

# Driving **Strategy Road**



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Driving Strategy Road is a collection of 43 articles I wrote and posted on LinkedIn across 2016.

All about **strategy**.

What it means. What it looks like. What it needs and what it does.  
When it works and when it goes to seed.

Anecdotes, experiences, ideas, tools and practices.

The pragmatic, the colourful and the cage rattles.

A huge thanks to the clients, colleagues and case studies that enabled these pieces.

I hope you enjoy it and find the value in the journey.

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## Strategy shell game *(posted 18/2/16)*

Have you ever collected shells on the beach with your kids?

You say to them *"we can't take them all home, we have to limit it to (say) five. Find five great shells"*.

So they quickly gather up five. Five that look pretty good.

Then they see a sixth. And it's a good shell.

But you say *"the rule is five. Now you've got a choice to make."*

So they look at their first five, then at the sixth, and they decide the sixth is an awesome shell, so they pick the worst of the original five and chuck it back on the beach.

Then they keep going. Find a new one that looks good. Size it up against the other five. If it doesn't trump an incumbent, throw it back. If it does, pick the weakest of the existing shells and replace it.

### Is that how you choose your strategic priorities?

Lots of businesses & their leaders struggle to let go of their first five shells. They want that sixth shell, for sure.

- Some try and cram it into their collection, and now you've got confusion and dilution and too much to handle.
- Some give the sixth shell a cursory once-over, then remember how comfortable the first five feel in their hand, and how long it took them to gather them, and that they'd rather go sit down and eat a sandwich, and so they elect to not look too closely at it (fearful it really *will* be better than one of their collection, and that will require a decision).
- Some can see a big shiny shell a little way down the beach, but can also see that they'll have to barefoot it across hot sand and sharp shell fragments to get there... and hey, we've already got five good shells, so let's stick with what we've got. The change process is unappetising.

There's no guarantee that sixth shell is any better than the five you have in your hand. And (other than Dad's random rule about shell numbers) there's no ironclad law limiting you to five. Maybe six *is* do-able. Maybe seven. Maybe ten. Maybe you're happy with two.

If leadership is about making progressive, focused decisions and then catalysing the aligned actions to bridge that potential-to-actual success gap, then leadership *demand*s you keep comparing shells.

- The five in your left hand (any hairline fractures? Unwanted hermit crabs living inside? Do you *really* want & need them all?)
- The sixth in your right hand (fit for your purpose? Relative appeal versus the first five? Can you do it justice?)
- And then the others, out there, on the sand (could that one big shiny shell over there replace three of these small ones? What size, shape and shade of shells are surviving or being exposed by the to-and-fro tides?)

Keep comparing shells. Keep making hold and toss decisions.

**Keep thinking about why you want these shells in the first place.**

## **Insane strategy** *(posted 9/2/16)*

On an interstate plane this week, I watched a Louis Theroux doco about folk in a mental health facility for criminals (not sure what that says about my prep for the workshop I was heading to facilitate...). It was interesting watching the patient conversations with the psychiatrists. It was clear there was a lot going on inside many of their heads (perhaps noisy & confusing), but very little manifested as movement, facial expressions or visual cues of emotion. I imagine in part, the pills, but also part their overwhelming focus on the internal voices (vs their affect).

As a contrast, I occasionally find myself in workshops where there's lots of gesticulation and frenetic verbal games of tennis going on... and sometimes with significantly more oral than cranial application. Outbound projections of what maybe would benefit from greater levels of inbound consideration.

It got me thinking...

**Strategy is head stuff.** Braiiiiinnns (Zombie voice).

**Tactics are hands.** Do it. Operations.

**Values are about what's in your heart** (not literally, but you get me).

**Vision is where you point your eyeballs.** Your target.

And **your Purpose is your DNA.** The hard-wired why-you-get-to-breathe stuff.

Hands without head will create output, but it'll be inevitably faulty.

Head without hands will create nothing.

Head and hands without heart runs the risk of doing more harm than good.

Anything without eyeballs means you're half a chance to end up in the carpark.

And all of it without being true to your DNA won't be sustainable.

Strategy. It's not a *"wheel in the facilitator every 5 years"* thing.

It's a daily thought process. Tied to hands. Tied to heart. To eyes. And to DNA.

Think with yours before putting your hands in the clay today.

## Strategic themes to 2020 *(posted 4/3/16)*

As a facilitator of strategy discussions, plan development and recalibration processes, I'm privileged to witness high-level think tanks, truth serum clinics and commitment ceremonies where the future of big dollar value organisations (and all those they serve and employ) are shaped. While the specifics of each are in a vault, I'd offer the following as common terms and topics peppering strategies to 2020 and beyond. Just a sample, they may not surprise, but let them be foil to your own organisation's thinking.

... **Innovation.** Taking a position on its role in your future, determining the tech vehicles, applications and impacts most pertinent to your space, and then landing on your harnessing, managing or mitigating activity set. If system, process, product or people innovation isn't on your strat plan document, you're in the minority.

... **Safety.** You could argue innovation is how and where you'll set the new world on fire or at least which of your marshmallows you'll toast on the flames of disruptive change. For that reason, it's the sexy piece of many strat plans. However deciding on where you'll most benefit from donning flame retardant suits and who most needs to wear them is also muscling its way onto more and more of these documents (be that to do with cash, humans, client groups or org reputation). It's not just WH&S or "risk", it's a Maslow Level 2 consideration much broader.

... **Working capital.** Once a sub-measure reported on at monthly finance meetings, more organisations are putting the reduction of otherwise-tied-up-in-operations cash in bold print as a strategic priority (or at very least sitting it higher on the food chain under the \$'s piece). It's appearing because, like the light blue domed roof over *The Truman Show*, businesses are getting to grips with their limitations - that the sky has a ceiling and they can't grow revenue to infinity and beyond (so if profit measures and growth aspirations are to be realised, then efficiency, frugality and running lean has to play a bigger role).

... **Alignment.** It's the corporate word of the '10s, I think. Of our people. With our Values. To our Purpose. Of words and deeds, in customers and suppliers, to our culture and our strengths, in partners and processes and philanthropic pursuits. If it isn't, or can't be easily aligned (right down to the bootstraps of the person coming in after hours polishing the floors), more often than not it goes to the back of the line of strategic priorities.

... **Data.** Not the guy from Star Trek, and not necessarily "Big" (though that's talked about constantly with a sense of befuddled yearning... *"we think we want to make out with you, but we don't get you nor know how to interpret and apply you!"* If Strat Plans are from Mars, Big Data is from Venus). No, data in a broader context - from capturing and analyzing it at every business articulation and interface (we'll figure how to apply it for improvements later), to utilizing it and displaying it as a saleable asset, to looking at the teensy data in the pores and shirt fabric weave of every customer of value so that we can tailor nano-uber-niche-bespoke services and solutions. Data - de rigeur in strat plans.

... **Relationships.** As market & technological complexity perplexes and hungry hordes of competitors rip the spleens out of our old cash cows (sorry, overly graphic), there appears a renewed focus on who we can & should bond with, bring value to and leverage for our (and their) ends. Selecting the lucky few (customers, suppliers, partners, staff, influencers), setting the compass on where the relationship needs go and charting operational courses beneath this is, I feel, undergoing a renaissance in strategy discussions.

... **Being good.** Environmentally, corporate citizenery, charitable, philanthropic, community-minded, CSR, stewardship, legacy, compliance, NFP partnerships, applying our values.... so many ways and places to focus on being good / moral / ethical. Organisations are placing strategic emphasis on a *"do the right thing, do a good thing"* focal point. Not purely for the shareholder payoff (though we'll take that as an upside if it happens), not even for the employer-of-choice benefit, but for the fact it's human. Such a soft concept for a document as hard as a strategic plan. It is rising and rising because we (customers, shareholders, employees) like it.

I'd observe that general themes in strategy selection - your priority labels - are important mountain top pieces to keep your eyes on while you battle tactically through operational blizzards. But the mountain top themes need selected peak focal points, they need decisions on positions and routes and actions and resourcing and markers of success (or calls at least on when to make the next decision).

When the planet is getting confusing, when markets become so loud and unpredictable, when short-term-ism is rife (check your super fund balance), the need for deeply-considered, ever-current, well governed strategies and the plans that underpin them are arguably more important for an organisation than ever before.

Yes, strategy may be eaten as a breakfast cereal by great culture (I'd counter great culture will go hungry without it).

And yes, it can and likely must be agile. But agility is very different to random or off-the-cuff.

How fresh, focused and aligned is **your strategy** headed to 2020?



## The alternatives to a strategy *(posted 11/3/16)*

Your business doesn't have to have a strategy. Lots don't. Here are some common alternatives.

There are businesses that roam far and wide delivering myriad piecemeal offerings to all kinds of groups in all kinds of ways, no real bent for tight focus on the where, what, who or how (as long as it pays the bills). Let's call what they have a **Scatter-gy**.

There are organisations that toss initiatives at the wall to see what sticks. Less long-term considering and terrain analysis, more movement based on short-term experiments with glue and gravity. We'll label that a **Splatter-gy**.

Then there's the business that talks and talks about what they could do, should do, might do, WILL do... and never seem to get to. That? That's a **Natter-gy**.

The business, obsessed with agile and organic and reaction speed, that just spreads its sails to catch the wind, not believing in the need for long-term imaging or mapping (pish!)? Call that a **ProbablyDoesn'tMatter-gy**.

The org that tiptoes cautiously through the noise of a complicated world, frightened of making a ruckus, happy if at day's end all still have a job? They have a **PitterPatter-gy**.

The business sitting plump and comfortable in its groove, not bothered by or budging for change winds, just demanding ever more from the brand of feedstock it grew large chomping. They've got a **Fatter-gy**.

There are those banking the farm on a single crystal ball imagining, throwing the Hail Mary pass, crossing fingers that one crucial play delivers ('cause there ain't no plan B). That, my friends, is a **Shatter-gy**.

Now there *are* those that DID have a strategy... but we think it's in the desk drawer (no-one can really remember). Coated in dust, beneath the paperclips and permanent markers lies a **Tatter-gy**.

And we see a fair whack of businesses opting to ride on coat tails, chew away at the imaginings of others, taking some market share by playing me-too and working the plans and street corners of others. **Ratter-gy**.

You don't have to have a strategy. That sky-to-soil deeply considered selection of the paths, people and priorities you'll invest in and forgo others for in order to get you to your Vision, fulfilling your Purpose while embodying your Values?

There *are* alternatives to that.

How do they look?

## **Strate-verbis (start with your actions)** *(posted 15/3/16)*

Selecting the best fit paths and having the confidence to snub the alternates as you grind towards your Vision perched atop Purpose mountain can be tricky. The choices are many and often confusing. Once you've determined the big three - why you exist, where you're headed and the tenets you'll stick to as you make your way skyward (Purpose, Vision, Values) – why not consider beginning with the verbs?

- Start...
- Stop...
- Continue...
- Research...
- Invest...
- Partner...
- Recruit...
- Increase...
- Decrease...
- Maximise...
- Minimise...
- Develop...
- Open...
- Close...
- Communicate...
- Utilise...
- Implement...
- Enhance...
- Engage...
- Cull...
- Review...
- Refine...
- Rework...
- Redirect...
- Sell...
- Buy...
- Grow...
- Shrink...
- Map...
- Iterate...
- Invent...
- Build...
- Dismantle...



- Automate...
- Maintain...
- Break...

As you think about your desired future and the passions, strengths and skills you'll apply (there's another good verb) to get you there, imagine which 4, 5 or 8 of these verbs might have the biggest role to play. Verbs intimate choice and action (the absence of either does not a strategy make).

Splice the action choice words to the right subject matter, and you've created a strategy skeleton to start fleshing out.



## 5 ideas for the strategy refresh *(posted 17/3/16)*

Taking your team through the most important conversation you can have for the future of your business? Here are a few ideas...

- **Taste your Strategy master stock repeatedly.** You're putting yourself through a refresh process that's all about looking and moving forward from today. But if you've not got a tight grip on what you're building *from*, what you've done that's worked and failed and made the soup sweet or sour? Then you're every chance to start creating meatball flavoured ice-cream or a broccoli & octopus sandwich. There's an existing flavor profile that's just you, that's got your business here, and unless you're willing to pour the whole master stock down the sink (fire the team, dump the clients, purge the product portfolio, start anew), you really need to understand what you're building on and make those vital choices conscious of what's already in your pot. It means you can't have certain strategies. It means certain paths just WILL NOT WORK for you, no matter how attractive they are and how well they're being used by your competitors. Live with it, and know that's OK... 'cause they don't have *your* master stock. And it's a kick-arse master stock that, with a few touches of this and more focus on that, can no doubt feed your crew heartily to get you to the next level.
- **Be candid about your top 3 Strat-vantages.** There's stuff you do, have or are that will give you a natural selection leg-up over those trying to cut your lunch. Stuff that's tightly aligned to the places you want to get to. It's your strategic advantage kitbag – strengths, superpowers, head starts, justice league alliances... name them. There'll be one big hairy one, but try defining a big three. Honest, don't BS yourself. Identify them, put them in the light. Line them up against the wall and know, deeply know, just what you have (and are going to need to work like a mule) to get your business further up the hill. Because if you don't have them, these strat-vantages, your strategy is going to have to be to build them.
- **Shake the Strategy Snowdome... really hard.** It's pleasant and wistful to imagine a smooth journey to success on the coat tails of your strat-vantages. When all is calm in that little alpine village immersed in water under the glass. But what about when the blizzard whips up? When someone or something upsets the apple cart, and the risks start being realised, and the terrain changes rapidly and distressingly, and the competitors bring it? How will your organisation cope? How will your strategy hold up in the face of angry market Gods? It's not to say your calm day strategy is wrong, but you'll do well to test it, rigorously, against stiff winds, shaking earth and the human fallout when the ugly scenarios present. Shore up the map with some hypothetical hurricane imagining.
- **Decide which Strategy platform you will never back down from.** It's a fascinating test of commitment to a path you've selected. To ask yourself, if big guys X, Y and Z enter the playing field, and put on a squeeze like we've never been squeezed before, which will be the last strategy standing? Which are we SO SURE ABOUT, even in the face of mega-threats, even when cash-flow thins and a great many beliefs in the plan fall away, that we'll hold our line on? "*Let the cannons boom, let the bullets whiz, WE ARE BACKING THIS TO THE Nth DEGREE!*" The modern strategy is generally considered doomed if it doesn't factor in "agility" and "flexibility". But a spinal column strategy that's scaffolding that mobile ribcage of plans and paths you've picked? To have a steely determination to back a fundamental choice you've hitched your wagon to? It's inspiring, it's reassuring, and it's a gritty gutsy test of your belief in what you're trying to achieve and what you'll need to do or pay to get it.
- **Know you'll leave a lot untouched in the Strategy Pantry.** Leave the smorgasbord to others. In picking priorities, less is invariably more. Tighter and focused beats flaccid and voluminous. Just because you *can* do something... remember it means diluting something else. Choose to pay your opportunity cost in advance, and use that slightly sick feeling that comes with saying "no" to the Tim Tam - the strategy you just don't need (like, a real no) - to spur your gusto in chewing harder on the better choices you've made.

