

CHAPTER ONE

Devising a strategy for you: the Strategy Triangle

What sort of strategy process will work best for you?

This chapter will give you an overview of the process set out in this book to make your own map, constructing your strategy for you. We'll draw the comparison with corporate strategy, looking at what strategy is and how it's formulated, but we'll focus on the way this will work for you as an individual.

Why this matters to you

During any strategy process, we aim to find the answers to some important questions. Where am I trying to get to? What shall I do next? How shall I get there? These are the right questions,

but although they are easy to ask, they are usually very hard to answer. There are so many aspects to consider and the answers are likely to have a huge impact on the future. So any strategy process has to be both broad and rigorous – and that’s why organizations pay so much attention to it. And that’s also why there are so many strategy tools, taught in business schools and published in business books.

So, what sort of process will work best for you? This chapter answers that question, with an overview of a strategy process that works for individuals. Subsequent chapters contain a selected set of ideas, models and exercises to help you. Some of them may appeal to you more than others and some will have particular relevance for you. Some may look as if they won’t be as helpful to you at the present, but they might still be worth trying, because they’ll help you see your working life from a different perspective.

The idea

Strategy is one of those words which is used all the time but which means different things to different people. It is often part of the job description of senior leaders – its origins in the Greek word *strategos* connect it with leadership since the Greek word means a military leader.

Formulating strategy is about setting a direction for the organization or entity as it moves forward. It implies taking action to create its future rather than simply arriving at tomorrow. Strategy is also about story – the narrative about where we are trying to get to, and why. Strategic decisions can be large or small in scale, and can encompass the short, medium and long term. This set of definitions underlines the point: strategy formulation can be complicated, so the clearer and more straightforward the process the better.

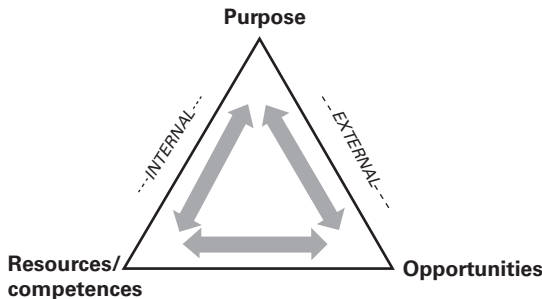
The three elements of strategy

When we talk about strategy, the conversation covers three different elements: purpose; resources and skills; and external opportunities. One of the most brilliant strategy professors I know, Professor Marcus Alexander, uses this diagram to represent these three elements of strategy.

The diagram reminds us that in formulating strategy, you need to generate insights about all three elements. But you also need to understand the links and interactions between them and keep the three in balance. As an introduction to our strategy process, let's look at each aspect.

Much strategy work focuses on articulating where you are aiming to get to; this is sometimes called the 'vision' or 'mission' school of strategy. You may have worked in an organization with a framed vision statement on the wall, listing its aims, beliefs and values. These statements have been a long-standing business fad and may motivate some people. But one definition of 'vision' is 'an unreal dream' or 'a supernatural apparition', and, over time, these framed statements can grow stale. That's why we will talk about purpose, rather than vision. Purpose statements articulate what you are for and why, and if they are clear enough, they help to generate the kind of implementable strategy which will lead to sustained success.

FIGURE 1.1 The Strategy Triangle



Adapted from Professor Marcus Alexander's Strategy Triangle

The second aspect of strategy is resources: the skills and capabilities you have and the time and energy you want to devote to your working life. In organizational terms, that's about the people in the organization and the other resources that the organization possesses, such as money, time, information, equipment or even reputation. Of course, these resources can be developed or acquired – for example, when an organization acquires another business, or invests in hiring new staff with key skills. For us as individuals, the development of our skills is an obvious part of implementing our strategy, but there are various options for how we might do this and what to focus on – and that, too, is a part of our strategy.

The third aspect is the external focus on possible opportunities which the organization could respond to and thus generate value and deliver good results. The link between this aspect and the other two is important: all three should be logically aligned. In other words, the ideal opportunity is one which is in line with your purpose and for which you have the right resources. Business school strategy lectures sometimes appear to emphasize this external aspect over the others, partly because it's the least controllable. Some strategy processes involve enormous amounts of market analysis because new opportunities may suddenly arise which may not be part of the original purpose. Take a business example: a UK bookseller called The Book Depository was originally set up to sell niche or hard-to-find books but grew into a major player in the Australian market by spotting an opportunity. Even though they had no physical presence there, they identified an opportunity in the Australian tax regime on book pricing: books sent into Australia from abroad attracted no tax and were therefore cheaper to buy. Spotting opportunities like this and capitalizing on them allowed them to become one of the fastest growing booksellers in Europe.

