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# Approaches to Strategy – Discussion Piece



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## Introduction

Note on definition: strategy means different things to different people. A dictionary will give any number of definitions of 'strategy'. Most of them will relate to company strategy and will be framed in terms of 'winning market share' or 'gaining competitive advantage. A strategy is often accompanied by, and synonymous with, a plan for how to put the theory into practice. **For the purposes of this note, the working definition of strategy is 'A theory about how to achieve success in the future'.**

Developing a strategy for the future is important for all organisations. It is certainly more valuable than repeating what you've always done, or constantly reacting to changing circumstances.

It is important for all organisations, partnerships and teams to make time to lift their heads from the day-to-day and to consider the impact they want to have and the direction they want to take. And to discuss together and transparently the tradeoffs that are inherent in these considerations, and the (often hidden) assumptions that inform them.

The challenge is to ensure that a strategy process becomes a meaningful opportunity to step back and focus on what matters, rather than just another task to be completed / a form to be filled in.

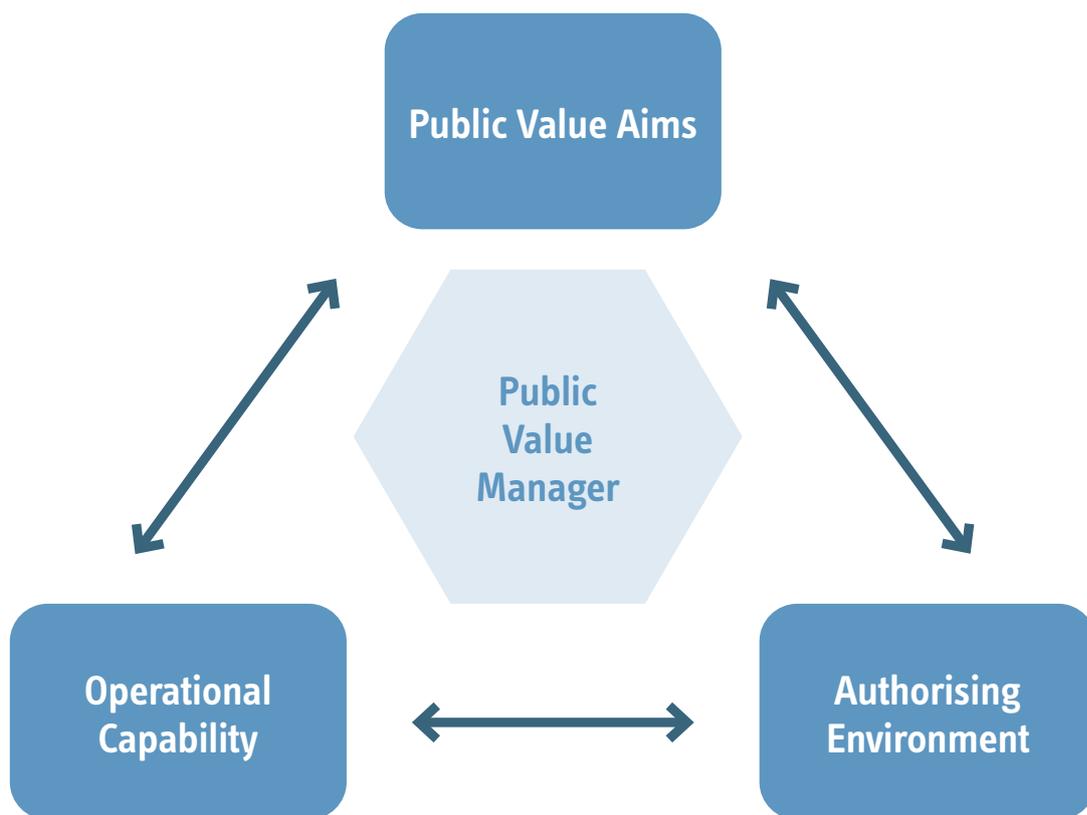
And, in the field of tackling exploitation, to consider how strategic processes conventionally used in organisations can be applied to complex partnerships. Organisations within a local strategic partnership will have their own default approaches to strategy development, such as the '4P plan' in policing (prepare, protect, prevent, pursue), so taking time to agree on what strategy means for those in the room will be important.