A final thought (if this hasn't registered yet) - always, always, ALWAYS reference whatever recipe, whatever ingredients, whatever kitchen crew or café configuration or schedule of service you develop BACK TO YOUR DREAM. To where you ultimately want to get. To your summit. Gary Vaynerchuk calls it your North Star. Most companies think of it as a Vision (a high but more tangible manifestation of successfully living your Purpose).

Call it whatever you want, call it "Rodney" if you like - it's your mountain top.

But never stop looking at it.

You can make and do so much stuff.

Surely you want it to be the **right stuff** for you and your business tomorrow?



## The aligned Monday morning strategy checklist *(posted 20/3/16)*

Can you complete these sentences? Quickly?

- “The organization I’m a part of exists first and foremost to .....”
- “What we’re working to achieve in the months and years ahead, more than anything else, is.....”
- “We share a belief in certain behaviours - things we all try to demonstrate in our work. They are....”
- “We’ve decided to prioritise our energies and focus our efforts in a few key areas to achieve our goals. Those areas are....”
- “What that means is that, in my role in the organization, I’m very focused on delivering.....”
- “What THAT means is that, today, I will prioritise these activities - .....”
- “If I do these things well, and my colleagues do likewise, we will .....”

Can you answer these questions?

Can everyone in your organization?

Yes?

Purposeful, focused, values-driven, strategic, aligned, disciplined, powerful.

Nice one.

No?

(Better fix it quick).

## This strategy stuff is gonna hurt *(posted 23/3/16)*

Given birth?

I'm reliably informed (and have borne witness to the fact) it's long, it's painful (but the result? Oh so worth it.)

Run a marathon?

The effort, the struggle, the hurt... and then the ecstasy after the line.

Ever facilitated a strategy session?

Helped an action-focused crew get to, and stay awhile at 35,000 feet, clarifying the purpose, determining the vision, landing on the values and honing in on the biggest strategic priorities?

It is the very definition of *short term pain for long term gain*.

Gather the Board and Leadership team. Fire up the coffee pots, fill the mint trays and plaster the walls with butcher's paper.

Now - climb into the semantics cauldron.

It's about to get real, and it is going to **hurt**.

All melodrama aside, strategic planning sessions that begin at 35,000 feet are tough going for a group that's otherwise about the day to day delivering. It hurts them (and you) to do the work needed to get *every. word. bang. on*.

It invariably starts friendly-like.

Soon, you annoy them.

The process annoys them. They want it to be over.

You get it. There's only so much a mint will counterbalance.

The politest, most professional and sage apex leaders quickly start snarling, grimacing, and it's not long until impatience bubbles to the surface.

"Motherhood!" "Semantics!" "CantwejustmoveitalonganddoesitREALLYMATTER?!"

Well, **yes**.

Yes it does matter.

If we're aiming at 4 words in a Purpose, just four words, the RIGHT four words, the BEST four words, I will stake my first born on the fact it WILL be hard and it WILL hurt and you bet your favourite hat it matters.

Everything. EVERYTHING. Ev-ry-thing follows these words, these big ol' why words.

The What you'll aim at. That follows.

The How you'll go about getting it. That follows.

The Who, What, When, Where stuff. You simply won't pick the right ones if the WHY isn't there. Isn't right. Isn't honest.

Strategy, Plans, Tactics, Resourcing, Decisions, Alternate courses, *everything* including the kitchen sink is only selected for one reason.

**Its fit for the Purpose.**

I'm sorry that it hurts you to nail it (because I really like you, and I honestly don't like seeing you suffer).

But I will not shy away from holding your collective noses on that emery wheel.

Because when you get it right?

You will thank me down the track. Because so many others will thank *you*.

(That's worth our shared very short term pain.)

## A few simple meta-scan tips for strategising *(posted 29/3/16)*

Informing your strategy with meta scans across the sea doesn't need to be complicated or expensive. Here are 6 simple sources you might start with;

- **The local rags** – local by geography or market. Peruse a few over a few weeks to get a sense of trends, recurring topics and pressing matters in your immediate environs. Clip and categorise stories into strategic subheadings you suspect might be relevant to your business, like technology, workforce, investment or leadership. Press like *The Fin Review* and *The Australian* are important, but so is *The Border Mail* if you live in Wodonga.
- **Specialty publications** – your esteemed industry magazines or the leading authority journals in relevant but functionally diverse spaces. For the work I do, I like periodicals like *HBR*, *In The Black*, *Company Director*, *Psychology Today*, *Wine Business Magazine* and *The Stock Journal*. For your space, it could just as easily be the biggest news names in Slow Food or Haberdashery or Shipping Containers.
- **Their electronic counterparts** – leading blogs, RSS feeds, social media luminaries, podcasts, webinars, the myriad of e-newsletters from trusted suppliers or trusted contributors on platforms like LinkedIn. Your search can all start with a few choice key words tapped into the Google box.
- **Trend sites** – “Top 10” lists aren't all clickbait. Go to respected sources like the World Economic Forum or government reports or platforms with really large data inputs like Trendhunter. Significant data sets tracked over reasonable periods by respected researchers provide valuable input to your imaginings about tomorrow.
- **Your competition (and their likely replacements)** – their websites contain links to e-newsletters and Annual Reports and updates on where they're investing time and resources. Be mindful of the Gretsky-ism here about skating to where the puck will be versus where it is now. This type of competitor analysis will tell you history more than their future, but you can often glean some pointers about where they're heading. To that, imagine the rising stars not currently in your competitor super-pac. Who is trying to fulfil your Purpose in a better, different way to you? That's often where your real insights loom.
- **Coffee with your key clients / contemporaries / suppliers / staff** – sitting down and asking the crew what they're seeing, feeling in their bones, how their worlds are changing, what's keeping them awake at night, what appears to be growing or shrinking in magnitude of importance... ok, it's anecdotal, but if you build a decent sample size, you can start to pick commonalities and outliers. And these are the folk your business centres around, so even anecdotal counts.

Bring the highlights of your first cut research to the conversation pit, work through it with the crew, see what you can glean and concentrate and imagine from it. Compare and contrast it with your business' own track record of strategic decision making (where you made successful left turns and why; where you jumped right at a shadow and learnt a tough lesson). Should this still prove un-enlightening, there are respected crews that you can contract to dive into the mire on your behalf to unearth wisdom pearls.

Why not try this first?

## Why strategy fails *(posted 31/3/16)*

Ever made a big professional decision at time point A, started down that strategy road, then hit time point B where you said to yourself

*“THAT didn’t work!”*

Maybe;

- The strategy wasn’t aligned to the Goal, Vision or Purpose you defined
- You didn’t actually HAVE a Goal, Vision or Purpose for the strategy to serve
- The strategy had no underpinning plan
- You didn’t have the tools, capabilities, skills, vehicles, petrol or stomach to carry out the strategy successfully
- It just wasn’t well thought out
- The thought was there, but the diligent research that might’ve exposed the flaws wasn’t
- You weren’t willing enough to pay the necessary opportunity costs to give it the focus it needed
- You had a great strategy... you just didn’t implement it
- The strategy didn’t fit your values or your culture (so your culture ate it)
- You did OK with it, but someone else did it better
- At another time, it would’ve been tickety boo, but.... timing sucked
- Your timeframe is wrong... you need longer
- It did work... you’re just measuring it wrong
- You know, the Universe, stuff...

If you’re on a strategy road right now, do you have a strategy to manage or mitigate each of these failure risks?

It's not all predictable, but a lot is imaginable.

## Knowing your sales strategy *(posted 4/4/16)*

When you've defined a sales goal for your outfit, aligned with your Vision, consistent with your Values and fit for your Purpose, it's time to define your sales strategy.

Will you;

- Win on price?
- Win on superior features, benefits, range, solutions or applications?
- Win because of closer relationships, deeper understanding, congruent values or accumulated wisdom?
- Win because your model is fast, oiled, childproof and leaves no scars?
- Win because you're omnipresent, you advertise like a storm, your competition is found wanting and you are a damn cool supplier brand for a client to hitch their wagon to?

Well then, will you...

- Focus intently on a narrow cohort, or cast your net shallow but wide?
- Aim for low margin bulk transactional efficiencies, or bespoke agency arrangements fewer but fatter in their payday?
- Partner, plunder, barter or broker?
- Deploy great shouting vehicles out in the physical and digital streets, or define a compelling electro-magnet that will bring them to you?
- Let the techies be the face and fingers, or give it to the suit wearers?
- Ask questions, or tell stories, or tie them together?

So will you mostly...

- Be substance or style or size?
- Be tight groove or vast plains; nimble and deft or solid and persistent?
- Be a dominator, or a pack runner, or a mopper-upper of the rich gravy slicks?
- Be about ease, or expertise; DIY education, or DIFM stress relief?
- Strive to shape policy and improve standards, or deal with the reality and mindsets existing right now?
- Keep your eyes on a cash position, or a value position, or a building reputation position?
- Play against the playing field, or the clock, or hold your eye on the black line and the strengths you're putting in to progress along it?

Sales strategy, but one of the many domains your business needs to think about as it selects its roads through the mountains to Purpose Peak.

(It's the one that pays for the others though, so get as deep as you can with it.)



## 7 tactics in support of any sales strategy *(posted 5/4/16)*

If they're important enough to make it into your sales strategy...

- **Call them.** You know who they are. You've been putting it off. Just pick up the phone and call. They know you're out there, they've seen you playing on the public cctv that is digital media. Even better – go there. Press palms. Show off your teeth.
- **Thank them.** For the smallest of efforts, for the snippets of information, for the crumbs of time and validation of your endeavours. They didn't have to. Be generous with gratitude.
- **Ask them.** About the logical, the emotional, the aspirational, the consequential and the mechanical. What you can, how you can, when you can, and will they?
- **Show them.** Ways and means, ideas and guaranteed, the paths of others and a path you think fits their situation. Translate, interpret, elicit “*ahhh!*”s.
- **Connect them.** With providers and networks and machines and better ways. Matchmake with even better fit mates than you ('cause that's what real mates do).
- **Help them.** Out, in, over and through. With what they want and then what they need, beyond danger and across narrow precarious tracks, with whatever you have and however it fits.
- **Stick with them.** Even the transactionals. Even the couldn't-do-much-today'ers. Even when attempts 1 – 7 don't go so well. Be a sticker. Be gum.

So simple.

So rare.

Do it?

## Strategic Knights at your round table *(posted 7/4/16)*

*“Please help me. **If you can’t**, please help me by matchmaking and chaperoning my courtship with someone that you know can and will”.*

That’s an ear worm you should let infest your cochlear.

Be my superhero, or introduce me to the Justice League.

As a contracted advice cornerman over a decade, I’ve been fortunate to meet and make mates with some remarkable service providers. Developing a black book of specialists I’d trust with my own cash (and concurrently blacklisting the rascals I wouldn’t send to walk your dog) means that, be your need legal, digital, fiscal or risk(al), I’ve got a person I’m happy to put my professional reputation behind in your service.

### **That’s a big thing.**

When your business is essentially you and the words that come out of your mouth, there’s little else to fall back on if a referral goes wrong. To trust another to respect a brand you built over a decade, with a client you may have built a partnership with over many years, is a massive hat-tip to them. It does, as Spidey knows, also come with great responsibility, but know that *if I do it* – share your name, pump your tyres to others publicly – you have earned it. (You of course have to KEEP earning it, but for now, you’ve got a gurnsey and are on the field).

This came up in a strategy workshop I ran for a client this very morning (*yes, these are all fresh daily*). One of the strategic strengths of my financial services client was the power and horsepower of *their* business partner network. So strong in fact that in client surveys we’ve conducted, it keeps coming to the surface as one of the big reasons clients love working with them. It’s not all just *“you deliver great services”*. Nor just *“you’re really lovely people”* (though they are and clients do say so). No, it’s also *“when you can’t help me, you find a way help me through others.”* This is a real partners network – complementary and sometimes even overlapping competitive service providers – that is nurtured, cherished and worked. And, for them and their clients, it works. Strategic, perpetually fuelled networks. Trusted partners. A team beyond your branded team.

So! While you battle the headwinds of your marketplace, and you come to grips with the map limits of your ability to help others (and accept which of those others you just can’t bill and deliver sufficient value to), I encourage you to take a lateral look at those you’d trust with your own cash.

Who’s at your Round Table?

Who are your trusted Knights?

And who do you know that might like to meet them, D’artagnan?

## Aligning next week to your strategy *(posted 7/4/16)*

While the blitzers race to whack stamps on late shipments, frantically clear the urgent-flagged inbox decks and put off today that which looks like it has Monday written all over it, consider another use of your pre-Friday drinks opportunity.

1. **Take 2 to review your Strategy** – which are the paths you're saying boo-ya to, which are you absolutely intent on closing off, and reflect again on why (the long, long term piece; the Purpose, the Vision, the Values). You simply can't engage with these selection filters enough. It is the self-medication that staves off the fever-causing potential carcinogens of short term choices.
2. **Cast an eye out over the Monday to Friday** that sits just beyond this weekend hump (and consider reframing the weekend as the hump between you and your goals, not Wednesdays). What's in that investment portfolio already, and are those prescribed activities, meetings, selections looking like they'll pay their fair share and be actively contributing members of your strategy team? If they're not? Be brave and get the hatchet.
3. **Look at the grout** – the time gaps between the big task tiles that sit in that week, and think (Friday, hard, I know, but try). *Think*. What could you do? What won't anyone else do? What will your strategy love? What's the secret ingredient, the chilli flakes, the pinch of salt or the anchovy fillets that will just MAKE that week an alive, strategically aligned one? What bigger pieces are missing that, if you're to progress, you must insert? What, if you could start afresh (as many of you with blank diary pages can easily do), would the perfect week of energy look like if it was architecturally designed by Frank Gehry to serve your selected strategy?
4. **Make it so.**

This is one of those eat-sleep-rave-repeat loops. No apologies for using those eye-opening things you see on *A Clockwork Orange*. It needs you to eyeball it. Your strategy needs you to eat the alignment vegetables all. the. time.

Book 5 in your diary before 5 today. Get it done.

## Is “cool” a good strategy for you? *(posted 11/4/16)*

Cool is on the edge of current. Topical, fashionable, anti-yesterday. Attractive for its novelty, for who it identifies with and who it ostracises. Cool by another name is disruption. Choosing to turn and swim against an old predictable tide. A concept as old as the hills, a flavour as fresh as young coconut juice.

In a great many games, cool is winning large wedges of attention and share. Be they beard wearers, online tribers, owners of the 9th letter or co-working spacers, cool spruikers are playing compelling tunes that sing to the increasingly ravenous instant gratification centres of our brain (base though they be). Unsustainable by definition (unless you're Keith Richards), cool makes us feel alive by letting us dinky awhile on a funky float motoring through the crowded market parade.

The question is, **does cool fit you and your professional outfit?**

Can it be *your* winning strategy play?