This idea of seizing the opportunity is relevant to us as individuals, too. If you suddenly get a surprising phone call from

a headhunter or recruitment consultant about a job which you would not normally consider or didn't even know existed, take the call – it might be worth it. Sometimes it leads to a new and very successful route. There's an important point about strategy here: it's not a rigid constraint, with a plan set in concrete, but an iterative process which helps you to respond successfully to the constant changes in your life and your world.

The Strategy Triangle diagram is also a good way of illustrating what might happen if the three elements get out of balance. The neat equilateral triangle might be warped and distorted, with some obvious pitfalls. For example, too much focus on the external opportunities might cause an organization to spread its resources on a range of activities which are not core to its business. The point is the same for individuals: although an opportunity-led career strategy seems increasingly common in a turbulent, fast-changing marketplace, it has some risks. New opportunities might arise which seem fascinating and worth exploring, but they might also take you down a cul-de-sac in career terms which could be hard to return from.

Equally, organizations which are too internally focused spend management time and energy on internal change programmes which take so long that they miss the very market opportunity they were trying to address. That's true for individuals too: all development is useful, but if you can't use what you learn on a development programme or training course, your new skills will fade over time and won't pay off in terms of progress and achievement at work. Finally, an excessive focus on a tightly defined purpose or aim might make an organization rule out some interesting new opportunities which it could easily benefit from – and that's true for us, too.

So the message of the Strategy Triangle is that the three elements are interlinked, and a change in one aspect will cause change in at least one other aspect, too. Here's an example:

CASE STUDY New skills, new opportunity, new direction

When she was promoted to operations team leader at an international gas company, Nina discovered that her new role meant that she spent most of her time working with the IT department. That hadn't been in the job description! Every time there was a new systems development project, she was the person assigned to work on it, because she really understood the operational processes. 'The trouble was,' she told me, 'that I didn't know much about IT. It's boring to have to ask for explanations all the time, and I felt like I was always one step behind. It wasn't that enjoyable.' So, almost as an experiment, and without telling anyone, she booked herself onto an introductory 'learn to code' weekend. 'I was very surprised – it was quite interesting! And I could do it!' Of course, this still didn't solve the problem at work, so she signed up for a longer online programme, covering the fundamentals of both IT and coding. 'That really helped. After about 18 months, I knew enough about the field – or at least felt that I did – to hold my own in meetings. I got on better with team members, and I think we made better decisions because we had clearer discussions.' And Nina's new skills opened up a new opportunity for her: she was invited to apply for a more senior role in the IT team as a business analyst. It had never been part of her plan to move out of front-line operations, but the more she explored this new opportunity, the more interesting it seemed. So, when she was offered the job, she took it – and that took her career in a completely new direction.

Keeping the three elements of the Strategy Triangle in balance is a necessary part of strategy formulation, but it's also useful in action planning. If you can see the implications of a change in one aspect, you can also see what else needs to change, and plan accordingly. Here's a hypothetical example: if you suddenly develop an interest in becoming a sports commentator but you currently have neither the relevant skills nor any experience, then, at present, you have a dream rather than a strategy. And the way to turn the dream into more of a reality is obvious if you think about all three elements of the Strategy

Triangle: given this particular purpose, think about the opportunities that are out there to get work in the right kind of organization; and consider the resources – skills, energy, time, willingness to relocate, for example – which you might need to develop in order to devise a strategy which you can actually implement.

The connection between the three elements of the Strategy Triangle, with both the internal and external focus, will help you to organize your strategy thinking. It will help you decide what to do, as well as what not to do. Sometimes, it's absolutely the right strategic decision to say no to a new opportunity because it doesn't fit with the rest of your life and you don't want to make the required changes to accommodate it, given where you are now. To be realistic and implementable, strategy has to take into account the constraints under which you work. And the Strategy Triangle can help clarify your choices when situations change and new constraints arise. For example, if you suddenly find that you have to work part-time for a while because of a family issue, in effect your resources have changed because now you have less time to devote to your paid work. So you might find that you need to look for a different kind of opportunity. And perhaps your purpose might also need to alter. Maybe for the next few years the purpose of your working life is less about paid progression to senior management and more about finding something relatively interesting and remunerated which allows you enough time and energy to meet your other responsibilities outside work.