## Effective strategy: Mark Moore's Strategic Triangle

A conventional strategic review process is an opportunity to focus on the external landscape and how to position the organisation to deliver its objectives effectively in that context.

One of the most useful frameworks for strategic thinking is Mark Moore's 'strategic triangle'. The three elements of Mark Moore's model are:

- > public value proposition (an unambiguous and shared sense of purpose)
- > authorising environment (permission to exercise leadership)
- > operating capacity (the means to deliver).



Adapted from Moore (1995) *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government*: Harvard University Press

For a public sector organisation, the external environment will include looking at the ‘authorising environment’, including the strategic intentions of elected political leaders. The ‘public value’ to be created will often be contested and complex. The [Staff College’s thinking on systems leadership](#) is a useful discussion of these issues.

For a voluntary sector organisation, the ‘public value’ will map onto the vision and mission of the organisation, and require consideration of the impact of the organisation on its beneficiaries. The external environment will include other charities in the same field (as competitors or collaborators), and the commissioning and funding environment.

A strong strategy will address the key challenges facing the organisation, resonate with people at every level, and enable staff and external stakeholders to understand the organisation’s direction of travel and how they can contribute to it.

## Related Resources

- > *Using the strategic triangle: key questions and case study*
- > *Options assessment: tools and case study*
- > *Getting to action: key questions*

## Alternative approaches to strategy

A critique of conventional approaches to strategy has emerged over recent years. The key criticisms are listed as follows:

- 1) **Illusion of control:** setting out a plan for the future, particularly if it contains detailed output or outcome targets, implies an assumption that the external environment will be stable.
- 2) **Incremental:** the process often ‘starts from here’ rather than focusing on the desired outcome and asking, ‘What would it take?’
- 3) **Uses a deficit-model to drive change:** there is often an unspoken premise that the current way of working is problematic, and change needs to happen.
- 4) **Can be focused on the production of a strategic document, rather than a strategic conversation:** too often, a strategy process is driven by the requirement to produce a document by a given date, rather than creating the space for a conversation about what matters most to people, where the greatest impact can be made, or where the difficult trade-offs lie.

The following sections discuss some alternative approaches to strategy, which seek to address these issues.

## Emergent strategy

Henry Mintzberg (1987) writes about emergent rather than planned strategy. Using the metaphor of a potter crafting in clay, he conceptualises strategy as developing from an interaction between the process of deliberate and detached planning, and the process of reflecting on and learning from what's happening in your hands as you work with the clay.

He distinguishes between intended strategy (formulated ahead of time), emergent strategy (activity that develops on the ground in response to changing circumstances) and realised strategy (what actually happens when intended and emergent strategy combine).

He argues that the conventional planned approach to strategy rests on a flawed assumption that thinking happens first, and is followed by action. All of us who have used reflective practice will recognise that thinking can also follow action.

He also argues against the conventional wisdom that organisational strategies should be reviewed annually, or every three years, arguing that, more often, there are periods of stability punctuated by rapid change, when something changes in the external or internal environment.

From this perspective, the role of the strategic manager is to:

- > Know the organisation and its work in order to identify what's emerging 'on the ground'.
- > Look for patterns that indicate an emerging strategy (e.g., 'We are doing this more and more' or 'We find we have to do this differently in order to get what we want').
- > Look for discontinuities that suggest the time is right to review the previous strategy.
- > Create reflective spaces and times where conversations about what's emerging can take place.

## Strengths-based approaches – appreciative inquiry

Conventional approaches to strategy are based on a deficit model – i.e., the current situation is problematic and needs to change. Concepts such as a ‘burning platform’ reinforce this message.

Appreciative inquiry (AI) is the most well-known alternative approach. [Developed by David Cooperrider](#), it seeks to draw out the ‘positive core’ of an organisation by focusing on what it is best at, what motivates the people to work there, and how it can be even better.

AI draws on:

- > **Positive psychology** – the idea that psychology should be about what is right with a person rather than just what is wrong with them.
- > **Social constructionist schools of thought which argue that the world is socially constructed** – i.e., that we humans give phenomena meanings and power.
- > **Postmodern ways of thinking** – the rejection of concepts of organisations as machines, and thinking of them more as systems or groups of people who are organising themselves.