From an unashamedly uncool vantage point, I encourage you to consider;

- **Your track record of cool** – in a professional context, did you really ever have it (who judged it so?), did you wear it well, and more importantly, did it actually pay off?
- **The quest for cool in your target market** – are they gagging for it, these professional paramours of yours? Are lots of the serious players in your space also trying to be rebels and misfits (making your attempts to be more cool decidedly less so, or perhaps diluting your impact?) Has cool proven effective here before (or is the space ripe for unimagined novelty)?
- **Your appetite for the efforts of cool** – unless you just have it oozing from your pores, you might consider how much work goes into looking disheveled (or at least what's required to leverage dishevelment for profit). Have you geared up to reap the rewards of cool quickly and furiously (knowing it doesn't last forever)? Or if you're intent on using it longer term, have you developed a "cool recalibration" unit to make sure you keep your finger on the moving pulse and anticipating before it all gets mainstream?
- **Your willingness to pay the costs of cool** – in every space, there is a pin-striped brigade standing back watching your supernova flash, awaiting its inevitable fade (at which point it will be ready to march over your spent casings and point to your remaining forces saying "*knew it wouldn't last!*")... are you OK with that? Worse, they take notes and feed the lessons your cool runnings exposed into bigger machines ("cool homogenisers") and set about making more from your leading edge efforts... OK with THAT?
- **Dealing with the uncool** - if there are those in the team, or the punters, that aren't a natural fit with the edgy you're focused on developing & showcasing, what will you do? Fire them? Reprogram them? Send them to cool school (or hide them away until the cool fever passes)?
- **Your understanding of the alternatives to cool** – what if you were uncool... but valuable? Non-hip... but effective? A flavor of vanilla, but a really nice vanilla bean (not that artificial essence gunk)? Could you keep shaving and wearing a tie and referring to your customers as “dear customers” and still go about improving their lives and turning a profit for the foreseeable future?

Cool is very compelling. It appeals to the occasionally bullied, shoulder-chip-bearing, overlooked-for-the-team 9-year old in every business professional. It is Darwinian, it produces endorphins, and because we're pack animals, hey, why not hang with the cool pack? And if it fits – if it's genuinely you, your business, your market, your opportunity to differentiate valuably, lucratively and (to the timeline of your defining) sustainably, then knock yourself out on cool as a strategy to win. Lots are and can.

If it doesn't though?

Do you really need to force it?

There are alternatives.

(Cool in a different way.)



## Strategic lexicon *(posted 12/4/16)*

**Parents in the house** – ever caught yourself lecturing your kids with the precise words you got from *your* folks? (*Ahh, a sea of hands!*)

Natural, right? You heard the words so often, your neural wiring shaped around them. *“Eat your vegetables or you’ll get scurvy! We are a family and we look out for each other! Knuckle down or you’ll be driving a garbage truck the rest of your life! (Insert your own here).”* To this day, as the sentences tumble from your lips towards the ears of your progeny, you find yourself momentarily transported back 30 years where the sentence structure, even tone of your parents is palpable. **On these words your values and activity patterns were founded.** Now you’re a grown-up that has grown to believe these words are right and thus worthy of embedding in your *own* offspring.

So if the constant repetition of clear, belief-aligned words has such a profound impact on the juniors of your house (a multi-generational impact in fact), consider how *you as a team leader* can apply this concept in your business, strategically.

- **Peppering your team feedback with the Purpose, Vision and Values words** – in mirror-holding conversations with the crew, to recognise a great effort or acknowledge a positive result or express displeasure about the dropped ball, tie it back to the highest order words your business owns. Vital at formal reviews, but equally important and impactful at the water cooler each day, repeat the aspirational terms consistently, clearly and enunciate how they tie to that moment just passed.
- **Built into planning processes** – whether you’re collaborating on a new account strategy, or thinking through the 12-month allocation of effort and resources, continually pull the conversation to those higher order words and their path selection offspring, your strategic priorities. Say them aloud, these words. Place the first-cut thinking about how you might tackle the challenge before you alongside those bigger picture words and see how they sound laying in the same sentence bed. Alignment served by repetition.
- **Meeting agendas** – ritualizing and advance-prescribing the continual review and reflections on your strategic priorities and the goal masters they serve is the perfect application of an agenda. Yes, there’ll be tactical and bushfire stuff you’ll always want to satisfy your tick-box cravings with, but by having the PVVS printed, gazetted in your agenda, it’s a no-escape vehicle that pulls the really important big stuff front of mind once more. Kinda like tying you to your chair so you can’t avoid eating your peas.
- **Being brave enough to apply the big words to client messaging** – whether it forms part of your tangible marketing collateral or you just commit to engaging key clients in conversations about your organisation’s hopes, dreams and strategic choices, consider the upsides to the repetition of your strategy words beyond your own four walls. It’s an avenue for client self-selection (which will come out eventually anyway), it’s a catalyst for deeper, more inspiring partnerships, and it regalanises your own belief in them (after all, you wouldn’t toss your reputation away by saying things to clients you didn’t believe in, right?). So maybe the most important application of this repetition concept of all...
- **Self-talk.** Whether you’re one of those types that stands in your jammies before the mirror each day shouting positivity mantras at the slightly-manic scruffy-haired one before you, or you’re a first-coffee-of-the-morning quiet ponderer, go over these words yourself, daily. Build your own leader’s neural wiring around these beliefs and commitments. Make them such a regular, ingrained feature of your thinking via constant exposure that you just start making

aligned calls without even knowing. Remind yourself that you're paying the opportunity cost that is every other career, every other organisation, to be doing what you're doing (so if you are, then damn! Drink the KoolAid, buy into the Vision, choose to live and breathe the Values. Be Purpose-filled.)

The sentiment behind the words is the real game. But it's **the words** you remember.

Help others ingrain the right ones. (And eat your vegetables.)

# THE POWER OF WORDS

## The blank strategy page *(posted 14/4/16)*

So much of strategy is and must be developed on the renovator's delight that is your current organisation. But there's great value to taking out a blank piece of paper, or a clean whiteboard, and beginning as if anew.

- **Imagine.** The kind of impact your wolfpack could have on the world. The portfolio of work you want in the glass case in the library or reproduced by street artists. The type of vibe and pipeline of work running through the place. The standard you can set, the magnetism you could electrify. Let the reins go, do a mic drop on your staid thinking or iron paradigms. Imagine.
- **Burn down the building.** A great exercise for leaders – if the worst happened and you let big Clive run your Nickel mine or it just went up in flames, and there you stood the next morning in the car park, thinking about a restart in the empty building over the road... Take a close look at the long faces in the crew, the processes you had, the org chart that was, the activity programs and the old WWDTAH (way we do things around here). Who and what should stay? Who and what is superfluous or contrary to what you're rebuilding? Is the mission still what you want to pursue?
- **Reverse-engineer.** Think about that Purpose, that Vision, that perfect or highly desired entity you'd love to be leading. Think about what that organisation looks like, does, employs, and break it down backwards. What underpins such a magnificent beast of a business? What went into structuring it? What makes it go zip when it moves and pop when it stops? Who drives each component, where does it start, what are the choke points, and what, thinking back to front, stands out as the key success drivers of such a business?
- **What-if-ing.** Future scenario creation and postulating how you'd deal with it. What if the backside fell out of your current cash cow? What if competitors 1, 2 and 3 got it on? What if talent scout aliens abducted your top 20 people (replacing them with nut jobs?) What if today was opposite day? What if the regulators close the valve on the dripping pipe you've been drinking from? What if Do-It-For-Me-rs became DIY-ers and vice versa? I wonder if the likes of Blockbuster and Borders did this – what if customers stopped wanting to come to us, and instead wanted us to take it to them? What if it stops being physical products and starts becoming digital services? What if I actually *moved* on these insights rather than just passively reading them?
- **Random connections.** Fill the blank page with themes, topics, concepts and powerful forces. "Digital disruption". "Smiling customers". "Supermarket aisle ends". "Wearing your jeans down low". "Pomegranates". "Dancing bears". "Swimming caps". It really doesn't matter too much what they are – pepper it. Now try joining dots. Making connections that make sense, that join essences as much as actuals, about what you're seeing, anticipating, imagining.
- **The tombstone** – when you go, when they close the doors on the building for the last time and the army of beneficiaries of the work you all did gather, weeping... what would they endorse as an accurate description of how you affected the world? What will the stonemason scratch into the granite... and is that what you want? So how well does what you're doing now fit that epitaph? Let your pencil capture the realities, the aspirations, the gaps and the first cut thoughts on fixes.
- **Doodle** – logos, structures, the face of your target market, flow charts, the scary monsters in your space (and where their soft spots are). Let the pen flow freely without judgment while you think and recalibrate... see what you come up with.

No guarantees with a blank page. But a simple counterweight to our institutionalized and fundamentally biased building on the existing matrix.



A blank canvas...

## Strategy in a sea of imperfections *(posted 18/4/16)*

(Here's a mirror that I think is tough, but critical, for leaders to look into...)

You don't have the perfect organisation.

Some of your team are occasionally lazy.

Some of your products are a bit naff.

Sometimes, your turn-around times stink.

You are not up to scratch when measured against the competitor in lane 4.

You have process gaps a furlong wide and a less-than-ideal org chart that grew around roles and faces no longer there (and now it's a trip hazard).

And that party trick that got you your first audience... now others can do it, chained up, underwater, behind perspex.... better.

But lo!

All is not lost.

Because you have a Purpose. A reason for being. A marrow-borne desire to deliver something of value somehow to some someones.

Because you have a Vision. A dream, a target, a bugle rousing you from temporary slumber, compelling you forward through the squalls.

Because you have people. Good people, most. People with skills and experience and personal aspirations that can be organized, inspired, set free to do the yards and then tie it together, together.

You have an audience, or at least the makings of one. A crowd that want you to be great, that want the upsides of you in their corner, that want you to overcome your limitations and be dazzling in deploying your strengths.

And you have a start. Some momentum, a powered vehicle, a splash of fuel in the tank and you, steering.

It's not perfect.

Don't choose strategy pretending it is, or that might in time deceive you or others into forgetting your limitations and inabilities. Those strategies take on too much water, and then they take you off the cliff.

But this chance, this vehicle, this crew... it's *something*.

And if you select and engineer strategy around that imperfect something, being honest about it, mitigating or reinforcing the soft spots as you work on perfecting the aim of your spinnaker strengths?

Then it can win.

Honest strategy is strategy founded on an understanding of imperfections. And honest strategy?

*That* you can sail.

## A great strategy tool – the PESTLE analysis *(posted 18/4/16)*

If you're about to rework or recalibrate your strategy for 2017+, or you lead a team that's become overly introspective, or you're wanting a crew to mentally connect the dots between "*the world is changing*" and "*maybe then we need to change*", then this tool can help.

Thought to have been created by Harvard Professor Francis Aguilar in the 60's, the PESTLE framework is a simple method to help you scan the macro-environment for forces likely to impact your organisation's progress towards its Vision. PESTLE is an acronym;

**P is Political** – what local, national, international or industry politics or political machinations are likely to have an impact on your operations in the next wee while? It could be policy, or election-related, or the level of stability, or even personality-related.

**E is Economic** – consider the state of play in your market, your region and the state of stakeholder wallets. Unemployment rates, disposable incomes, exchange rates, availability of cash, interest, appetites for investment... what economic landscape and decision shapers are you likely to be navigating your organisation through in months and years ahead?

**S is Social** – think about the trends you're seeing and evolving societal pressures and opportunities manifesting large. Generational activities and differences, emerging buyer and seller behavior, new norms in education and appetites and aspirations. Globalisation and shifting populations and demographics. How we interact and communicate. What are the dominant themes you'll need to factor in to your future operations?

**T is Technological** - Be that platforms or interfaces or applications or availability, which tech pieces are bubbling to the surface in the minds and lives of your suppliers, staff and customers? Think innovations and speed and omnipresence and intertwining and usability (ease).

**L is Legal** – what regulations or restrictions or openings are most likely to rock your boat or blow hard on your sails? FTAs, IP, OH&S, industry-specific clamp-downs or rule rewrites... which will need your focus and decision-making?

**E is Environmental** – a category more than just green, it asks you to consider the actual or likely changes to your physical environment and how you'll need to move. Public attitudes, climate, infrastructure, resource availability... what from an environmental perspective must you think deepest about for the future viability and traction of your business efforts?

Whack 6 big sheets of butchers paper on the walls around your meeting room, each with one of the PESTLE category headings. Break the team into cross-functional groups and give each the task and some time to flesh out their first-cut thoughts on what the key macro-environmental factors most pertinent to your organisation or marketplace might be. Don't fret when you see the same factors pop up more than one piece of paper – there is logical overlap between categories, and it might be that a dominant issue percolates to the top on 2 or 3 pages. Cross-pollinate and discuss collectively.

If you want to soup the exercise up a little, overlay a risk matrix by adding two columns to each sheet.

- **Column 1 – Likelihood (high, medium or low)** – ask the team to rate how likely they think it is that this force / issue will impact your organisation and its journey to the goal. Often 'topical' issues get thrown up that don't necessarily have enough grunt or relevance to sufficiently alter your course, and conversely, with a little digging, smaller "sleeper" issues are exposed as having the potential to be massive game changers.

- Column 2 – **Impact (-, neutral or +)** – can the team see just how this force / issue might impact your future success? This is an interesting one – many teams (rightfully) hedge their bets, saying “*it could go either way*”. If that’s the case, you can take this exercise a step further and get them to flesh out “*if it proves positive, what will we need to be ready to do, and if it proves negative, what will we want to have thought about / implemented?*” If you find at the end of the exercise your butchers paper is peppered with an overwhelming number of negatives *or* positives, there’s maybe another layer of analysis required by you as a leader. Is that a function of my team’s attitudes? Of the likely future health of this market or business? Of our genuine understanding of what’s ahead? So, part information gathering, part readiness diagnostic.

This tool and exercise has a VIP seat at Strategy Workshops, for sure, but you can also use it regularly at team meetings where you consider PESTLE forces specific to a function of your business (marketing, operations, customer service), or as an evolving pattern indicator that you keep recalibrating your efforts against.

As with any self-populating, anecdotal, opinion-based tool, a PESTLE analysis is limited by the group’s understanding of the rising forces in the world around them (and for that matter, the groups genuine understanding of your organisation’s own operations). However as a means to get people thinking more broadly than what’s going on in the four walls of your outfit, or to consider more deeply just what may lay ahead that will need some planning and activity shifts to navigate, it’s a pretty easy exercise to facilitate, and it dovetails beautifully into more introspective pieces like SWOT and ultimately to developing strategy.



## Great strategy tool #2 – the Gantt chart *(posted 20/4/16)*

If a PESTLE analysis is all about broad scans, future imaginings and maybe impacts, then the humble **Gantt Chart** is where stuff gets real.

Developed by Polish Engineer / Economist Karol Adamiecki in 1896, then popularised by US Engineer / Management Consultant Henry Gantt in 1910 (*yeah, they had management consultants even then...*), the Gantt Chart is a simple visual depiction of a project broken into its component parts and how progress should and is made over time. If you've worked with a builder, you'll know it as a **schedule of work**. It dissects your kitchen reno into demolition, then plumbing, then cabinetry (overlapping with flooring), then painting, dovetailing into new appliance delivery and finally cleaning before the scheduled handover date (*which seemed so realistic at the time...*). Each component is allocated an appropriate time frame from start to finish, relative to and sequenced with the rest of the work.

As a tool applied to organisational strategy, I really like the Gantt Chart as a simple, honest and practical means of taking strategic priorities or goals, and connecting them to aligned strategic activities or higher level tactics. More gutsy in my opinion than a Balanced Scorecard, a Gantt Chart developed for 12, 24 or 36 months (or longer) not only asks a leadership team to start identifying HOW a strategy will be brought to life, but WHEN it'll happen and WHO will drive it.

Let's assume a moment...

