There are enormous differences between a tactical CEO and a strategic one. In the past, most executives could afford to be tactical – they could focus on the day-to-day, on cash flow, on putting out fires, etc. Those days are increasingly behind us, and corporate executives are finding that, suddenly, the definition of strategic thinking has changed.

Boeing has provided a recent, high-profile example of lack of strategic thought. After the crashes, Boeing needed to focus on restoring confidence among travelers – it should have taken the initiative to proactively ground its planes. Instead, Boeing did the exact opposite. Boeing’s CEO made a call to President Trump to emphasize the safety of the 737 Max 8 Jets, presumably in an effort to prevent groundings. Eventually, the planes were grounded anyway, and Boeing ended up looking as if the company cared more about its profits than passenger safety.

After the grounding, Boeing issued a statement further emphasizing their confidence in the safety of the 737 Max yet determining to “recommend to the FAA the temporary suspension of operations of the entire global fleet of 371 total 737 MAX aircraft.” Too reactive, too little, too late.

Boeing’s Twitter page is a case in point. In March, the company tweeted a series of blue card statements. Nothing about them feels authentic. Nothing about them communicates empathy. They weren’t personal. They were too engineered, too corporate. Fortunately, Boeing seemed to get the message in April – their Twitter feed started to feature more photos and videos. CEO Dennis Muilenburg spoke with conviction and
empathy – by putting a face on the crisis, Boeing was able to begin communicating with authenticity.

This is an example of executives learning the value of strategic thinking in real time. Boeing was used to thinking of itself as business to business (B2B) and suddenly found that it had to start thinking in terms of business to consumer (B2C). Unfortunately for Boeing, it could have saved itself a lot of trouble had it incorporated strategic thinking in its communications strategy earlier – strategic preparation avoids the need for tactical firefighting.

Part of the increased importance for strategic thinking has come from the changing nature of social media and customer engagement, the speed at which information is available. With it becoming much easier for corporations to engage consumers it has also come to be expected. The distance between a brand and the consumer does not exist today – customers more easily feel invested in a brand but may more easily feel slighted as well. As a result, strategic communications has become increasingly important, as has deeper integration between such communication and brand identity.

Many executives, when given a chance, aren’t sure where to start. There’s a general awareness that strategic thinking is something that needs to be done, but not much understanding of how to go about it. How can an executive hope to implement strategic thinking when he’s not even sure what it looks like?

As a result, businesses are increasingly turning to outside strategic counsel. Efficient organizations recognize the importance of letting strategic communications experts focus on the roles that they are most qualified for – retaining strategic counsel is well worth the investment, particularly when a company is lacking strategic organization.

Proper strategic thinking isn’t a matter of simply being proactive, nor is it a matter of simply making time to plan.
Executives need to be armed with the knowledge and insights that will allow them to focus their energy where it can be best applied. Given the proper resources and strategic planning, executives will be able to spend less time on the tactical decisions, and more well-prepared when tactical decisions do need to be made. This is how we win the war, and not just the many battles.

About the Author: Joshua Kroon is a seasoned strategic communications professional with LEVICK Strategic Communications, headquartered in Washington, D.C. His work as a strategist and counselor has touched numerous issue areas, most notably government relations, international relations, defense, technology, and finance. He specializes in developing strategies that help advance efforts to catalyze broad impact through the sharing of effective ideas and practices.