Key features of an AI approach are:

- > Theory is co-constructed on the basis of experiences. Strategic planning is a shared responsibility, not the role of one individual.
- > Interest is focused not on problems but on what works.
- > The focus is not on ‘the right answer’ but on identifying good questions and promising lines of enquiry.
- > Conversations between people are powerful in imagining the future and making it happen.

A standard AI strategy process will use four stages, as shown the diagram below.



Figure 1: The AI 4-D Cycle (Cooperrider & Godwin 2011)

## Related Resources

- > *Appreciative inquiry: key questions, delivery approach, useful reading*

## Strengths-based approaches: SOAR

This is a related approach using the acronym SOAR – strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. The ‘strengths’ activities are very similar to the ‘discovery’ stage in an AI process, but the ‘opportunities’ activities go out to stakeholders and ask the question, ‘hat do our stakeholders want from us?’

‘Aspirations’ activities involve asking the question, ‘What do we care deeply about?’, which moves the conversation from analysis and process to exploring what people are passionate about. This can bring a very different perspective to setting priorities. The ‘results’ activities focus on indicators of impact, ‘How will we know when we are succeeding?’

### Related Resources

- > *SOAR: key questions and case studies*

## Strengths-based approaches: positive deviance

The concept of ‘positive deviance’ developed in the overseas development literature. The classic study involved researchers identifying why some children in a village were better nourished than others. They discovered the children were washing their hands more often, eating more and smaller meals, and their mothers were collecting shrimps as well as rice from the paddy fields. They encouraged other mothers to watch these ‘positive deviant’ mothers and to copy what they were doing.

Using this approach suggests that the role of the strategic manager is to seek out examples of what is working well, perhaps against the odds, and endeavour to understand the conditions and attributes that are leading to success.

### Related Resources

- > *Simple strengths-based approaches: proposed exercise and case Study*

## Discourse-centred approaches to strategy and organisational change

Discourse-centred approaches to strategy and organisational change draw more heavily on social constructionist thinking. Unlike conventional approaches which conceive organisations as real, objective entities that can be changed by management effort, these approaches describe organisations as ‘socially constructed’ or ‘meaning-making systems’, with an existence which is multiple, emergent and negotiated.

It follows that if organisations are even partly ‘socially constructed’ then changing the organisation means changing the conversation (Bushe & Marshak, 2016). In other words, change happens when people start talking about different things, to different people, or in different ways.

In this way of thinking, metaphors are important tools in helping people think differently about what they are trying to achieve. For example, talking about ‘fixing’ or ‘maintaining’ suggests that the organisation is a machine, and the people in it inert components. Talking about ‘growing’ or ‘developing’ implies a more organic view of change.

A particular example is the ‘generative image’ (Bushe, 2013). These are ideas, phrases, objects, pictures, manifestos, stories or new words with two properties:

- > Generative images allow us to see new alternatives for decisions and actions.
- > Generative images are compelling—they generate change because people like the new options in front of them and want to use them.

In their work on discourse-centred approaches to organisational change, Grant and Marshak (2011) argue that there are many ‘discourses’ or narratives in an organisation, which inform the way people talk on a daily basis. For example, the way people talk about the organisation might be informed by inspection judgments, or by different professional backgrounds. (In the field of child exploitation we know that the way we talk about young people – victims, perpetrators, child prostitutes etc affects the way we think about them, and the way we act.) The dominant discourse in an organisation is linked to the power dynamics within it.

For the strategic manager, the existence of multiple discourses within an organisation means that they can listen out for alternative discourses, and promote them to help achieve the desired change.

The implication of this is that, if a strategic manager wants to identify progress towards achieving the change they want to see, they should identify what they want to hear people talking about, and find ways of collecting that information.

In a partnership context, this approach can be linked to the Collaboration Framework developed by Archer and Cameron (2013), which suggests partnership working is a three-legged stool comprising governance, operations and behaviours. A discourse-centred approach would be a good way to reflect in particular on the behaviours of a partnership, including questions such as, 'What do people say about working together now?' and, 'What would we like them to say in future?'

## Related Resources

- > *River exercise: Using metaphor - exercise and case study*
- > *Simple metaphor approaches: exercises and case studies*
- > *Using conversations as indicators of change: exercise and case study*

## References and further reading

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