- your business has a clear vision – a mountain-top goal.
- you've broken it down into slightly closer vision-aligned goals or objectives
- you've then identified the key 4, 5, 6 or 7 strategic priorities that, with focused planning and activity, will be the best paths to achieving those goals

Those fundamentals in place, imagine then drawing up a table with 17 columns, and starting with your strategic priority 1;

- Atop the chart, write down the 12 month goal that is the best interim marker or manifestation of that longer-term strategic priority
- Label the columns, from left to right  
Column 1 – **Strategic Action**  
Column 2 – **Owner / Driver**  
Columns 3 – 15 – **Each of the 12 months**  
Column 16 – **Status**  
Column 17 – **Comment**
- In the first column, down as many rows as you need, write down the key strategic activities that need to take place in the 12 months ahead for that goal / strategic priority to be delivered upon. Not granularly tactical, but not cloud-fluffy. Activity sets of substance and impact.
- Next to each of the strategic activities, write the driver / owner of the activity, and then in the adjacent 12 columns, document precisely when key actions or milestones need to be undertaken or achieved.
- Do the same for the remaining strategic priorities.
- Now get busy.

It may be that each of these strategic activity sets needs their own business or operational plan (Gantt Charts for Gantt Charts). At the highest level though, this strategy list and calendar needs to have tabs kept on it regularly.

- Is what we said we'd need to do *being done*?
- Is it being done when we said we'd need it done?
- Is it working?

The "Progress" column can be used with a simple traffic light system, or with quantitative metrics, or qualitative comments. The "Comments" column can be refreshed regularly and provide insight into the future of that particular action set for future years.

While Gantt Charts do some of their best work at the operational coalface, I've seen Boards and senior leadership teams of really large organisations manage to keep their entire set of vision-aligned strategic priorities and 12-36 months of key strategic action sets on a single A4 page Gantt Chart, reviewed and updated at Board and Senior Leadership Team meetings, where progress is assessed, deviations identified and strategic calls made accordingly. I've seen business managers develop their departmental and project plans similarly, that then feed up and into this higher order page, and down into their teams diaries.

Heck, there's really no reason **every individual in your organisation** shouldn't have a Gantt Chart of their strategy-aligned key activity sets across the next 12 months. It's such a simple, transparent and clear framework to tie aspirations, priorities and activities together, and it can dovetail from the Boardroom to the shop floor. One mechanism, one tool, for one Vision.

The tool is great. It works.

But it doesn't work itself.

That needs work, from you.

### 3 strategic tips to make your SWOT analyses better *(posted 20/4/16)*

They're a comfortable staple of review and strategy workshops. Look internally at your **S**trengths and **W**eaknesses, then outbound at the **O**pportunities and **T**hreats. Whiteboard, group discussion, and then into the planning.

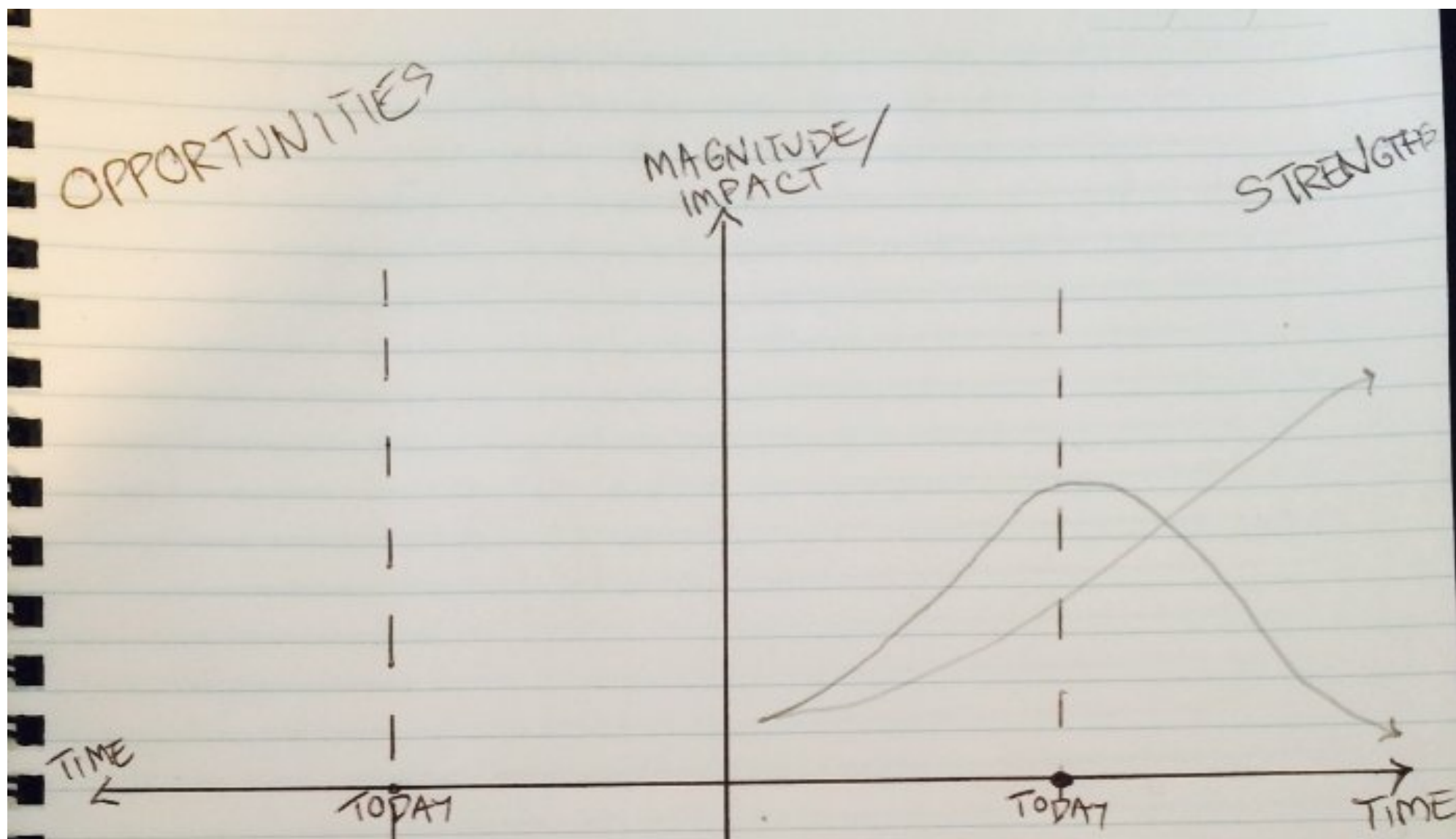
For many organisations, that's it. That's the extent of the brief and the analysis. And while it's not worth *nothing*, it's not worth enough.

So, soup your SWOT up. 3 quick tips;

- **Be really specific.** What are you actually SWOTing for? Your entire organisation? A product line? A particular strategic path? The alignment of your current outfit with your Purpose, Vision and Values? Give your SWOT context. Even an exercise as broad as this need something to aim at. Define clearly the SWOT what, and even consider giving it time boundaries that put the S & W on the same piece of the calendar as the O & T (a dwindling strength today may have zero relevance to an opportunity emerging in 3 years.)
- **Be evidence-based.** Smile if you've heard any of these offered from the back of the room. *"Our people!" "Big competitors!" "Our customer service!" "Discounting!" "Our superior product lines!"* GrrrrEAAATTT. Maybe they're true. Maybe they're just a chance for Sally or Fred to feel like they've contributed (you can never go wrong saying those ones). Test the validity of these generic topics by adding a column to each of the 4 matrix boxes labeled **"evidence"** or **"prove it"**. Ask for gutsy examples that back the claim. Tangible manifestations pointing to the fact your contribution is real and deserves to be up there.
- **Plot them out** – at the bottom of your matrix, draw a set of XY axes, Y being **"magnitude"**, X being **"time"**. Halfway along the positive part of the X axis, draw a dotted vertical line called "today", then mirror it in the negative territory (see the picture overleaf for clarity). Now, for each of the factors you define in each of the 4 SWOT categories, have a go at charting the factor as it *has, does, and might* impact your future. For example, if you list a strength of your business as *"technical advice superiority over competitors"*, think about how that strength has developed over the past years, where it sits on the axis today, and, relative to what you're comparing it to, how you think it's likely to develop in months / years ahead. Don't be fussed that Y axis metrics will be different for each factor and the timeframe is a bit fuzzy – it's the shape of the curve you're really interested in and your assessment of the relative magnitude of each S,W,O or T. If you're looking at a strength that is bell shaped (meaning it started low, developed to a high point in recent times, but has started trending downward and is more than likely heading back to "average" in the years ahead), does it deserve the same strategic focus compared to a strength that is low now (but you're imagining it growing exponentially in the next few years?) Or if a weakness has remained stable over recent years, and you can't see it going anywhere different, what does that mean you'll need to craft in your strategy to strap the heel or work around it ('cause you're obviously not intent on fixing it)? Charting each SWOT factor relative to each other over time is a simple way to compare and contrast the history, current state and future direction of the key forces in your world.

It's a great tool, but it's easy to apply lazily and say you've ticked a box.

**Go SWAT on your SWOT.**





## Great strategy litmus words – **By and Because** (posted 26/4/16)

Take any task you're engaged in today, any project you're working on, any strategic priority working party you've formed. Now take it up the **Because Tree**.

*"We're doing this **because**.... (we want to... we can... it will... it'll help... we've determined that.... it gives us...)"*

Go again, up a branch.

*"And THAT's important, **because**.... (our aim here is... we're committed to... the opportunity is... our people will....)."*

Go higher.

*"Why are we doing that? **Because**... (we want to be known as.... it will give us the advantage of... it's key to our mission... it means we will create...)"*

See if you can climb the tree ALL the way to the top.

To the **Purpose**.

*"Because **that's who we are. That's why we exist. There is no other "because". It's just in our DNA."***

OK, now back to the task at hand, the project, the general topic area or strategy you're working on.

Try chasing it down the **By Burrow**.

*"We'll make this endeavour successful, **by**... (applying.... prioritising... resourcing... partnering... acting on... delivering.....)."*

Nice.

Keep going.

*"We'll do THAT **by**.... (creating... setting up... working on.... asking...)"*

Deeper.

*"The way I'll get that progressing is **by**... (planning... diarising... meeting with... implementing...getting busy on...)"*

Sure you're at the bottom yet?

*"Phew! I guess the only way that gets done is **by**... (picking up a phone... activating my biceps... moving a finger over a mousepad... walking over to Henrique right now and asking this question...)."*

The **Because Tree** gets you aligning your efforts with your Purpose. The **By Burrow** takes any nebulous thinking down to the very next step.

These aren't forgone conclusions. Because Tree climbers know how often you find yourself running out of branches (nowhere near the top, unclear on where the sun is), or your head pops up in a canopy (but it's the wrong one, a non-purposeful one), or you find yourself trying to make a giant mental leap across branches that is just too great (so you're really not connected to what you're trying to achieve).

It's also scary how many times you find yourself agreeing on concepts, projects or strategic courses of action where, once you start down the By Burrow, you find you're not adequately resourced, or your appetite for that particular dark confined space sees you give up early, or it's a crowded space that won't actually get you to the sub-terrain level you need to get the right work done, or you just refuse to stop entertaining thoughts of other burrows - opportunity costs - so never fully go boots-in.

**By and Because.** Test them today.

## Is your strategy opaque? (posted 27/4/16)

Great strategy – effective strategy - wears high-vis.

It doesn't take Owl eyes to see Mr Trump's. Behave like the antithesis of the political establishment and take a no-prisoner, sensibility-shocking position on everything (one you know masses want to hear, and change it quickly if need be).

Apple's?

Coat technical wizardry in beautiful simplicity, lead all comers with intelligent iterations and add-ons of consumer cool, and empower the loved & loving tribe to build the apps that make the technology an extension of your ulnar (replaceable only with V #.@)

The Australian Cricket Team's?

Front foot aggression, bat first, try to dominate opposing heads like they were rank full tosses, and never forget that as a team member, you're a privileged ambassador of something sacred, baggy and green.

*(Of course, even great strategy doesn't pay every time, isn't always executed perfectly, nor might you choose it for yourself, but it has underpinned the relative measures of remarkable success for these 3 otherwise unrelateds, and just a cursory glance will throw up a bazillion other highly visible examples you'd be familiar with in your world).*

Amazon. "Others that bought this liked...." customer encircling omnipresence.

Tonka. Tough, oversized boysy-ness.

Maccas. Fast, consistent, everywhere, on trend.

Kardashians. Whatever it takes to get on the front page looking en fleek.

Think about your favourite leader.

The startup success (that took 20 years) that spurs you on today.

The sporting club enjoying applause.

The organisation dominating.

The market disruptor.

### Think about their strategy.

Can you see it?

Is it obvious?

Not the nuances, but the thrust.

Not the whole kit and caboodle, but the arterial roads.

Can you see clearly the priority choices they've made, the focal points they've landed on, the opportunity costs they've elected to pay, the endpoint they keep in mind, the values they prioritise above all else?

Can you see their core strategy?

I bet if you look and concentrate, it's quite visible.

**Opaque strategy** – not visible or discernable to outsiders – might mean a few things.

- You don't actually have one. (NB having one and not putting it into play = same same, not different)
- You have one, and it's underway, but it's not yet mature enough to be manifesting to outside eyes
- You're being tricky, keeping your cards reaaaally close to your chest (fear of being copied or gazumped? Clinging to old school sensibilities about need-to-know-bases? Lack of confidence in your choices? Just waiting for the wind to turn?)

If you're going to win in your space, London-to-a-brick the methods, choices and paths you've elected to get there will invariably be seen. Stealth, if it does, usually only wins once. It's a transparent world. And if you want the crew to buy into it, they need to see it from both inside and outside the shop window.

Which leads me long way round (my favourite way) to the two questions I wanted to plant in your head this morning.

**If we asked the market what *your core strategy* was...**

**... would they see it as clearly as the strategy of Trump, Apple and the Aussie team?**

And if they *can* see it... **would their assessment of your strategy line up with what you think your strategy is?**

Opaque won't last or it won't win, because it can't be embraced, because if it relies on slide-of-hand it'll quickly be debunked, and because it breeds confusion and mistrust. Either plan for transparency, or question why you're not willing to.

And if what it looks like you're doing from the outside bears little resemblance to what you'd planned to do or think you are doing?

I urge you to rethink.

## What place for platforms in your strategy? *(posted 28/4/16)*

Great piece in April's *HBR* about the impact that platform businesses are having in traditional product & service markets (*"Pipelines, Platforms, and the new rules of strategy"*). The authors reference the jugular squeeze that Apple's App ecosystem placed on competitor phone manufacturers. Apple went from 0 to 92% of the phone market in 7 years, killing Nokia, Motorola, Ericsson and more. Not just because they are sexy and simple, but because they create a business opportunity for more than just Apple.

Look at what Uber is doing to the taxi market; AirBnB to the hotel market; Amazon to the book market and so far beyond. Ebay, AliBaba, Wotif and umpteen others. Traditional linear makers and sellers of widgets are being dacked and spanked by open range marketplaces, by brokers, by facilitation businesses, by the trade show hosts themselves. Enablers and promoters of others. It's B2B mindsets beating B2C transactions (*"if I can help you sell your stuff via our mechanisms, we will outplay the factory-to-consumer-showroom players hamstrung by the limitations of a fixed offering"*). More than this, many platforms are about letting the buying and selling crowd **improve the platform**, in the process adding value to other platform players and consumers.

