

Effective Strategy

Precision, then process

by Nicholas Dungan

Strategy consists of a clear, realistic goal and a clear, realistic path to that goal. That is all. Anything else is not strategy. Dreams or vague objectives do not constitute strategy: 'increase market share', 'make the world a better habitat', 'be the best' may be inspirational or aspirational mottos, but they are not strategy. They do not specify a clear, realistic goal nor a clear, realistic path to that goal.

Effective strategy depends on one precondition — precision — and thereupon unfolds in five movements which constitute the essential direction of the strategic process.

The precondition of precision requires deciding the scope and purpose of the strategy. Is it to increase market share? If so by how much, when, in which markets, through what means? Does it apply to a specific service or product of the enterprise, or a given geographic market or market segment? Is it primarily driven by customer needs, competitive pressure, technological change? Or is it 'grand strategy', comprising all the strategic elements germane to the organisation over the long term? For a nation, a company or any other form of societal organisation, the first imperative of strategy is to debate and define in precise terms what kind of strategy is being contemplated, what it is meant to achieve, what it is *for*.

Once this precondition of precision has been satisfied — and the discussion and analysis needed to meet the precondition are highly valuable exercises in and of themselves — then the process of strategy with its five main movements can begin. We refer to these as movements, not stages or steps, because, like the movements of a symphony, they fit together, are intertwined and succeed each other perhaps in different tempos and timbres but always with a similar leitmotiv, which is that the whole strategic process serves the precise strategic purpose.

The five movements are:

- assessment: where we are today
- objectives: where we want to go
- action plan: how we are going to get there
- implementation: putting the plan into practice
- impact: evaluating how well we have done.

These movements encompass the following components.

1 Assessment

- Assemble a multi-disciplinary team from within the organisation with clear top-level commitment.
- Review all available sources of applicable strategic intelligence within the organisation.
- Examine the organisation's strategic performance today, benchmark it against competitors.
- Score the organisation vis-à-vis best-practices strategic thinking on the strategic topic selected.
- Deliverable: appraisal and analysis together with concrete, detailed, practical recommendations.

2 Objectives

- Achieve clarity and consistency on the alignment of the organisation's purpose and strategy.
- Enumerate and prioritise the stakeholders, internal and external, of the organisation's strategy.
- Construct transformation maps of the cross-cutting thematics, types of expertise to deploy.
- Examine sub-set strands concerning distinct business lines, geographies, other variations.
- Deliverable: clarity and consensus on this strategy's desired outcomes and desired impact.

3 Action Plan

- Compose a playbook to apply to all organisation strategy experts, spokespersons, practitioners.
- Plan with this organisation team all priority action items: content, format, outreach.
- Determine optimal sequencing and scheduling of the strategy's action items.
- Design implementation scenarios by all organisation representatives with CRM-type follow-up.
- Deliverable: written and oral presentations to the organisation's management and governance.

4 Implementation

- Designate an in-house task force within the organisation to centralise and manage the strategy.
- Execute a phased multi-stakeholder action plan involving relevant organisation representatives.
- Capitalise on existing relationships to capture the full range of multi-stakeholder networks.
- Produce multi-platform output, outreach; monitor roll-out based on CRM methodology.
- Deliverable: multi-year strategic plan translated into focused, measurable action steps.

5 Impact

- Establish clear, timed results and measurement criteria across the range of strategy initiatives.
- Set specific guidelines to determine desired quantitative and qualitative impact of strategic goals.
- Employ professional external evaluation methods (eg surveys) for objective impact assessment.
- Utilise the impact evaluation to critique assessment, objectives, action plan and implementation.
- Deliverable: analysis of performance, recommendations on course corrections for the future.

Such a complete strategic exercise can take place over several months or several years and, indeed, at the end of the final movement, impact, should in principle be renewed *da capo*. It is of course possible — and in most organisations will probably be deemed more practical — to take one step at a time and thus to begin with the precondition of precision, defining the strategy, and then a piece of the first movement, assessment, in a preliminary and limited fashion, after which the organisation and its decision-makers can determine the most effectual way forward.