

Demystifying Strategy

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Watch the S Word

Introduction

Sometimes it seems that no interview is complete unless candidates can find some way of using the S word – strategy. It may be “strategic” leadership, strategic plan, being strategic, developing a strategy. Likewise employers seem to think a job is incomplete without mentioning strategy – understanding strategy, shaping strategy, strategic delivery (what is that?), being strategic. Time and time again it comes up – and it’s clear to us that most people just don’t get it.

Candidates use strategy in an ad hoc and often irrational sense, on CVs, in interviews and in conversation. Recruiters insert it to make roles sound more important, unwittingly obfuscating and creating confusion; employers use it as a substitute for clarity, a lazy shorthand. It’s time to slay the strategy beast and bring some clarity, or at least to shine a light in this murkiest of areas.

Definitions

Looking at definitions opens a can of worms.

The ever reliable [Wikipedia](#) gives a number of definitions:

- *A **strategy** is a plan of action designed to achieve a specific goal.*
- *Strategy is all about gaining (or being prepared to gain) a position of advantage over adversaries or best exploiting emerging possibilities. As there is always an element of uncertainty about the future, strategy is more about a set of options ("strategic choices") than a fixed plan.*

[Henry Mintzberg](#) from [McGill University](#) defined strategy as "a pattern in a stream of decisions".

- *"In management theory, the Chandler definition is typical: "...the determination of the basic long-term goals and objectives of an enterprise, and the adoption of courses of action and the allocation of resources necessary for carrying out these goals"."*

Chandler, A.D., Strategy and Structure, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1962

Johnson and Scholes ([Exploring Corporate Strategy](#)) define strategy as:

- "Strategy is the **direction** and **scope** of an organisation over the **long-term**: which achieves **advantage** for the organisation through its configuration of **resources** within a challenging **environment**, to meet the needs of **markets** and to fulfil **stakeholder** expectations".

There's a more comprehensive explanation of business strategy on [tutor2u.net](#). There's a good overview of strategy on [The Times 100](#) website.

It seems to us that it really is not that simple or straightforward. Defining strategy often makes it more confusing. The problem seems to be descriptions of strategy are abstract, full of jargon and management speak and rather than described in an accessible way.

Make it Personal

Most of us behave strategically without knowing it; we just forget how to describe it.

Here's our attempt at de-mystifying strategy and all the management mumbo-jumbo that creates so much confusion.

To have a strategy, you must first have a vision and a mission.

To start, you need a **vision** – a **vision** is where you want to get to. You then need a **mission** – to understand why you exist (sometimes called your reason for being) and your **strategy** is what you will do to achieve your **vision** and follow your **mission**. Your **values** dictate how you behave.

Without a vision or mission a strategy is directionless. It is like following a route map without having a final destination.

Strategy is a plan of long and short term actions that, when added together, achieve a series of outcomes aimed at getting closer to a long term vision.

In coaching sessions we've described strategy as a series of discrete, overlapping, complementary, self-reinforcing, integrated actions that together create the momentum to deliver a longer term vision in line with the organisational mission.

That's the management speak out of the way, so let's make it personal.

Example

A new graduate leaves university or college and has an image of himself or herself in the future – it's vague in some ways but clear in others. In their mind's eye they see themselves owning a nice house, with a partner, healthy, respected, confident, happy, making a difference; maybe children, holidays, pets, maybe not. Whatever the specifics, this is their personal **vision**.

They know that getting there takes time, but if they get some money, meet someone, plan and focus, they are more likely to achieve this. When they wake each day, whatever they do that day is directed towards achieving their vision.

They might ask themselves “Why do I exist?” – the answer to this is their purpose. For some it will be to make money, to raise a family, to make a difference, to make great art, to write music, to make others smile, to make others happy. Whatever the purpose, this is their **mission**. (We think this is the hardest concept for people to get and even harder to understand about yourself.) **How** they live their lives is a direct product of their **values**.

Take one aspect of this vision – owning a house. They know that they can't just buy, they must plan. They break this down, they need a job, savings, a regular income, an idea about where to buy, how big to start, the total price. Additionally they know they can't just buy their dream home, it might take 10 or 15 years. They've already started to put together a strategy. They've done research, worked out the resources and set themselves some targets. But starting to save and thinking about buying is only part of the picture. They need to address finding a partner, being happy, buying a car, making a difference etc.

Owning a house is not the whole strategy. In fact, the house is just one “Strategic Priority” Another Strategic Priority might be “Money Generation”. This might involve getting a job, starting a business, inheriting millions or robbing a bank (this is where values come in). A third Strategic Priority might be their “Partner Strategy” (i.e. finding a partner to share all of their successes). All of these strategies come together in a **Strategic Plan**.

