consider what steps to take next. Great teams think about how to operate, how to work together – in order to maximise the value given to customers and the organisation. For individuals, long-term thinking can be the differentiator when it comes to promotion. When moving up the ladder and going for another job, the candidate that shows they can think about today and make the links to the future will stand out.

A team we work with have the usual pressure to hit their sales targets. And every

month, 12 days from the quarter end, the pressure increases dramatically with the number of fire drills, status calls and updates increasing, piling on the pressure. This team got together to review how they were managing and leading this as a team. When the pressure was on, they became short-term focused and saw nothing else. They agreed there was a need to think bigger and create a purpose for them that was "bigger than just the number". The team came up with a team purpose that described their passion for what they wanted to create together. It included how they felt about: being successful, feeling pride, being the team others want to work in, being respected and recognised. Now, when the pressure hits, this clear purpose helps them focus on the long-term results as well as the immediate ones.

SOME SOLUTIONS

Here are some more simple and effective solutions to make long-term thinking a reality

- Have both short- and long-term goals, to balance the focus – as what's rewarded gets done.
- Reward your team members for thinking long-term, make it attractive to be long-term focused.
- Think of your team members as customers and treat them that way. Notice how it affects the long term relationships and results.
- Show your team members the links between the short and long term, the cause and effect of actions and behaviours. Create an awareness of what happens as a result of decisions that take the long-term impact into consideration, and those that don't.
- Discuss short- and long-term issues as a

team: What will be the short- and long-term effects if we do this? Consider your stakeholders in this too: How will our stakeholders be affected by what we do, how will they react, how will this impact their support of us?

- Get your team members to collaborate more, sharing knowledge, experience and their "tricks of the trade" to continually increase the capability of everyone. This will help you all be successful in a longer-term perspective.

These solutions take an investment of team time, so invest in that time; the payoffs will be dynamic.

In addition to the solutions, a set of behaviours is needed to support long-term thinking. As leaders and team members, we need to demonstrate patience, show courage and genuine interest, be curious, rigorous, generous and inspired – and we need to inspire, display hope and determination.

BUSINESS SUSTAINABILITY

Long-term thinking is ultimately about sustainability. Sustainability has become a popular word in business, but very few organisations do this well yet. Sustainability is taking the big picture view, to consider all the complexities of business and consider the impact of decisions, actions and behaviours, not just now but also in the future. It's to think about the impact on the financial (money), human (employees, societies in which the organisation operates etc) and natural (water, air, and so on) resources a business needs to succeed, hence creating sustainable, long-term success – something all businesses should aim for. Long-term thinking is simply too important not to take seriously. ▼



Mandy Flint and Elisabet Vinberg Hearn are the authors of *Leading Teams - 10 Challenges, 10 Solutions*, published by FT Books. Long term thinking is one of the 10 challenges they explore in more detail in the book. See www.leadingteamsbook.com for more information.

