

Strategy—An Obtuse Art?

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INTRODUCTION

We are regularly invited to assist organisations in the generation of strategic plans. The generation of a document or report is very often seen as the “end product” of a process and in some cases the plan itself then needs to be “sold” to the organisation. Increasingly we find management teams wanting to approach this task in a more creative way. The following are some thoughts, garnered from conversations with our clients about how it might be done differently.

“future” exists as a separate tangible place and the role of the strategic planner is to identify which aspects of the organisation’s mission and activities can be made to “fit” with that expected arrival. This can sometimes set up a defensive pattern within organisations that may turn a strategising process into one which seeks to prevent the organisation from experiencing any risk whatsoever, thereby protecting it from uncertainty and potentially from growthful risk and challenge.

“In terms of clarity, strategy has become an ever more obtuse art”

(Micklethwait J and Wooldridge A, 1996, pp159).

CONTROLLING THE FUTURE

Why do organisations strategically plan? This question is rarely asked because of the dominant discourse in business that suggests that not to plan is somewhat reckless. Banks require plans in order to release funds. Marketing departments require plans in order to position the company or product. Most business engagement with state or central government requires a written plan that serves to reassure the parties that some kind of certainty exists as to who the primary actors are. Plans and strategic plans in particular are a primary map and compass of the business world. This raises one of the fundamental aspects of strategic planning – i.e. the hope that in producing a plan, uncertainty will be controlled and the future predicted.

Many strategic planning processes are predicated on the assumption that the

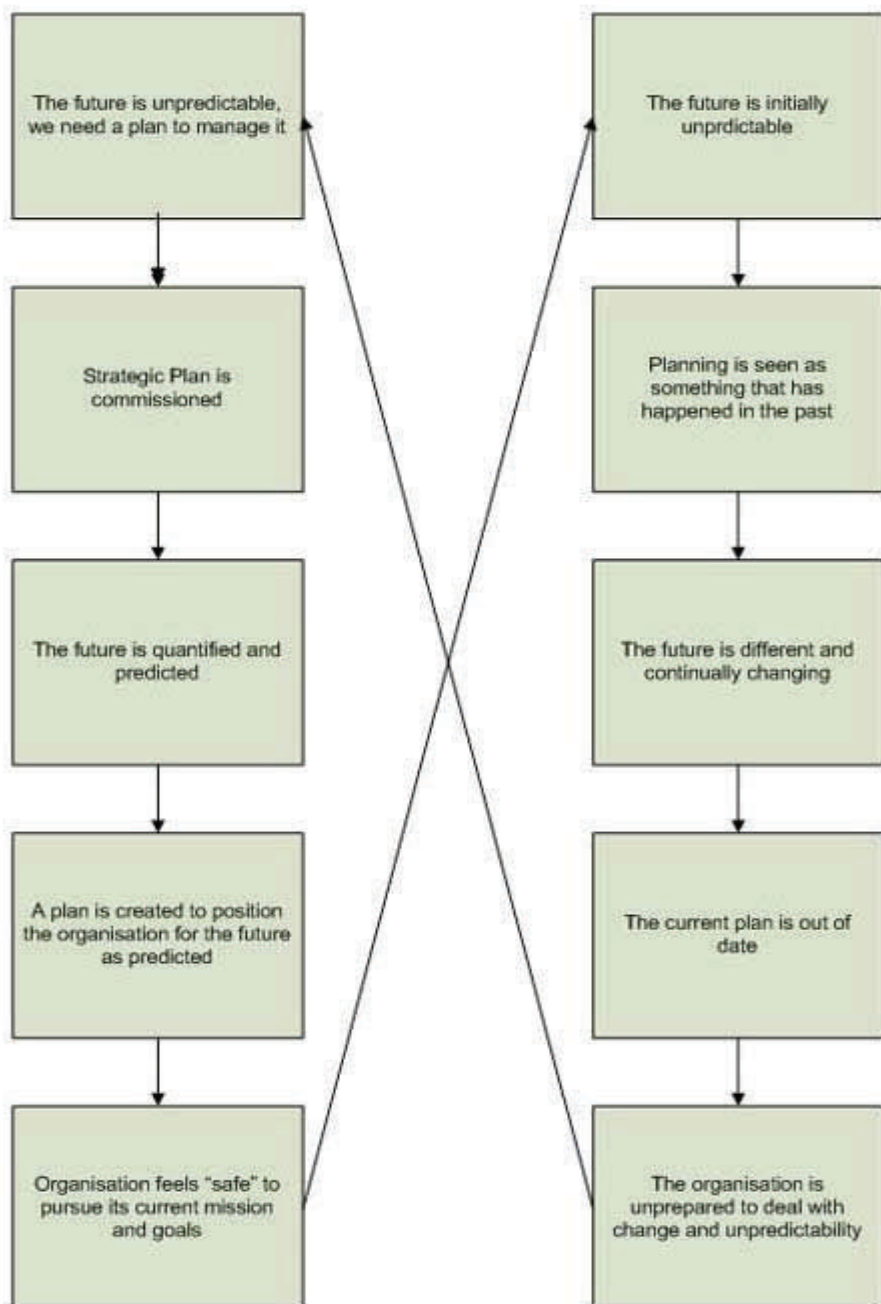
THE PARADOX OF PLANS

Increasingly we are working with clients to create strategic planning processes whereby the strategising is fluid and evolving while at the same time visible and tangible. A plan is delivered but it is the result of and beginning of strategic thinking. If we are fixated on "one" future, then any unpredictability or deviation from that future can leave us feeling unprepared which is what we're supposed to be addressing by doing a strategic plan in the first place!

The paradox can often look like this:

Closed Strategising Process

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The contracting phase is now a time when we work with clients to re-frame the possibility of strategising and planning as one where the future is co-created in the present and is seen as a plurality rather than a single certainty. We assist clients create safe enough spaces to imagine a different way of working, and more importantly, a jointly constructed future that embraces change, challenge and uncertainty.

Graetz draws a distinction between strategic thinking and strategic planning.

"..Planning concerns analysis – establishing and formalising systems and procedures; thinking involves synthesis - encouraging intuitive, innovative and creative thinking at all levels of the organisation".

Hypothesising, de-constructing, re-framing etc are all tools for creative thinking and strategising which fit within our consultancy tool kit.

"So long as contrasting right versions not all reducible to one are countenanced, unity is to be sought not in an ambivalent or neutral something beneath these versions but in an overall organization embracing them" (Goodman, 1978, pp5).

In revisiting some of the work we have undertaken with clients strategising has been a way of asking creative questions with a view to generating new possibilities and new futures. The other insight of course is that we strategise all the time – whether how to sneak out of the house in our teens or securing additional finance for a business venture – strategic thinking comes naturally!

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The primary challenge to those of us involved in assisting organisations to strategise is the co-creation of a secure enough environment in which to envision a future that is insecure.

An un-attributed quote states – *"Martin Luther King did not say, 'I have a strategic plan,' he said 'I have a dream'"* – and has a lot to offer those of us in the midst of strategising. The dilemmas about outputs become secondary to the strategising itself and business plans, marketing material, bank proposals etc become obvious ways of developing contextually situated conversations that can only enhance understanding.

REFERENCES

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Micklethwait J and Wooldridge A, (1996), *The Witch Doctors*, Heinemann, London,

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