The “strategy” has lots of elements, the elements all link together, the elements change over time and are all needed to help deliver the personal vision; the personal mission gives each of us a purpose every day.

In fact, the personal vision might take twenty years, and one strategy is too complex. So you'll probably need four, five, six strategies. Each time you take stock and think what next – that's a **Strategic Review**. You double check – do I still want this vision, is my mission the same, what about my values? Generally your

mission and values will not change that much – unless you've had a major life change. Depending on the answers and where you've got to, you set another Strategic Plan.

Under each Strategic Priority there might be a plan specific to that priority. So the Partner Strategy might include losing weight, getting a hair cut, buying clothes, developing hobbies, becoming interesting, telling jokes, being on twitter etc. You might also have a "Home" Plan, a "Job" plan, a "car" plan, an "education" plan. There will be some trial and error.

All of these separate "plans" should all come together into one cohesive set of actions – the overarching **Strategic Plan**, with lots of measures of success, a series of short and long term actions, and linking all other, subsidiary plans together. In organisations these might be called a Strategic Plan with discrete Service Plans or Action Plans. These all sit under and flow from the strategic priorities and are designed to deliver them.

As we meet new people, the strategy has to change. If you find a partner and have children, or start caring for another person, their thoughts and views on the vision, the mission, the values and the strategy become important. You could just follow your own thoughts, and not ask them. You might be lucky and it all works out. However, if everyone shares their thoughts it is more likely that everyone will understand and buy into the final vision, mission and strategy.

Some people have no vision, they drift through life. Likewise, some people don't understand their mission and lack purpose. Without a strategy in place people do things in the wrong order and struggle to make progress. This also applies to businesses.

Finally, the strategy is meaningless if it does not shape what we do on a daily, weekly, monthly and ongoing basis. It's no use having a vision if you do nothing, or do the wrong things. Get the right vision, understand the mission, get a relevant and straightforward strategy and then put it into action.

We can all think strategically, understand a vision, identify our mission and make a plan to get there. Once we understand how to get inside the jargon, we can also help others to break through the management speak.

What to do about it?

Of course, it often gets very confusing. People make it complicated; businesses make it complicated and most often, managers make it complicated.

“Being strategic” is so emblematic of a senior manager or leader, it is important to aspire to this nirvana. This creates an expectation on ambitious employees to use the strategy word at the earliest opportunity and as often as possible. Of course, so few people confidently understand this it becomes like the emperor’s new clothes, everyone uses it but people dare not ask what it means. We create a self-fulfilling cycle of management speak misunderstanding and hyperbole hiding behind a smokescreen of ambiguity and misinterpretation.

If in doubt, make it simple. Ask straightforward questions:

Vision: Is there a clear vision I understand?

Mission: Do I understand why the organisation exists? Or more simply does the organisation know why it exists?

Strategy: Is there one, documented organisational or business strategy? This can be called a Strategic Plan, Business Plan or Organisational Plan.

If undocumented, is there one, widely understood organisational or business strategy?

Strategic Priorities: Are there clear Strategic Priorities that inform actions across the organisation which when added together bring us closer to our Vision.

Service or Departmental Plans: Are there Service, Departmental or Divisional Plans that sits under a whole organisation Strategic Plan and identify specific actions?

Personal Objectives: Do my personal objectives link clearly to the Service, Departmental or Divisional Plan? Can I therefore link my actions through to the Strategic Plan, and therefore the vision for the organisation?

If you follow this framework you should be able to make a link directly to how you make a difference to your organisation, to identify your impact regardless of seniority and to understand your part in contributing to the mission and achieving the organisational vision.

But in the real world it’s not always that easy.

Many organisations don’t have a vision, are unclear on their mission, have either no strategy or too many strategies and spend a long time talking about values but not behaving in line with their values.

If this is the case, this gives you the chance to make your mark and have an impact in these areas. You might not be able to describe

the organisational vision – but you can describe your understanding:

“the organisation doesn’t have an explicit vision but it’s widely understood thattherefore everything I do aims to achieve this. This is the key message I give my colleagues/team.”

The absence of a vision, mission or strategy leaves a void that you can fill with your own actions; this gives you the chance to create your own narrative in a way that shows your talent.

Why’s this important?

Organisations get it wrong. They make it complicated and hide behind jargon. So do consultants, candidates and lots of academics. Get it straight in your head and in your organisation. If you get lost, then go back to basics. By understanding how strategy shapes everything you do, in work, at home, with friends and colleagues, there’s more chance of achieving that vision, whatever it is.

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