It's organic, eco-systemical, expandable pie stuff.  
It's winning, because it lets *more* people win.

### So - are platforms part of your strategy?

Maybe you're readying to launch your market's version of AirBnB.

Maybe you're not quite there, wrestling with the idea of how to turn control of something proprietary, some expertise or IP, into a broader playing field, a bazaar, where more can benefit (but that, in some way, pays you in return).

Maybe it's not about your creation of a new arena, but a decision on how you'll add value to a growing one, where you'll park your thermos and host pony rides around it, or maybe who you'll partner with to create a yellow brick road of connected service stations throughout the new kingdom.

The digital world arguably makes it easier than ever to render traditional business models irrelevant. But is that always useful? Is shooting the other Texas Hold'em players around the table in a fixed pie mentality way really the right way forward in your sector?

Maybe better to think long and hard about that expandable pie idea. About how you can help give others a leg up, who'll be willing to try working with you to improve the platform you boosted them onto, that might be able to deliver an upside to more.

Strategically challenging?

Sure.

But it's winning.

## The only criteria for strategy *(posted 1/5/16)*

It has to **fit**.

You, your organisation, your culture, your dreams, your wagon, your capacity, your timelines, your people, your groove, your amours, your worldview, your appetite.

Truthfully. (That means Purposefully).

It doesn't matter if others think it's daggy while theirs wears pin stripes.

It doesn't matter if it's last seasons colours or it makes you stand out or blend in.

And it doesn't matter if every man and their dog outside the border fence is spruiking an alternate path.

If it fits your desired outcome and your willingness and ability to put it into play with disciplined focus and observant agility...

... then it fits just fine.

Check the fit of yours again today.



## Six strategic priorities *(posted 9/5/16)*

One of the upsides to facilitating strategy conversations in multiple organisations is the chance to identify patterns. While no two strat plans ever look the same, there are maybe **six priority areas** I see consistently appear in strategic plans regardless of whether you're in beer, bricks, botox or bean counting. (And why should the marketers have all the P's?)

The **Pay-for-it Priority** - a financial objective, a funding demand, the dollars we're going to need to make, deploy or deliver the right ROI from. Nary a commercial strategy misses the money piece.

The **People Priority** - customers, staff, channel partners, suppliers, community, recipients... who gets our overt focus and diligent planning efforts? Kind of intertwines with culture, and often breaks out into more than one priority, but people need to be there somewhere if we want them carrying our litter to the Vision peak.

The **Power Priority** - the major strength we'll leverage, the big differentiator basket we possess that we'll load up with effort eggs... what's our very best party trick (and what are we going to do with it)? Often portfolio-related, but it could equally be about people, or IP, or a space you'll take yourselves into better / faster than competitors.

The **Plug-the-hole priority** - a flip side to flexing biceps, what's the biggest risk to the business' success that needs mitigating or protecting against? Plug-the-hole can be about trying to strengthen weaknesses, or about rerouting activities away from a space you know you can't win in.

The **Process priority** - systems, procedures, infrastructure, operations, technology application & advancement... most smart organisations select a strategic focal point to do with HOW they go about their business.

The **Progress priority** - innovation, advancement, succession planning, exit, expansion, initiation. New, different stuff. Beyond what you've already got in play, what's going to get your focus next to move the line along?

Yours might have more, or less, or variations on the themes, but in my experience, a Purpose-Vision-Values-led strategic plan with;

- Clear financial targets
- A defined focus on VIPs
- A play on key existing strengths
- A major risk address
- Effort centred on the mechanisms to deliver, and
- A determined position on evolving (or revolutionising) for tomorrow

... then you're in the mix with the best.

## Bad strategy. Don't. *(posted 10/5/16)*

I had the great pleasure of hosting a bunch of SA's finest strategy consultants and business advisers for a frothy and some wedges last night. We sat by the front bar and talked about **bad strategy** – what it looks like, why it comes to be, what it does and how to avoid that unnecessary car crash in the first place.

Here are a few thoughts from the crew...

- **Bad strategy is too introspective** – when the leadership team sits around the boardroom table and thinks too deeply about its origins and its special talents and its infrastructure and who's delivering for them... and not enough about the people beyond the four walls of the office? It goes bad. Go back to root causes for the decision to found the business – to fix a problem or satisfy the need of *someone*. Who are they, these someones? What's the current iteration of that one need they have today? What's it likely to be tomorrow, and how can you reroute the amazingness that's inside your four walls to deliver to those beyond them?
- **Bad strategy puts too many eggs in one basket**– you see it often. A business goes and structures its operations around a single mega-customer, a gold-egg-laying goose they can encircle and evolve for / with... and then the goose dies or flies, and your house of cards falls too. Flipside – as a distribution business reliant on suppliers, you go all in with one or two key providers. Deep relationships, a deeper reliance... and in good weather, it's efficient and slick and lucrative. And then it goes bad, and you're shivering in the rain while others you ignored turn their noses up at you. It's not to say that key customers or key suppliers shouldn't be part of your strategy (I'd argue they must), but if you're *all in with one* at the price of ignoring all others, your risk levels are up the wazoo and you have to ask yourselves *"is this genuinely sustainable?"*
- **Bad strategy is an overbaked cake pushed down from the C-suite** – when the team huddle is called and the shiny bums swan in waving a 48 page document in the air saying *"Team, take a knee. This is our strategy. I built it. You - implement."*... that's bad. No involvement. No engagement. No ownership. No coalface reality checks. And frankly, unless the team are oompa-loompas, mignons or late 1800's steel mill workers, *it won't work*. By all means, leaders, be the direction setters. Clarify a compelling vision that the crew can get excited about and imagine for themselves, yes. Even define a few general pathways you're keen to explore and progress to get up that mountain. But get them involved, earlier, in the informing, in the creating, in the planning and shot selection. Loosen the reins, relinquish a (mythical) sense of control you might think you have, let them get their fingerprints all over it. What's the saying about families with young children – *"you can have a clean house, or a happy house"*. Change that – *"you can have a polished leather-bound strategy, or one that the team will love and work hard to apply"*.
- **Bad strategy doesn't prepare the team for change** – even in spaces / orgs where a more conservative "classical strategy" is apt (fewer and fewer of those), if the team don't get that we actually have to shift beyond the zones of comfort and do something differently today, then it's doomed from the beginning. There aren't many plans that say *"do nothing new or different"*. So change is implicit in most strategy. And yet we're sometimes not explicit enough about it, or haven't considered the team's ready-willingness for it, or haven't considered the ramifications of friction burns that all change has the potential to deliver. When you talk strategy or set strategy, be thoughtful and clear about just what that means you'll be leaving behind and how you'll navigate the farewell tears that might come.

- **Bad strategy has drunk too much of its own bathwater** - “the way we did things around here” might have worked for a long time, but if future strategy is predicated on what did work working in perpetuity, then it’s doomed. Bad strategy sets in organisations that don't imagine change will be necessary for them (because we’ve been successful / we’re different / our market is immune). A. so what, b. no you’re not, and c. phhht.
- **Bad strategy isn’t anchored to reality** – lofty BHAG visions are one thing; crazy-arse pie-in-the-sky aspirations that have no discernable connection with what you’re able to do with this crew, this jalopy, this attitude or climate? Ultimately unembraceable, unresilient and unsuccessful.
- **Bad strategy tries to make things too complicated** – from the size of the document to the number of focal points it lands on to the language it employs. Too much is bad. Be clean and clear. Easy to see, easy to digest, focused on the most important, the most elemental endgame. Strip it back. Less is more. Natural beauty attractiveness beats surgically-modified botoxed face paint.

Bad strategy is largely avoidable. Thought, imagining, homework, consultation, mapping, refining and disciplinedly applying takes care of 90+% of the damage you see bad strategy cause.

*Really big thanks to last night's contributors including Jason Dunstone from Square Holes Market Research, Mel Blondell from Red Seed (HR & Productivity Strategies), Deb Black from Black Forrest (Dispute Resolution & Mediation Strategies), Peter Alderson from Shield Insurance (Risk Management Strategies), Ian Pratt (Change Manager & Leadership Strategist), Tim Siebert from Bentleys Accountants (Business & Financial Strategies), Deb Trebilcock, Stephen Heaney, Tim Lewis and the other crackerjacks - nice one!*





## Strategy up when it's all going peachy *(posted 12/5/16)*

Sometimes it's in doing the graft work, not reading the literature, that you *really* see the patterns.

Time spent on three separate pieces of strategy work for three diverse clients today revealed a thread.

The first client, in capital equipment and service programs, is in the pack of market leaders in their field. They've had, by their own high standards, a good few years in a climate of battlers. Their strategy has focused on holding a revenue line while sharpening the expenses pencil, as well as shoring up relaxed farm gate client relationships with more formal co-developed long-term partnership plans. It's worked really well, supported by a pretty stable culture of "*always do the right thing*" and "*I've got your back, Jack*". **But**. The competitor hordes grow, hungry. Their space, while opportunity rich, is increasingly skittish. The client dollar is being forced to stretch laterally, and the big expensive machines... "*maybe we can wait another year*".

So?

### **Strategy up.**

While the sun is shining.

Before it gets grim.

The second client, a professional advice & technical services provider, has earned itself a reputation for quality, independence and consistently supporting their community of clients with output of deep value. Their Board of 12, a values-sharing amalgam of business folk, techos and users of the service themselves, have their collective fingers on the pulse, are working a well informed, sound strategy, and they put in like I've not seen many Boards do. They're in a hard-earned happy place. But they're vigilant for that reason. They're savvy to complacency being a death knell. They love their brand of knitting, and they think essentially sticking to it will be the right long-term call, but they're eagerly beavering to test the fringes, refine the thinking, and make an early start on longer-term directional shifts if it's what deeper analysis points to. And there are a few rose bushes at the end of the vine rows showing signs...

So?

### **Strategy up.**

While the sun is shining.

Before it gets grim.

The third, a volunteer Board of a sporting club. Remarkable long-term success. Revered champions, historical powerhouses, deep and wide pride in the gurnsey. Unified. Arguably playing with an overly complex plan, a myriad of focal points creating some confusion, but with sufficient effort and attention being put into the *most* important parts in order to keep success flowing. More than that, an all-pervading culture of sleeves-up contribution and a lust for winning that supersedes line-item detail in any document. Motoring on in a vein of success, though in a space that's increasingly under fire from multiple vantage points.

Rest on laurels and drink from one of the many premierships cups?

No.

### **Strategy up.**

While the sun is shining.

Before it gets grim.

Three organisations that could easily say “*we’re OK thanks. For now, we can leave deep analysis and considered future planning to the battlers, to the desperate, to those trying to knock us out (‘cause we’ve proven time and time again that we’ve got the recipe right). Operations as she goes.*”

The very reason they’re at the top is they’re already re-imaging, re-inventing and re-focusing **before they have to**. (Not *long* before they have to, because there is no long anymore. But, **while it’s peachy**.)

Your bunch travelling along nicely just now?

**Strategy up.**

While the sun is shining.

Before it gets grim.

(*Sidebar* - I do like Peter Drucker’s quote, “*Culture eats Strategy for breakfast.*” Maybe. But *without* great strategy? Fresh Strategy? Healthy, substantial, well-prepared and hand-kneaded strategy that fits the unique appetite and nutritional needs of the body that’s going to consume it?

Without it, culture starts the day hungry.

And hungry is grumpy.

And grumpy is hard to love.

**Great culture is synonymous with great strategy.**

If not, it won’t be great for long.)



## Should the strategic SME bother with Purpose & Vision? *(posted 17/5/16)*

When undertaking business cartography – mapping your route to a happy future – it’s tempting to skim or rubber-stamp the 35,000 feet pieces. Why you exist and where you’re aiming to get. When you’re a SME – grinding through the daily to keep the doors open and wolves bayed, it’s arguably even harder to land on (then plan for) a meaningful Purpose and a clear Vision. *“Don’t they kind of mean the same thing? Does a SME really need a statement on both?”*

I think the SME does benefit greatly from Purpose and Vision statements, and the main reason I think so is because one is about other people, and one is about you. (And when I say “you”, I mean the collective you, everyone in your organisation.)

A **Purpose** – your “why” - defines your legacy. The thing the world will thank you for... and miss... when you’re gone. It’s a statement of realisation that you're not just here for you, but that your work is for the crowd – your chosen crowd. It’s pre-writing your organisation’s eulogy - *“We’re so thankful that they invested their every effort in .....”. “They valiantly strove to..... and we’re so lucky / grateful / inspired that they did.”* Whether that crowd is *“everyone in Western Victoria”* or *“a subset of the rubber band market”* or *“our staff / channel partners / extended family”*, well, that’s entirely up to you. But your purpose is detailing the ultimate gift you want to offer up to others. *“We existed to deliver a benefit to these people. This is what we deeply loved trying to gift to them.”*

The **Vision** though? Your “what”? Well, that’s for you. That’s your statement about where you want to get to, what you want to achieve, how you want to be perceived. The biggest self-determined goal; the yardstick of success you cut at a length of your choosing. These two statements, of purpose and vision, while not needing to be natural bedfellows, can’t be polar opposites. You want to fulfill one and achieve the other. You need both, because one inspires you to think about the world *after you’re gone* (and what you did for it), and the other inspires you to get up again and do something that fires you up *for what it can give you*.

One for the crowd, one for the crew. One for the ages, one for a timepoint we can touch. One that will keep our eyes and minds operating beyond our four walls; one that will keep us driving, operating, refining internally to achieve something truly cool.

If you're just Purpose-centric, then maybe you lose touch with the rigorous internal things that need to be done to sustain the climb, and so you run out of fuel or run inefficiently or stop enjoying the work. If you're just Vision-centric, then maybe you lose sight of (and engagement with) the folk that you don't need to have an entity without, and you make short-term decisions and start heading up wrong hills. Too far in one direction risks perceptions of kumbaya. Too far in the other risks perceptions of selfish. Together though? Like Sinatra's horse & carriage.

I am never more excited (in a professional capacity) when an organisation becomes 6-6 clear about why they exist and what they want to achieve. Because right there, at that moment, they took possession of the teachers edition. They built themselves the ultimate filter combo for every decision that they’ll make from this day forth, be that strategic, tactical or reactive. And the question then always becomes *“this thing we’re thinking about doing here... will it help us deliver the “them” legacy piece, AND will it help deliver us the “us” achievement piece? Or is there a better way to go here that does both?”*

Strategy is still hard – making decisions without a crystal ball or ironclad guarantees. That won't change.

But when you’re tightly focused on a legacy for others and a meaningful-to-selves achievement you can aim at while you’re above ground?

Then your strategy has the benefit of two ultimate deciding voters. Together with your Values, there is no-one more important you can work for than these two voters.

That’s a powerful activity focuser for a SME.

## **People ARE your strategy** *(posted 23/5/16)*

I've watched a client team go through an unbelievably difficult experience this past week. Human, blindsiding, rippling out to many. One of those infrequent life moments when an organisation really tests the mettle of their values. About what they prioritise.

From the fog, the only meager sliver of positive is watching all those in close instinctively pull together, getting back to what's truly important.

And it's not innovation.

It's not systems or processes.

