

## STRATEGY AS FICTION - history of the future

For many years, it has not been unusual for people to think of strategy as being a kind of long-range planning. In times of relative stability, it is tempting and even necessary to determine trends and to forecast unfolding events so that an organisation can be prepared to arrive at, and to deal with, predicted circumstances. It makes for a safe, certain and sometimes dull existence - the conveyor belt from cradle to grave, with no surprises on the way.

In times of change and unpredictability this notion of the nature of strategy is less useful. Think of the contrast between peace and war. The (relative) predictability of peacetime allows for long-range planning, whereas the tumult of war suggests a view of strategy more as an attitude to game-playing – an ability to anticipate and double-guess, to be creative when faced by the unexpected, to be well prepared and to arrive at the right place at the right time in order to succeed.

There is, therefore, increasing credence in the idea of strategy as narrative. The strategy is the story of a future that people can believe in, to the extent that it carries the day. History is a narrative too and, in telling the history of the future, strategists attempt, not to predict, but actually to create that eventuality.

Whatever was the reality, for instance, the myth of Shakespeare's Henry V, on the eve of the battle of Agincourt (4:3) rousing the troops with

*"... gentlemen in England now a-bed,  
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,  
And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks  
That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day".*

is plainly a narrative of the future. In the play, at least, it worked.

Play is a relevant word. The play is the dramatic unfolding of events and shows how what happens arises from the interplay of the minds, attitudes, skills and intentions of the characters.



We can see how some great figures can tap this aspect of strategy – Churchill, Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Mandela and, today, we hope, Obama, inspiring whole nations

with their stories of the future and their re-interpretations of history. From those stories other stories arise – and others and others – and all belonging to the greater tale in which belief is rooted. Such stories are worth dying for – and hence worth living for, as they give meaning to people's lives.

Good narratives have within them all the motivation needed to do the job and a 'bonus mentality' is no longer relevant.

Within the narrow world of management and business planning, a spreadsheet approach to strategy is often adopted. This looks at the mechanics of the long-term plan. It stems from a view of an organisation as a machine and people as assets to be sweated. But what about the human dimension? How does your own organisation imbue the lives of its people with meaning? How does it add value in the world? Or is it, like so many financial institutions currently, happy to de-value the lives of people to compensate for its own mechanical and meaningless pursuit of self-interest? Does it regard motivation as a problem and rewards and bonuses as necessary mechanisms to drive out results?

If narrative is actually fundamental to creating the futures we want, how do we create the story line?

And if we have a good story line, how do we turn the story into effective action – or how can we ensure our story is played out in reality?

The second question is answered by thinking for a moment of opposing armies in war. Each believes in its own victory, so to a large extent the battle is between opposing beliefs as much as between opposing armouries. Tales of small armies beating superior numbers illustrate how the psychology of warfare is critical to success. Yet often in organisations we 'go into battle' with half-believers and non-believers and downright cynics on our side. If the rest are only there for the rewards, we should expect our competition to outplay us. That said, we cannot neglect our planning, logistics and financials or we are likely, sometime, to find ourselves high and dry without resources.

And the answer to the first question? The story has its roots in the people. Obama could not have succeeded without the myths held by many Americans – many of them from non-Anglo-Saxon backgrounds. Many, too, held myths about equality, compassion, community and so on, that had been trashed in the Bush years. By skilfully knitting those myths together in a way that caught popular imagination, Obama rose to power.

At the organisational scale, it is necessary to appeal to the myths and aspirations of the majority of people and create a believable story of what could possibly be, if their potential is to be realised in the metier of the organisation. There are ways to do this by engaging people in articulating their stories and orchestrating their tales into one whole.

The point of this idea of the nature of strategy, is that it arises from the people. Instead of creating strategy as a plan to be sold to people, we engage the people in creating the story of the future they want to believe in. If we can together produce a narrative that binds us together in creating our joint futures, we release all the energy that otherwise was needed to hold us reluctantly on course or was needed to motivate us by bribery and coercion. If we can become one whole instead of un-integrated fragments, we acquire a new level of being and access a different level of energy.