Parallels with corporate strategy

Most of the ideas in this book come from mainstream strategy work. They are used by organizations of all kinds from all over the world to help them navigate changing circumstances, to make the best use of their resources in line with their purpose.

Their employees want to know what lies ahead and so they have to make a map for their future.

Given how many strategy frameworks and models there are, one of the first questions an organizational strategy team has to answer is: which strategy approach shall we use? Often the choice of the approach is driven by current fashion – what’s being written about in blogs and taught at business schools. Or it might be a choice based on previous experience, to reuse the same set of tools and approaches which the team used last time. There is no one strategy tool which is right for all situations, and a combination of different approaches is more likely to generate clearer thinking and therefore a more successful strategy.

Using organizational strategy ideas for an individual is not such an unusual idea as it might seem; after all, strategy itself was originally developed in a military context to help with campaign planning and, in that sense, it has already been repurposed to apply to a commercial and business context. As markets opened up and developed in the 20th century, particularly in the USA, leaders – who may themselves have had a military background – began to use strategy tools as part of business planning. So you could say that we are simply repurposing these tools again, to apply to each of us as individuals rather than to the organizations we work in.

But because we are working on individual strategy, this book does include three other useful ideas from elsewhere. One is from psychology – the Strengths model in Chapter 7 – because part of any individual strategy is about self-development. The second comes from philosophy – the Ikigai model in Chapter 4 – because this is a book about changing your thinking as well as about devising a strategy. And the third uses a creative technique to help you articulate the fundamental strategic concept of purpose. Although these three are not classic strategy models, they are sometimes used by strategy teams as part of their process, and you’ll find them useful as part of your strategy process.

The underlying research

Strategy theory and practice are built around mental models – ideas, concepts and frameworks – which are ways of thinking about the present and future in order to answer key questions about direction and objectives. These strategy tools and ideas are what academics call ‘heuristics’ – that is, tools for thinking. They don’t contain the answers themselves but they are designed to help answer important questions. Techniques don’t make strategy, but people do – and experience and evidence suggest that we can do it more effectively with some tools to help. One of my favourite quotations from Donald Norman in a book entitled *Things that Make Us Smart* sums this up: ‘The power of the unaided mind is highly overrated... the real powers come from devising external aids that enhance cognitive abilities... Tools of thought... cognitive artifacts – that complement abilities and strengthen mental powers.’

These tools of thought offer a range of different perspectives. Some strategy models have a market and competitor focus, such as Porter’s Five Forces model, and some are much more internal and operational, like those which look at internal re-engineering of the whole organisation as a source of competitive advantage. Some span both internal and external, such as the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) or Value Chain analysis. In most situations, a combination of these is key to developing a workable strategy, as the Strategy Triangle illustrates.

The strategy models

So which techniques will you want to use in devising your own strategy? Here’s an overview of the models and exercises in each of the succeeding chapters. This summary will give you an idea of the overall process as well as the key questions to be answered.

Strategy processes typically have three stages in order to answer three questions: Where am I now? Where do I want to go? How will I get there? This book uses the same structure.

Where am I now?

Stage 1 of the strategy process focuses on your current situation. The very first model, though, helps you to think about how you got to where you are now. Looking at the past may seem an odd place to start when what you really want to do is to devise a strategy for your future. But answering this question will give you a clearer sense of the resources and skills you have developed so far. That's helpful, since sometimes you realize you have resources which you aren't using fully and which could be more useful in the future. So, in Chapter 2, you'll be asked to draw the Journey Map of your working life, to answer the questions **'How did you get to where you are now? What's the story of your working life so far?'**

In Chapter 3, there is a set of exercises designed to help you answer the question: **'What's working well for you in your working life right now and what are you less happy with?'** You'll consider balance and priorities in your life and exactly where you spend your time and energy right now. Maybe you are entirely happy with some of it, or perhaps it's not working as well as it might? Although you are laying the groundwork for your strategy work, you may find some immediate actions which you could take, right now, to make some improvements. Even in the middle of strategizing, some tactics become so obvious that you won't want to wait before taking action.