It's not the cash.

It's not products.

It's not even the brand all are so proud of.

It is a cliché for a reason.

It's people.

Unless you are an organisation of none, with no customers, supply chain partners or shareholders, the strategy starts and ends with people.

When you're whiteboarding the likely success trails up the hillside, the forks where you can differentiate yourselves from the chasers, bear it in mind.

Someone's going to live it.

Someone's got to deliver it.

Someone's got to benefit from it.

Someone's going to be hurt if it's not right.

Someone's working it for you as a means to enable their own, bigger life goals.

Before you get too spreadsheety or techno-whizical with your strategy, take a moment to remember that at base level, it is only ever by folk, with folk, for folk.

Or it really doesn't matter a damn.

Put them first.

## A strategic value-service combo deal *(posted 24/5/16)*

Are you ready to differentiate your business from the pack on **more than one plane**?

I've spent a few months helping a client develop their strategy with overt focus on two fronts. The first front is **value** – how they'll keep their pricing keen and still deliver high calibre in an increasingly price-sensitive (but quality-desiring) sector.

The other front is **service** – how they'll deploy concierge-esque initiatives to stand out from the super-discounters that have pared their operations back to rudimentary (un-service?) levels in order to fund the heavy discounts.

As great strategy is created with competition in mind, let's consider these **rock-bottom-pricers** a moment. All markets have them (or better be ready for them). The big box / e-mega merchants that use smart models and omnipresence and buying power on a high-protein diet to offer consumers cheap. *Really* cheap. Top line, the scale delivers a consumer's dream (as long as you appreciate and can reconcile the longer-term truism, that someone always ends up paying that piper).

The scale that the biggest discounters apply to bring you lowest prices generally comes from three sources – **bigger spends with suppliers, bigger consumer groups**, or **smarter infrastructure & operating channels** (and most often all 3).

Bigger supplier spends can be from engaging a bigger *range* of suppliers (precipitating en-mass peer pressure to keep quotes lower to avoid being left out – think the disruptive market platform businesses dominating the press) or by going really deep with a small number of suppliers (think the big supermarkets with milk), or by investing in smart tech or pipes that realise cost efficiencies that can quickly and easily be enjoyed by punters (think crews like Netflix).

Bigger client groups come about because of monopolies (organic or inorganic), or failure of competitors to de-commoditise consumer perceptions of the offerings, or because they genuinely do something more valuable (easier? solves more problems?) than others show they can. One discounting catalyst feeds the other, which feeds the other, until there's not much feed left on the playing field. Don't grizzle though – you empower them with your purchasing habits, you enjoy the savings, they employ your kids, and you might even have them in your superannuation portfolio.

My client has a great platform for running lean and offering sharp pricing, almost up there with the biggest of big box leaders in their sector. But they **just can't win on that front alone**. As my client said the other day, *"the big discounter has a great model that works for them... but their strategy relies wholly and solely on that model. They can't shift – it would erode everything. They are wed to it for life. We aren't. Moving on and dominating more than one front can be our strength."*

So to the other front – **service**.

It might constitute different things in different markets, but at its core is doing something extra, above the box transaction, that's appreciated and (in some way) valued by your target tribe. It's a mix of free stuff (smiles, kind words, can-do mindsets), system stuff (loyalty programs, get your order together faster, offer a tip or recommend a complementary offering you'll likely appreciate) and it's brand stuff (commitment guarantees, consistency, aligned words and deeds). When it comes to good ol' fashioned back-in-my-day service, my client can't necessarily out-play old Mr Hooper who's been running the little corner store for 50 years, who knows the names of your kids and wraps your purchases in paper sprayed with lavender oil and gives you a hug on your birthday. (Sadly, service alone won't even keep Mr Hooper employed forever.)

But combo a great service culture & systems with sharp pricing? Build and execute a plan to win on Value AND Service (whatever those two things mean to your crew?)

That's something right there.

Alone, service in a discount-centric space mightn't cut the mustard.

Alone, discounting in a service-craving sector mightn't be sustainable.

Find a combo deal where you can do both at a credit-approaching-distinction level though?

Maybe there's a space you can build the empire in.



## Strategy, you old horse whisperer, you... (posted 25/5/16)

When a tactic fails... or several of them fail, in a row, quickly, the horses get spooked. It's antsy, the vibe on the floor. Ears prick, whiskers twitch and heightened senses (polarised by the Pride's imaginings that they're in perilously close proximity to a precipice) give rise to alarmist behaviours, fretting, reactionism and shrieks from bods that, in calmer climes, know better.

We value and admire calm heads under pressure.

We are inspired by leaders that breathe deeply in crisis cauldrons.

The boss that can quickly and quietly collect thoughts, ask the right questions and offer a path through the prickles, extending a grandfatherly hand or doling out a grandmotherly pearl... their grace under fire is synonymous with wisdom and trustworthiness. They calm the farm and we follow them willingly.

So what does a leader, be they SME, big end of town or any in between, have in their bag to help them stay Zen?

(No, not cigarettes).

Time and time again, it's those handful of priority paths they informed themselves about and subsequently committed to.

See, **it's a horse whisperer, strategy.**

It's a light, high up on the post, making the faintest of buzzing sounds, like a neon open-24-hours sign waiting to assure those smart enough to look up.

It's a mental acuity recalibration touchstone; a set of priorities and an informed pack of bigger picture choices that remind you that it's OK to muff the tactics 1 through 5, or fumble the short term play ('cause you're still on the right roads).

It's connected further up the chain to those cloud pieces which, in clear air, are *truly calming* - the feet-stabilising phrases around Purpose, Vision and Values. But, in times of despondency, strategy doesn't feel so far up the mountain that it's fluffy or disconnected from the action step debris that the individuals on the floor are gnashing their teeth about.

On good days, in good light, most good leaders have the confidence and clarity to be able to help all in the crew hold tight to the bigger Why, What and How headings. To see their place in the legacy mosaic they're building each day, and then have them re-engineer their energies accordingly.

But when it's raining, loud and you've collectively spilt a bit of milk?

When all are questioning everything-and-the-kitchen-sink because tactical failure has an acrid aftertaste and can feel grossly all-consuming?

Here, **strategy is the leader's great friend.** Their Ventolin. The gather-round-everyone-I'll-tell-you-a-story campfire that puts the priorities back into focus and reassures all that the sun will again rise and the new tactics, tomorrow's, are still in the service of something you can believe in.

## Factoring availability into your strategy *(posted 7/6/16)*

**Availability** is a Pandora's box our technology and prosperity age has wedged open. *The Goodies* no longer have the market cornered on **anything, anywhere, anytime**. In any realm, you can imagine, see, want, source, taste, consume, then gorge or comment, like, display sheep-like manufactured moral outrage, and move quickly on to the next bain marie. In its darkest corners, availability is a catalyst for addiction, a cancer of attention spans, a fickle white-ant colony of disloyalty and a crutch for commitment-phobia. I'm deliberately portraying its less attractive side, this feeder of fatigue; it also creates opportunities and knowledge wealth and progress. Good, bad? Irrelevant. It is what it is, and it's omnipresent and growing.

So it bears factoring into your strategy. A few to figure;

**Availability of alternatives** – in considering the competitors vying for the attention of your staff, customer and supply chain partners, mull and research the myriad alternatives the market has to satisfy whatever need you think you might meet. Who understands it as well as or better than you? Who's tailoring and targeting their alternative to delight the very clearly defined cohort you're banking your future on? Who's the smokie bubbling away in the background with an emerging alternative that will sit you on your backside (who needs insurance policies developed against)?

**Availability of feedback systems** – we're talking operational dashboards, voice of customer stuff, iterative design processes, the CRM and digital interactivity lecterns (give us thumbs up, stars and comments). There's zero reason to fly blind in any aspect of your business anymore, however some feedback streams will need to take priority over others in your shop. What are they? Why? How will you evolve, improve and apply their work product? What's looking like the next big one you'll need to start building for? Prioritise a powerful feedback mechanism that'll pay the biggest long-term dividends.

**Availability of distractions** – so it's probably dumb to ban Facebook in your workplace today (*that "Trust" value means nothing on the wall over there? "Innovation"?*). But understanding where you're most vulnerable and *why* to wasting energies that aren't laser focused on the mission-critical stuff is the work of strategic leaders. What's going to pull you, your internal and external VIP's away from the core of what you're working on? What's less impactful, less long-term impactful, but easy to engage in? It's not a hard one to work out – spend a day managing by walking around, continually casting a glance at your Purpose and Vision statements on the wall... you'll pick it up. Then work with the smart folk to figure out how you'll either turn the distractions into your strengths, or limit their supply without shooting your feet, or make the core work even more compelling.

**Availability of information** – today, you can find a double-blind placebo controlled trial to tell you anything you want. Compelling results that are at opposite ends of the spectrum. Every opinion, like this one, being espoused by anyone willing to take the time, creates either valuable fodder for your decision making, or adds to the heady befuddling brew of confusion that makes good decision-making even harder. Availability of information is at a (climbing) zenith, you can't be over or reconcile all of it, so you've got to make some strategic calls in your organisation about how much information, on what, where it's from, why it's in the mix and when enough informing is enough.

**Availability of platforms** – for communication, for resourcing, for interacting and informing and transacting and delivering. Channels to market are hydra-headed now, and it bears deep consideration and smart, prescient decision-making about where you'll play, which vehicles will best fit your Purpose and punters, and how you'll evolve when the new, better platform appears six months from now. Planned evolution (and the skeleton of a revolution plan) is smart strategy. Just think about how fast Google and YouTube and Salesforce came into your business world. The next one could be faster and even more impactful. How will your business deal with it?



**Availability of herds** – I’ve written before about how fast modern precincts collapse then redevelop; how traditional clusterings of businesses and marketplaces and competitors and customer cohorts quickly disband, then reswarm in different uniforms. There are groups you are currently part of (whether you like it or not), that you *can* be part of, that you’ll likely *cease* to be a part of when a new wave sweeps through, and that you can join with if you think about it and plan for it. Who do you want to be associated with? Why? What’s in it for the 360 degrees of stakeholders? How will you make it happen?

**Availability of free and fast** – it kind of overlays all the other availability pieces. If genuine strategic advantage can be created by being cheaper and quicker, then you are on a hiding to nothing, because there’s someone that can and will always go closer to the bottom or top than you. Determine the depth of your commitment to these choice drivers, land on which levels are satisfying to your punters, where you need to work to be in the years ahead and how you’ll complement your position with other upsides.

A final point on availability and its reckoning with your strategy;

**Just because it’s available, doesn’t mean they care.**

That may be the thing that’s less readily available than ever – enough folk to care about what you’re working to achieve. Find them, hug them, serve them, invite them to help you with the Sudoku. **Make yourself available to them.**



anything  
anywhere  
anytime

## Ten amber lights (check your strategy dials now) *(posted 21/7/16)*

In this dawn of FY17, as you reimagine or refine the strategy roads you'll lead your organisation along, here are ten amber traffic lights to pause at and think before progressing on your choices.

- **DNA** – this human, systems and infrastructure matrix you're part of, when looked at closely in a mirror, can be seen to have been designed to serve a Purpose. It might have bonus off-label indications, but it has limits to what it can do exceptionally well or the number of ways it can benefit the Universe. **Know them**, these fundamentals. Know the strategic implications that Purpose gives rise to, and start by working with what you have.
- **Direction** – a crystal clarity of destination, of destiny and desired legacy, leads to honesty and engagement and better shot selection and alignment of those that share a hunger for it. **Set it**, hold focus on it, pick mates for it, chart for it always.
- **Depth** – there are high flying aerialists, there are market surface skimmers, there are submerged current riders and there are bottom divers. All can thrive, all can be valuable, but they are built differently and they need different strategies. Understand **how deep you need to go** in technical aptitude, or service commitments, or pushing through challenge barriers, or in scale. Set your cistern float accordingly.
- **Data** – be it your own of making, or new intelligence you need to source about the terrain or client desires or manifesting risks... Plucking ideas and making big calls without doing appropriate homework is insufficient, irresponsible and likely ill-fated. **Inform your picks**, long, broad and smart.
- **Drive** – take a frank pill to confront just how much you and your homies **want it**. Get real about your collective willingness to push through pain, to endure rain and continue taking sharp breaths as risk rats bite and bite again. If endurance, persistence and longevity compared to the flighty and flakey are decent predictors of success (and they're pretty good, I think), then know that your choices have to be aligned with your drive to implement and bear them awhile. A long awhile.
- **Do** – what will the handful of super acts be? Where will the biggest bang for the smallest push come from? What small number of priorities does data, history, wise heads, scouting eyes and backing your judgment tell you will get you up Purpose Mountain? That stuff? **Do it**.
- **Dump – the rest**. As quickly and responsibly as humanly possible. Because Newton's cradle needs as much energy straight-lined and tightly abutting to propel you forward in a predictable vector. Anything skewing alignment, distracting focus, diverting resources.... show it the road.
- **Dynamism** – because strategy isn't ever forever. Because the market forces and internal situations change like Nick Kyriagos' on-court demeanor. So understanding the logical or semi-predictable flex points that are ahead; imaging when and how and what'll be required and how the team will react when these forces falcon into you (and then prepping to go Route B anyway) is the job of a modern strategic leader with a future. **Be ever ready to right turn**.
- **Dirigibility** – how easily or nimbly the airship can be steered. The present leader might have mastered the nuances and knows the subtle dips on the old pool table surface, but how well, how quickly can it be picked up by others? Does the succession plan have pilot training underway? Ready to shift deck chairs at a moments notice and retain confidence that the Zeppelin will stay airborne? **Ensure your strategy is pilotable**.
- **Diligence** – Measuring, managing, doing what you say and saying what you'll do next. Owning, not handballing. Studying as much as spitballing. Protocol, process, step-wise review and aligned refinement. Being the long term eyeballs and the perpetual massaging fingers. **Govern**.

Amber lights don't stay amber long - your strategy has to start work in 3 seconds time. Use the moment that is now to check your dials, shore your confidence, understand your journey ahead and back in a strategy that'll get you up the right road.

## Strategy lights in darkness *(posted 25/7/16)*

In the warm daylight, strategy roads can look shiny and bright. Curves and bumps and rises requiring effort to summit don't threaten so much, because the opportunities they might lead to are glowing, clearly, beautifully, just over there, on the horizon. Excitement! Adventure! Breathe deep and go.

### **In the dark though?**

When there's no clear view of where you want to be? No illuminated confidence or warmth of self-belief in where the road might head beyond the outermost limit of your low-beam headlights? It's in the dark moments that leadership fear sets in. When the collective conviction about a cause, purpose or opportunity drops away. Where imaginations go grey and silent. Where the desire to push on in the colder night air drops as quick as the night itself.

*Maybe we should wait until the dawn comes.*

*Wouldn't want to take a wrong turn.*

*Might run off the road.*

*Might go South instead of North.*

*Might be bad things over there we can't see.*

*Seems silly to move.*

*We've got time.*

*Wait. Sit.*

*Surely it'll get light again soon.*

*Wait. Just wait.*

Read any of the bullish pieces that permeate the nooks and crannies of virtual billboards like this one. *"We're doing this, we're kicking bums and taking names."* *"Exciting new initiatives being implemented to deliver remarkable outcomes."* *"Change! Innovation! A team embracing the new world order. A crew striving for a Purpose!"*

Know that you're catching these businesses in their daylight moments. During periods where they can see (or believe they can see) precisely why they're here, what they're doing and where they want to be. When the sun is illuminating their aims, exposing the roads and solar-powering their energies, self-belief and momentum machines. In these stories, you're watching strategies being driven in the daytime. More power to them, these sharers of sun-soaked success plans. More power to those that smartly charge their Tesla batteries with these reflected energies. Those are great days and they need harnessing and sharing.

