

Strategic Planning through Emergent Design

The oblique way ©

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Obliquity and other ways of negativity

Why do Zen Masters say you can't reach enlightenment by seeking enlightenment. Why does research show that seeking happiness is often a sure way of becoming unhappy? Why then do companies who seek only profit in the end lead to catastrophic failure? This is because they have not yet mastered the power of paradox which in effect is an oblique way of solving complex problems.

Obliquity is the technique where problems are tackled on an angle so to speak. In other words instead of directly asking "What vision do we want for our organisation?" you may ask a questions like "If we could live our values what would the organisation look like?" or "if we could live the vision we want of this organisation how would things be different to the way they are now?"

Closing down the problem by universal definitions

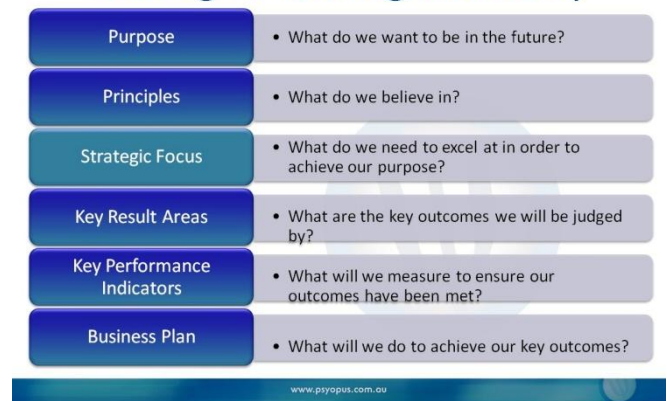
A classical direct approach to strategic planning would be to start with the definition of the problem. This makes perfect sense right? All we need to do is get a universal definition of what we mean then we can proceed from there. With very complex problems there are other ways of tackling and taming strategy. Using obliquity the object is to avoid universal definitions and explore the unique aspects and characteristics of the problem and allow the definition to emerge obliquely. Obliquity may be useful since finding universal definitions maybe impossible if stakeholders are deeply divided on the issues at hand. In addition obliquity is context rather than content driven, instead of starting with a definition we start with a situation and explore its uniqueness. Often getting bogged down in operational definitions may result in the definition being no longer operational anymore. Also exploring the uniqueness of a situation allows for performance indicators to be better suited and measurable. Finally obliquity can better tease out hidden agendas or *elephants in the room* that refuse to

be named or are sealed over due to poor psychological safety. Closing down too quickly on an operational definition may close down a great deal of the aspects of a strategic plan that needs to be considered.

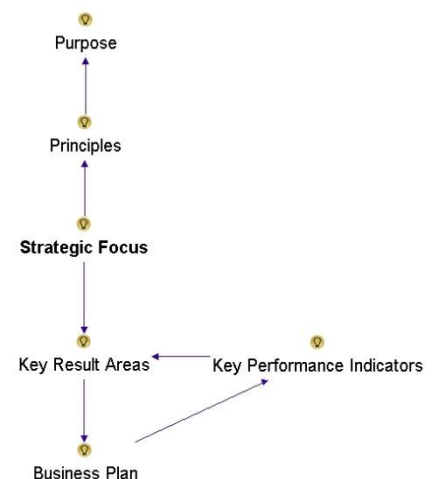
Start in the middle

Classical strategic planning approaches tell us to start at the top and work our way down. This is often to give the appearance of linear rationality.

Strategic Planning Hierarchy



In an oblique way we start at the middle and this middle is the Strategic Focus indicated in the figure above. Instead of looking at what our purpose *IS*, we examine emergently with those in the workshop what we need to do to achieve *OUR* purpose. In this manner we don't assume what the purpose is for the organisation but examine what purposes and principles actually drive the organisation to achieve its strategic ends. This oblique emergent way can be quite a surprise for some organisations since other principles and purposes not formally expressed may emerge from the dialogue.



In the figure above we can see that the Strategic Planning pathway goes both upwards and downwards

from the Strategic Focus since the very practical examination of strategy both informs Principles and Purposes upwards as aspiration (spirit) and Key Result Areas, Key Performance Indicators and Business Plans downwards into the organisation (soul).

Bounded rationality – form follows function

Often organisations will look at the organisational structure first and proceed with strategic planning from this perspective. This has what is known as a bounded rationality. It is bounded since the organisational structure determines how the organisation is to function and conversations gravitate around an existing form. The problem with this of course is that form should always follow function. Any organisation should first examine *why* and *where* it is heading before *who* and *how* to get there is examined. When one moves directly to the *who* and the *how*, one is often bounded to an organisational structure that may not reflect the intent of the organisation. With an emergent design practice, the organisational structure is initially 'checked at the door' before entering into the workshop process. This is to avoid a rationality that is bounded to an existing structure as opposed to a strategic intent. This is not to say that the organisational structure should be abandoned but should later be examined to test whether the current organisational structure reflects the intent of the new emergent strategy. For example, houses are not designed one room at a time (or at least they shouldn't be). The architect first examines the function and purpose of the house and designs the separate rooms around the primary function offsetting restraints such as size, budget and time. Often organisational strategies are made where rooms are bolted on to each other without examining the *interdependencies* between the rooms in terms of their contribution to the overall strategic directives. Silos are fine within organisations, since all organisations must eventually organise into discrete structures (just like houses) in order to function. It is not whether silos exist but whether they are notionally interdependent. Silos exist in organisations either because certain systems or departments are *redundant* or *incompetent*. People work around silos either because they are not needed or not competent in meeting the overall objectives of the organisation.

Principles over processes

An emergent design does not follow discrete steps or processes. There is no 6 steps to effective strategic planning which you often find in LinkedIn news feeds. This is because with emergent design context over content drives the strategy. Uniqueness and contingencies are examined as key aspects of the strategic planning process. Rather, principles on *how* to do strategic planning are more emphasised. Getting the rules right on how to play the game is essential with emergent design practices. Some rules or conditional principles are more conducive to collaborative performance than others. The following filter questions around organisational structure to deliver a given strategic plan may be helpful to consider:

- **Right fit:** Do the positions in the organisational chart meet the Key Result Areas and strategic objectives
- **Best for project:** Are these positions best for project not best for politics, power or person?
- **Redundancy:** Is there redundancy between the positions or organisational systems?
- **Interdependencies:** Are the different systems interdependent on each other?
- **Right level:** Are the positions appropriate at the right level of the organisation?
- **Right size:** Is the organisation the right size to meet and deliver the strategic objectives?

Hold or fold – does your design work?

Any strategic design that emerges out of robust and safe dialogue between key stakeholders should be 'stress tested'. In other words does the design, intent, structure and governance work or fail – does your design hold or fold? The best way to test a model is through scenario planning to examine whether the system is coherent enough to meet the strategic intent. Stress testing models that emerge from collaborative performance is critical to examine whether the model is *parsimonious* – that is does the model or design explain the greatest amount of variance with the least amount of variables. Any good strategic plan should have an elegance and principled simplicity about it – since principled simplicity is on the other side of chaos where emergent design practices reign.

References:

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