Polkinghorne (1988) puts it this way: "*Narrative is a form of meaning making. ...Narrative recognises the meaningfulness of individual experiences by noting how they function as parts of a whole. Its particular subject matter is human actions and events that affect human beings, which it*

*configures into wholes according to the roles these actions and events play in bringing about a conclusion .... The narrative scheme serves as a lens through which the apparently independent and disconnected elements of existence are seen as related parts of a whole."*

Strategy innovation requires some re-educational activities to unbind us from hierarchical conformity and expectations (the 'tell me what to do and I'll do it' mentality or, worse, 'tell me what to do and I'll make damn sure it never happens'). It needs us to recapture the creativity of our childhoods. We need to rediscover 'play', this time as 'serious play', in which we will shape our destinies. Then we can enter into structured processes that have us dialogue with our colleagues and co-create the stories we wish to believe in. This needs to be done in an aspirational rather than a naïve way, because we shall have to choose to take responsibility for enacting them.

Dare we believe in what we dare to imagine? That is a question that is answered through the flowing pattern of relationships we tend to refer to as leadership or teamwork.

Each of those requires that we learn to relate and that we learn to mean what we say and say what we mean.

Another factor in all this, is that the actors who will play the parts in our story of the future will have the benefit of years of learning and experience that we have not yet had. They may actually be ourselves, several years from now, but those selves will have been transformed. Hence we need to be able imagine a future in which we are not constrained by our current capabilities and also be prepared to learn our way into the roles we describe (a bit like Frodo, the naïve hobbit's journey in Lord of the Rings, for instance).

We can think of an organisation as being defined by the people and infrastructure of a shared story, much as we can understand a team as a group bound by a common purpose. Centre for Management Creativity has been involved in strategy innovation for 20 years and our Rapid Strategic Vision Process (RSVP) continues to evolve.

Teams from very diverse clients have benefited from the process, in spite of the fact that the narratives so created have usually had to be lived out in cultures that were less than conducive. For instance, we see how tenacious is the idea of 'reward' - that people still feel compelled to provide a bonus culture even though it obstructs the intrinsic reward that would give people meaning in their work. (see Alfie Cohen, Punished by Rewards).

RSVP starts with the idea of involving the whole system – all the stakeholders need somehow to be represented in the process. It involves the de-conditioning referred to above as serious play. It involves people intellectually and also physically, emotionally and spiritually – as whole people, along with the relationships that integrate them into whole teams and whole companies.

Ideally interactions take place in carefully selected and prepared environments that help with de-familiarisation of process and content, allowing fresh perspectives to form. The quality of environment and ambience – including the choice of food, decor and music – plays a part in the process. Interactions involve people in playing together as well as surfacing their myths through dialogue and through LogoVisual Thinking processes that help them produce a shared story

line. Being able to externalise one's ideas and experiences and arrange them along with other people's, helps reveal mutually relevant patterns of meaning. They start from the future they want and work back to the present, and even to the past, in order to tell a story they can believe in. In doing so their thinking is challenged as they utilise structures based on ancient story forms. The emergent knowledge that co-authoring produces is captured close to source so that detail and fidelity are preserved.

Having created the unifying plot, sub-stories can be explored and articulated. People can then think about the practical implementation that will realise their stories in the 'future-yet-to-be-lived'. With their narrative so written, (and re-written in lesser scales as iterations of the fractal pattern) people can engage in breathing life into it, every day and every week and every month, adapting it as necessary to the prevailing conditions. In this way everyone can play their part with passion, carried along by the shared narrative of their particular organisation and sharing the burden through distributed leadership.

Of course, engaging in such processes is not a full time occupation but it does require some persistence through time in order for them to bear fruit.

If they are taken as a one-shot event then they are likely to bring no more than short-term benefit. Strategy innovation is only part of a journey, as the narrative has to be lived to come to life and those who are living it have to become more than they were.

For instance, such devices as scenario planning are useful as a means of stretching the assumption pattern of stakeholders prior to the story building process.

Similarly participation in story telling, drama, arts and experiential learning may be necessary to de-familiarise people's expectations, so they can be more credible of what they dare to imagine. At the output end (after the narrative has been formed) the journey has begun – but must be continued.

Everyone in the organisation needs to have a local version of the macro narrative and embrace what it means in terms of their own *modus operandi* and their own behaviour. In turn this detail needs to reflect back into the big picture so that the narrative itself becomes an ongoing dialogue between it and its context. The story is never ending.

The strategist lives firmly in the present but in a present not just of the hour but, informed and extended by engaging in stories of both past and future, it is an expanded present in which the narrative will be re-written as it unfolds. The strategist as leader is able to carry others with them so that leadership itself is distributed and everyone becomes a storytelling strategist. Then the story they tell accumulates to become the history of the future.

**John Varney**  
**November 2008**