In the dark though? You don't hear so many bullish stories of businesses driving in the darkness. Businesses who feel lost. Leaders feeling desperately uncertain about left, right, up or down. Teams fearful of unseeable risks, the monsters and the pain that might come if they make a false step. It's cold and lonely and difficult and frightening in the dark. Not many build and broadcast their best marketing collateral at a metaphorical ten to midnight.

Maybe great businesses don't do much dark?

*(Ahem. Madam. Sir.)*

Really think the most amazing successes only got there travelling daylight hours?

Only proceeded when everything was clear and warm and exciting and came easier?

Do you think they too pulled into a roadside motel when the sun went down on their energy levels, on their confidence, on their momentum, and they just rested or reverted to "*way we've always done stuff*" until dawn?

Good strategy so often looks buff and coconut-oiled in the sunshine, I'll admit.

But *the strategy that differentiates?*

That's the strategy that knows night-time driving. That strategy accounts for the many long, cold, lonely and uncertain hours you'll spend in the dark if you seriously want to pursue a Vision, drive towards a Purpose for long enough. It appreciates there'll be nights when objectives are obscured, the fear of the unknown is palpable, the doubt about your next big move is enormous and you (and the team) are but millimetres away from giving it up.

It doesn't fix those things, this strategy. It can't, like the Truman show, "*cue the sun*" each and every time you need broad vision and bone-deep energising rays.

But it can be a torch.

It can be a cigarette lighter glow that casts the tiniest bit of warmth.

It can illuminate the dials on the dashboard to let you know you are moving, you are making progress, and you still have fuel.

It can be the toggle switch between high and low beam on the headlights.

It can be the cats eye reflectors on the bitumen, keeping you between the lines, twinkling in the side windows as the corners approach.

It can light up the key features of the faces inside the vehicle, on the road with you, reminding you that you're not alone in the dark.

It can keep you awake long enough for your organisation's circadian rhythms, your energy flows, to start heading up again as the first sliver of daylight cracks on the horizon. Getting you to first light. Over there. Drawing once more the silhouette of Purpose Mountain.

Great strategies being implemented by great organisations look great in the bright sunlight.

The greatest of all **get you through the dark.**

(And the dawn seen when you've summoned the courage and nerve to keep driving through the cold, lonely dark; progressing while others stopped, slept or cowered?

That dawn is a sight afforded only those willing to earn it.)

## Clarity. Unity. Activity. (In Strategy) *(posted 1/8/16)*

Before each strategic planning workshop that I facilitate, I make a heap of phone calls to those who'll be contributing to the process. Be they Board Members or the Exec Management Team or key external stakeholders trusted for their perspectives, I ask variations of a few fundamental questions. What does the entity do really well / what are its superpowers; what are the major opportunities / challenges / risks you can see looming on the horizon; what are the critical Start / Stop / Continues from your vantage point? To wind it up, I ask the **workshop goal question**.

***"Knowing who's in the room and why we're there, when we all walk out of that room at stumps, what more than anything do you want to have achieved?"***

About 85 - 90% of respondents immediately give me a variation of the three words in the title. The other 10 - 15% get there quickly with minimal witness-leading.

**Clarity.** *"Let's make decisions - a set of higher order choices. Let's assess those decisions and be clear that they're right. Let's determine the focus paths. Let's prioritise. Let's not be uncertain or equivocating or confused or in two minds. Let's know exactly what we're committed to doing and not doing."*

**Unity.** *"Whatever we pick, wherever we land, whichever focal points make that "we will" list, from that point forward, we are all spruiking the party line. We will continue to test our thinking and alternatives with robust discussion in the sanctuary of a closed-door boardroom under Chatham House rules, but when we present to the rest of the world, we will stand as a single, echoing, aligned voice. That's for the sake of our organisation, for our team's sake, and for the market to hear us clearly (for the consequences of real or perceived fractured leadership vantage points or discordant messages are almost always catastrophic)."*

**Activity.** *"If we decide we're going to do something, we'll do it. We won't leave that room riding a loose wish list of hopes, dreams and maybes that we don't genuinely believe will become reality. We need to move on our choices, implement our agreed standpoints, drive the intent underpinning our resolutions with actual movement. We don't need a 457-point actions list, but damn, we better know what the right next steps are, when they're happening and who's owning them to get this show on the road."*

It doesn't matter if you're selling fizzy drinks or designing cufflinks.

If you market professional advice or herbal tonics for head lice.

If your game is endoscopic scopes or height safety ropes.

If you're a benevolent foundation or trying to dominate the nation.

**The gig is the same.**

Help us attain clarity.

Galvanise the leadership group's commitment to unity.

Make sure we've nailed down some aligned activity.

## Seven vantage points to spy on your strategy *(posted 19/8/16)*

Unless you've had an ocular transplant, it's quite difficult to view your business or your business plan through different eyes. But we know this is useful (hence, consultants). There are, however, a few different vantage points you can try looking at your strategy or your plan from, with your own peepers, that might help you see things... differently.

Consider;

- **From the bottom of the piggy bank.** If the cash ran dry and there was no excess; no fat left in the system to fund the nice-tos or the extra extrinsic rewards for staff or shoppers... would it still hold water, this plan? Could it still, in essence, be delivered, and work? Are the fundamental differentiations and growth drivers overly cash dependent, or is your success more predicated on established & paid-up processes, passionate people and product lines? Imagine a blank bank balance... how drought-proof is this plan?
- **In the company of Mr B and Mr B.** Branson and Buffet. Cash men cast from different die. If Sir R had a wad and wanted a creative, bold, people-centric new arm to invest in and reap from, how do you stack up? Is the map clear, characteristic and customer-centric? Does it pop out from the beige crowd? If Warren was looking at it somewhat more impartially and clinically - less interested in the sexy and more in the certainty - how might the plan survive the most rigorous analysis of the best long-term winner picker? Think about its attractiveness to those you might have to ask for dosh; who knows a good horse from tomorrow's glue, and how would they rate your roadmap?
- **From the competitor's grassy knoll.** If (in a surreal out-of-body experience) you lay beside them, peering through the telescopic sight, watching you and your approaches, your interactions with customers... which flanks are quite obviously exposed? Knowing the little you know about these would-be snipers of your partnerships with payers, what might you expect them to target should they lay their hands on your checklist? If your plan was the Hatfields, and the McCoys grabbed it, where would strike one logically be aimed? Fix it before they start a 'shootin'.
- **From the crows nest at the trade show.** The peacocks, all, with plume a-bloom, strutting around the convention centre, aiming to attract, engage, delight and lighten wallets... where do you fit in that gaggle? What's genuinely different about your approach? What's brighter and bolder (and who loves that shade)? What's not as magnetic as others in that throng enjoy (and how are you spruiking to accommodate your shortcomings?) Think about the plan in the context of myriad plans all vying for the same piece of trade pie. How are you positioned?
- **In the grip of the squirrel.** Forgive the vulgarity, but you get it. When the squeeze is on, when your eyes are watering, what, honestly, will you dump in a heartbeat to make the pain go away? What's in the plan that will not survive the first brush with genuine discomfort? What's padding and fluff and has no stomach for storms that you'll be better culling early (rather than let it dangle in the breeze and have to lop it off, wasting time and effort, when the pinch hits)?
- **From under a bus.** Mercy, it doesn't happen. But if it does. If you get pushed under one. Fall beneath one. If you deem to throw a key driver of yours under one... what does it do to the plan? How key-human-gone-missing-proof is it? Should the plan be tragically orphaned, is it therefore doomed, or is it succeed-able (and have you factored that transition in?) While the bottom of a bus is a gruesome gravelly place to look at a plan, it serves as a worst case study for more benign transtions, such as sale, retirement, promotions or temporary leaves. Get under the bus before it's moving.

- **From Skynet.** On the day the Terminator robot army takes over, and the processes you know can be automated *are...* and the competitors that you know *can* go faster / cheaper / easier via tech-ing up *do...* is this plan ready for the next wave? Has it factored in likely exponential advances in Purpose-critical activities, operating processes and competition? Is it scaling to deal with the tsunami rise in client expectations around access, responsiveness, anticipation and customisation? Skynet may be a few sleeps away, but think about it now. Because the biggest changes, albeit imagined for decades, always manages to catch the unplanned by surprise.

Pull the crew together, allocate them one of the 7 planning vantage points, and see what they can see see see.



## 7 nose-in-front strategies for '17 *(posted 11/10/16)*

Heading to the Vic Spring Racing Carnival for the first time next week courtesy of a kind client. Not much of a punter, but I'm more inclined to put \$10 on the nose rather than each way. Don't do half-pregnant. Emulate the pig in the metaphorical plate of bacon & eggs – *fully commit*. (Perhaps why I don't gamble...)

It is increasingly tough to stand head, shoulders and sculpted torso above the raucous competitor horde in any market, but getting **a nose in front**?

As you shape your journey map for 2017's travels, consider these 7 means to pip the salivating pack by a nose.

1. **Plan a mega-love act for each of your external Pareto VIPs.** Think about where the high water mark for service initiatives previously delivered to these top 20% folk (by you or others) sits, then work above it. It might cost a little money or it might just take a truckload of thoughtfulness and collaboration, but take the tiny handful of clients & referrers that gave you the most, and tailor something for them they'll cry about. They earned it, and it's the smart play.
2. **Collaborate on a compelling project:reward combo for your internal Pareto VIPs.** The ones that give more, invest more, deliver more... sit with them, individually, collectively, for a day. Offsite (*come to Strategy Road HQ if you like*) and, together, map out something fresh, disruptive, that they and only they could drive that might unleash their talent beast in a new, valuable way. Then, tie an upside to it specifically designed for and loved by them. Inspiring & supporting marquee players to up their game (and the amount of skin in it) is a fuel-injected ROI strategy.
3. **Sharpen your business plan and review practices.** So many I see have disparate sections for "what we did last year", "what we want this year", "what we're planning to do" and "what happened when we tried that new thing". Get them all on the same page. One page. Clean. Clear. So compelling and dot-joiningly obvious that you use it every single day. Too many view business plans like deciduous trees – seasonal, dump the old, go into dormancy awhile, then start anew. No. **They're evergreen**. Constantly evolving. Never bare. Always working.
4. **If you're going to learn, do it with your payers.** There are few relationship-galvanising events like undertaking a PD course with a key client or collaborator. If you're going to pay the opportunity cost of being out of the daily shell game for a day, week or month, then have a punter with you (heck, pay for them). Not sure what to learn? Ask the punter what they're interested in. What interests your boss fascinates you.
5. **Cut the cord on a time-consuming limited-value practice.** I know this advice is as old as time, and maybe the hardest to apply. But in a world where even generalists are specialists, can you really afford to spend an hour on Act A (that you're not that good at, doesn't deliver enough upside and takes you away from your magic)? Act B is so you, it fits, it pays, and it needs Act A to disappear from your plate to fully flex its guns. Find an Act A Magician and pay them, then pay yourself more with the fruits of more Act B.
6. **Write.** Or film. Or photograph. Or paint. Or mime. On a new platform. About your UVP. Because **a.** you'll get progressively better at it the more you do it; **b.** "communication skills" in a business world where comms modalities are now hydra-headed is going to be de rigeur on CVs in years to come, and; **c.** you can't wait for the marketing department to spit out the brochure. YOU are the brochure. Your talents, the content. Yes, implement them, and yes, share news about them in your own performance style.
7. **Get moving implementing lists like this before you ever get to #7.** No-one has time to deal with 7.



## 10 strategic decisions for 2017 *(posted 1/11/16)*

With the Year of the Fire Rooster just weeks out, you may be elbow-deep in strategic decision making & recalibration (at least, you will if you're any chance of making the most of your non-refundable 365-day stake.)

Beyond the stock standard strategy choice buckets, here are 10 strategy decisions I think you'd do well to mull & make if you're to make great headway on fulfilling your Purpose.

### 1. **Extro-systems vs intro-preneurship.**

If you're an extroverted individual or entity – a thrive-in-company, better-together body with bravado - then are you gearing to supplement your in-public play and processing with some quieter, reflective, behind-closed-door data-driven mechanisms?

If you're a shy guy, gal or group – one that does better in quiet, thinking through and deriving energy in peace away from others – then are you putting in place any comfort-stretching actions that expose, test and iterate under the imperfect fingerprints of others to improve that which you'd otherwise leave in your navel to contemplate?

If you're inherently out there and make big calls amidst the chaos, will you choose to back up your brash with some cool-room considered systems that free you up to shake and kiss? If you're a wallflower that hums when pontificating, will you decide to get just that little more daring with some select public exposures (and let more benefit from your rumination)?

Sure, it's a fool that tries to change (or doesn't play to) their inherent strengths (you won't anyway), but I'd suggest you can make some strategic calls to ensure your natural disposition isn't your rate limit.

### 2. **Loud'n'proud in a crowd vs let them discover you quietly.**

There's plenty of opportunity to make noise about your value proposition, from paid placements to plugging yourself on platforms like this one. The question is – which way might better fit how you want your brand and the solution it represents to enter your VIPs psyche? Is it through repeated exposure and manicured, extrinsically-controlled comms? Or is it by enabling them to discover your magic more subtly, more organically? Both carry upsides and risk – the question is, which resonant memory and feeling do you want people to have associated with your brand, and which path is more likely to deliver it (and the actions you need it to give rise to)?

### 3. **Culturally aligned vs the merits of opposition.**

Will your organisation be better served in the year ahead seeking out the like-minded, similarly-valued? Or will active exposure to polar opposites challenge you to rethink, or maybe double-down on your differentiators? Be it staff members, suppliers, clients or network partners, think through the relative upsides and fit of expanding the crew to encompass a greater diversity of worldviews and motivators, or alternatively by staying in your lane and deepening the depth of a given mental mould and mates.

**4. Owning the niche vs being the bridge.** Will 2017 be about extending the gap between what Jo Public or Kym Competitor can do, and what you derive a dollar from? Or will it be about developing rope ladders and gangplanks to enable more aboard a ship where you're Chief Games Director? Consider whether employing breakneck speed to build daylight from others and owning a tight channel is a better play for you than being an enabler of masses to take part in your party.

**5. Top down vs middle around.** Is the Purpose, Vision, Values, Strategic Priorities and Goals of your bus something you think can, should, *must* be set by the primary dividend recipients in the C-suite? Or is there more to be gained by having the players at the coalface sit with the organisational governors and play a vital

role in higher-order decision making? One approach marries ultimate responsibility with key choices, the other informs more broadly from a practical vantage point. Which will give you greater clarity, certainty, stability or ownership this year and beyond?

**6. Quality thinking vs quality output.** What's going to be more important for your team this year – breaking the model, bolder ideas, nurturing an environment of smart imaginers? Or generating the calibre, the cash and the graph growth? Factor in where you are in your lifecycle, what your market segment is doing, and your risk of being gazumped by gallopers or just-getting-started-ers. Choose development or delivery as your priority play.