Where do I want to go?

In Stage 2, we turn our attention to your future, the destination you are going to aim for. There are four different models here, each of which will help you to envisage your ideal future in different ways. We start with a philosophical idea – Ikigai – to get you

to think about *why* you do what you do. This will help you to answer the question: **‘What kind of work do you see yourself doing as part of your successful working life?’** Although Ikigai isn’t a traditional strategy model, it covers the dimensions of the Strategy Triangle and will give you a different perspective on it.

Then, in Chapter 5, we look at the top point of the Strategy Triangle, to answer the question **‘What’s the purpose you serve?’** Sometimes, this idea of purpose can be hard to articulate, so this chapter uses a creative storytelling technique to help you clarify and express it.

In Chapter 6, we look at the internal dimension of the Strategy Triangle: the link between your purpose and your resources. This chapter will help you to find some answers to the important question: **‘How can you organize your life around your purpose?’** Business schools emphasize the importance of alignment between an organization’s purpose and its resources, and it’s just as vital for individuals.

Finally in this stage, in Chapter 7, we turn to one key part of your resources: your capabilities, skills and experiences. Most individual work on career strategy involves self-development at some point, and this chapter offers you a new way of answering the question: **‘What’s worth developing?’** This chapter focuses on your strengths but will also help you to decide what you might do about those capabilities that are not so strong.

How will I get there?

Strategy formulation can be both demanding and interesting, but it’s not really useful unless you can turn your insights into some kind of action. You have to make your strategy real. So in the final stage of your work, we’ll look at transition planning, setting out your plans for getting from where you are now to where you want to be – and taking action.

Before we get into the grit of preparing and planning, Chapter 8 will help you to think broadly about the kind of

transitions you might want to make, with one final strategy model to help you. This model is useful if your strategy work tells you that you want to make a major change at work – either in the role you do, or in the organization you work for, or both.

In Chapter 9, we come back to the Strategy Triangle to understand two different but complementary ways of implementing your strategy. Your preparation and planning work will involve thinking about what actions you want to take and how to take them. But the goal of strategy is not to create a single, perfect plan which you can then simply implement, step by step; that doesn't work for organizations and it won't work for individuals because work changes and so do we. Rather, the statement of direction which strategy work reveals to you requires a map: a navigational tool that you can use to help you adjust your course from time to time.

Those adjustments come through the tactical decisions and choices you make every day – and that's what the final chapter is about. Tactics are a key part of strategy implementation, not just because they are the actions which get us under way, but because they themselves are micro-strategies which deliver insight about where your strategy is working and where it isn't.

EXTENSION IDEAS

The extension ideas in every chapter give you the chance to expand your thinking on the specific exercise, or to start implementing your insights straightaway, before you've finished formulating your strategy. If you are an action-oriented person, you'll want to get started with doing something, and sometimes that's absolutely the right thing to do. But in some chapters, there are no suggestions for immediate actions because the insight developed in that particular chapter is only part of the answer. It needs to be added to the mix in your strategy before you start implementing it.

SUMMARY

- This chapter describes the process of formulating your own strategy for success and the content we'll cover.
- Typically, strategy processes go through three stages: examining the present (where are you now?), the ideal future (where do you want to get to?) and how to make the transition (how will you get there?).
- The content of strategy work – its scope and what it covers – is illustrated in the Strategy Triangle model: it illustrates the three elements of good strategy:
 - purpose
 - resources – capabilities, time, energy
 - opportunities – the external possibilities to explore or ignore.
- All three elements are linked and a successful strategy has to have a degree of coherence between the three, as the Strategy Triangle diagram illustrates. For example, if you have an ambition to achieve something but you have no relevant skills, you either need to take some action to develop those skills, or accept that your ambition is an unrealizable dream.
- This book uses the same structure as the strategy formulation process, with its three stages. In every chapter there is a particular model or idea, drawn from corporate strategy or from psychology or philosophy, to help you think clearly about your strategy.
- The model in each chapter is intended to help you generate insights about your ideal working life and the strategy to realize it. But you have to turn these insights into action: although you might identify some immediate steps to be taken as you go, the final two chapters will focus on planning and doing.

What's next?

Now that you have an overview of what's ahead, let's get under way.

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