**7. Clearing today's table vs playing the long tail.** There's a case to be made for asking for every available coin from the wallets of the beneficiaries of your help in the year ahead, and there's another for leaving a little salt on the bread when there's a bigger or longer-term payoff should you choose to play for it. One will have a greater long-term impact on what you're looking for as a crew. For you, which?

**8. Who gets the VIP badges?** The leadership thinking turnstile has shifted from a pureplay “*customer is king*” mantra to an increasingly pervasive attitude of “*our staff are most important*”. You get to choose. Who'll get more love from you this year? Who needs prioritizing, emphasizing, focusing on for delight and retention and leveraging? Yes, we get that both are IPs. There are, in reality, only so many VIP badges... who will your higher order decision making filters nudge you to hand them to?

**9. Austerity mindsets vs generosity epithets.** The fin controller will appreciate you carving fat, consolidating and keeping costs, well, controlled. The sales camp will indubitably ask you to give, gift, encourage and invite more onboard for the many-expenses-paid party that is a key to spenders sticking close. One will have a nose in front for your entity, for the year ahead. Which gets the weighting? Which will pay more for now and for longer?

**10. Champion, create, curate or cull?** There are those that make coin promoting the work of others. There are those that build and add new to the world. There are those that herd the cats and select the concentrate for discerning crowds. And there are those that remove from your plate that which just gets in your way, annoys or frustrates. Your business, your professional approach, can give Oxygen to one or more of these strategic activity sets.

Which one dominates and fits best?

Your 2017 – its processes, its outcomes and how much you love it – will be more a function of your choices (and how you hold to or bend from them) than it will be a result of what gets served up to you. Pick your paths. Be strategic. Own what you'll do.

## **Zeitgeist, strategy and remembering the privilege** *(posted 10/11/16)*

In picking paths across the plains, our strategy roads, it's clear the need to zero in on the intended destination. To chart our courses, to know our vehicle and to pay attention to likely bumps on the road and fuel in the tank. Focus on the crew and the passengers and those who are sought aboard and the heaviness of the traffic. Mindful of our own abilities, our appetites and our resolve.

Then there's the **zeitgeist**.

**"The defining mood, the spirit, of a particular period in history."**

How well have you calibrated your strategy, made your big choices for 2017 +, in the context of the prevailing mood? Of your team. Of the payers and the beneficiaries. Of the general feeling on plains across which you're travelling.

Not knowing, worse, ignoring the zeitgeist can have pretty big consequences.  
H-EU-ge consequences.  
Presidential consequences.

Listening and looking and thinking hard about what's happening in *their* backyard. Obsessing about what's dominating and distressing and keeping minds awake late. That's part, a big part.

**Remembering** though.

Remembering your version of Sam Walton's (paraphrased) words.

**"There is only one boss. The customer. They have the ability to fire everybody."**

To serve them, a privilege.  
There on their determination.  
Not over them. Not doing things to them. Not for us.

Those that let us be there for them.

Stop paying attention? Stop listening?  
Stop showing you remember the privilege they gift on very short term subscription?  
You soon learn the zeitgeist.

Build your strategy around remembering.

## Leadership as a strategy (can you really stomach it?) *(posted 24/11/16)*

At this Strat Planning time of year, a term I hear trotted out in many a strategy workshop is **leadership**. *"We're leaders in this, we will lead the market in that, we have a culture and proud history of leadership"*.

It always sounds tremendous.

Consider what it *really* means.

"Lead" means Front. First. Before or ahead of others.

"Leader" means the ones that are.

"Leadership" means the *practice* of being the ones that are.

Whether you decide your brand of leadership is *"going first"* (pioneering) or *"being first"* (running past or staying ahead of others to lead the race), it always requires that "first" bit, and it certainly requires the "doing" bit.

The *doing* bit? That, of course, that requires a certain kind of stomach.

For risk.

For uncertainty.

For working while scared and doing it while hungry.

For taking the brunt of the wind and weather in your face.

For reconciling that it just may not pay off. (*"Did we go too early? Too fast? In the right direction? Did we just get it wrong?"*)

You get to determine the nature of your leadership, of course.

Maybe it's in time (*"we went before anyone else!"*).

In quality (*"we're raising the bar higher than it's ever been!"*).

In process. In price or speed. In disruption or evolution. In aesthetic or function. In imagining or application.

The point is, first.

And not an outcome. A practice. An activity set.

Going (starting) or being (surpassing others). To be in front.

Either following the Trekkie mantra of *"boldly going..."* or subscribing to the Olympic oath. *Citius, Altius, Fortius*.

**So!** As you pick your strategic priorities and paths for 2017, and the word "leadership" fills the conversation pit and you see the puffing chests and eyes fill with pride in the gurnsey, let me help you govern in advance by passing you the Sodium Amytal...

... Do we *really* want to be the canaries in the coal mine on this one?

... Do we *honestly* have what it takes to be front runners?

... Do we fully appreciate, and are we (and our stakeholders) genuinely OK with the inherent risks, pressures and prospective catastrophes associated with going or being first?

... Is the gut, the research, the determined consensus of the ones with the control levers clear about the direction we'll lead in and precisely *why* we're doing it?

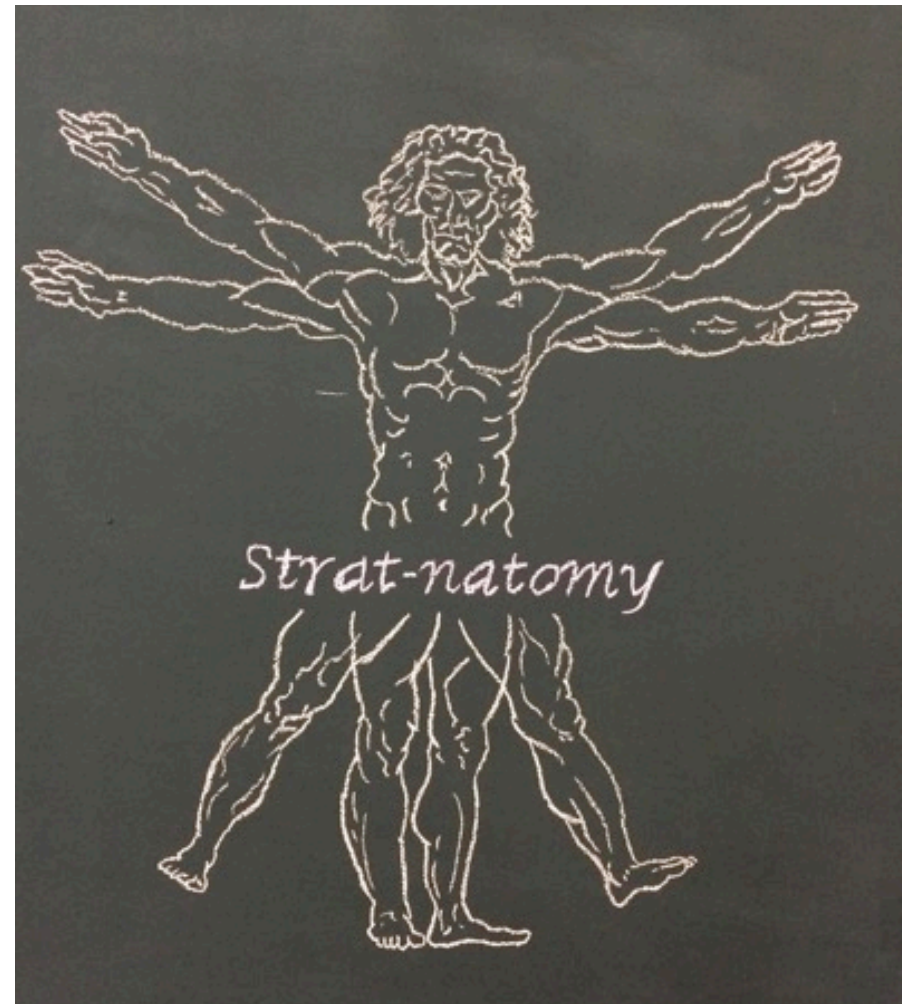
... Given everything else we could be prioritising and what we'd have to forgo to pursue "leadership" in this given arena.... **do we have the stomach for it?**

If that poke inspires and galvanizes your resolve to be leaders, then breathe deep and pick a leadership strategy. It's a remarkable choice, and you get to be **FIRST**.

If however you're internally gulping at the prospect, at the dawning reality of just what it will involve in effort, sacrifice and casualties, then take heart in the knowledge that *leadership isn't the only strategy* that can pay.

Pick either.

Pick wisely and honestly, and pick the pack position that fits your Strat-natomy.



## Strategy and the long term things *(posted 8/12/16)*

We know the things we value most are long term things. The health of a marriage. The wellbeing and character of our children. Life-long friends. The security of our family home. Our community, or service club, or sporting team, or the legacy we're working to leave behind. Hopefully our own health.

But the things we let rattle us each day with noise are most often short term things. Aggravations from people and pains in our business. Guilt pangs. Something yelling for attention. The latest trend or catchcry or lookit-me force telling us how it's so boldly disrupting our landscape.

As a business leader, as you review and restack your strategic priorities for 2017 and the infinite plains beyond it, why not ask yourself;

- How much of what we're gnashing our teeth about here, discombobulating ourselves with there, is every chance to be a redundant, 80s-perm moot point not five years from now?
- Could adopting & holding a longer-term perspective across the year ahead (hard as it is to maintain through noise) potentially prove to be a better call when viewed from the other side of 2030?
- If we're to treat these daily shiny object peaks, the weekly angry shout troughs and the monthly swirling trend breezes as essentially white noise, what are we going to need to commit to doing as a team to plug our ears to the siren's song of *"the Jones' are doing it! Keep up with them!"* and hold our collective strategic nerve?

Fixating on the longer term things you know you'll always value isn't anti-agile, nor need it be blinkered to genuine *"move the town, Jed, 'cause we just figured out it's built on a sinkhole"* warnings. Tactical nimbleness is smart in chaotic environs. But if it's not employed in the aid of a clear longer term game, deployed on the blacktop of a broader strategic passageway that fits your vehicle (and you know is long-term smart for your destination)?

Then the tactics of to-ing and fro-ing to the tune of the noise is nothing more than **playing dodgeball**.

Might be fun. Might keep you out of breath. Even tactically fit.

But dodgeball players always finish the game where they started. **Behind the same line.**

In your year-end Strat Wrap, why not put the long term things back in the decision filter cartridge, for the benefit of that which you know you'll truly value come the siren?

## 12 strategy ideas for 2017 *(posted 16/12/16)*

There is a veritable alphabet soup of position options available to you, but to spur your thinking bones, here are a dozen strategic ideas & positions you *could* consider for 2017+.

1. Leverage one clear tech advantage or unique skill set you can outpace the market with. Not just in creation or development, but in application for client value realisation. Tech's obviously a fast moving wave, so ready yourself to stay on its leading edge if this is your plan (or alternatively take it deep, right down to the roots of the reef).
2. Be the safest hands in the game (fewer errors, thoroughly planned & well executed support). Particularly valuable in a marketplace where the crowd are skittish because other providers have proven unreliable. "Zero Cock-Ups" maybe the ultimate unique market position and strategy... can you do it?
3. Adopt something akin to Amazon's "Customers that bought this also liked..." cross- & up-sell strategies to encircle an existing, largely satisfied client base that already trust you. Overt focus on those already on the payers list, finding broader additional ways to serve them. Lift the bushel obscuring your light a bit higher, let them see so much more of just what you could do for them.
4. Magnetise your brand & business by honing focus on recruiting, retaining and unleashing the difficult-to-match talents of a staff talent pool that deeply believes in being *better* (NB that strategy's probably going to take a lot of support, recognition & development (and coin). If this is your strategy, don't be half-pregnant on it - all in to win.)
5. Go cheaper. Slash everything unattached to delivering the base-level offering that fulfills the bulk of the clients needs. Then yell about the savings. It *can* win. But it's tied to ruthless decision making and nary a skerrick of tinsel- does it fit you?
6. Be the educators. A Uni of your industry, tied to a consultancy piece, tied to a product offering, tied to a badge of honour participants would value. This is a play about building client proficiency for self-sufficiency (that may or may not divorce them from your DoItForMe service offerings, but at very least gives you a genuine differentiation point and avenue into their mind front).
7. Certify. Accredite. Congregate. Be the authority or dogsbody that rallies the right folk and hands out competency badges. This is a strategy not necessarily about education, but being those that can recruit and induct aspirants into a club that they really really want to be members of.
8. Bundle or uncouple. Whatever the market is zigging with, look at the merits and potentially future-happy recipients of opposite zags. String together some partner products & services, or strip away the less valued to offer a mono-ingredient plate.
9. Go *co-*. Co-locate. Co-brand. Co-opt. Co-promote. Co-design or co-develop. Establish synergies where none existed previously; a summary offering greater than the constituent parts. Seek out *co-* where it's not been done, or not done well, and that plays to your strengths while strapping Achilles heels with the talents of a partner body, business, product or service.
10. Hybridise. Morph the best bits of separate offerings into something that's unique, better, tastier. Could be around processes or products or even hiring & developing staff with a combo of value that's different to others in your space.

11. Be easy like a Sunday morning. The axle grease industry is just fine, because lubricants of smoother movement, reduced friction, are always needed. The more rub points a market is frustrated by, the more they'll appreciate "easy". Make it your superpower.
12. Be fast. In important stuff. Initiation. Responses. Delivery. Creation. Breaking. Fixing. **Run**. If it's valuable to a sufficient and desired cohort, build a speed game that others don't have the stomach or tendons to match. Be mindful - takes much fuel and hard-nose discipline to hold your line on this strategy.

I don't know which one (or which variegated version) is right for you. But these are strategic plan positions I'm watching smart, successful and (we're anticipating) happy-tomorrow businesses deploy with vigour and rigour for a terrific 2017. It's just scratching the surface of the myriad strat plays you could make in the year and more ahead. But it's a start.

### **What will your primary game plan be?**

(13. Because it's Christmas and the air is full of baked deliciousness, a bakers-dozen bonus... Become a Blue Moon\* organisation that truly swallows the idea of what it takes to be providers of Mariana-deep customer service experiences. Let's be frank - "Customer service" is a flag all profess to fly, but sweet few stick around to salute it, long term, intently, in the rain. It's a differentiation opportunity. Take it seriously.)

\* Rare.





I hope you enjoyed these thought tracks.  
I hope they've helped you.  
If they have, and you want more, get in touch.

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Thanks for reading and sharing!

Troy



## About Troy Forrest & Strategy Road...

Troy has consulted to and supported more than 150 organisations over the past decade on matters of strategy, sales, marketing, leadership and business planning. He advises boards & business owners, coaches leaders & sellers, crafts client attraction & retention mechanisms for businesses large & small (B2B, B2C) and with 15 e-books to his name, writes an awful lot. Troy's custom-built strategic planning workshops and high-touch support processes are acclaimed across Australia for being engaging, effective and not being overly fussed with pin stripes.

Based in Adelaide with his wife Melisa, Troy is the father of and taxi driver for teenage daughters, the designer of the Parcel Nest®, and the Managing Director of Strategy Road Pty Ltd.



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- research & consumer insights
- user experience
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If you or your business would benefit from smart strategic support, please contact Troy for a no-obligation, confidential discussion.

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