

The maths and music of strategic planning

Dry, complicated, remote, academic – many people's impressions about strategic planning are remarkably similar to the popular stereotypes about mathematics: both are the domains of a few select experts who reside in ivory towers and produce work that bears little relevance to those who lead real lives and do the actual work each day. However, there is a tacit understanding that somehow mathematics is necessary to ensure that even everyday things work – and that from time to time it underpins some step-change in technology: but can the same be recognised for strategic planning?

Music, on the other hand, is about creativity, innovation, flair – and harmony, freedom of spirit, and uplifting feelings: surely there are no similarities with the analytic-scientific mindset of strategic planning?

Yet strategic planning is, at its heart, about ideas, people and opportunities. It is how an organisation makes sense of where it's going, and how it's going to get there. A strategic plan is how the organisation expresses its own story about itself and its desired future, and how it will organise its resources to realise this. Beyond the stereotype perceptions, there are indeed similarities to both maths and music in strategic planning.

The mathematics of strategic planning is easy to see, on one level: numbers, analysis, organising and manipulating data, spreadsheets, formulae, projections, financial ratios, and so on. But less superficially there is a more important similarity: strategic planning uses a very mathematical way of thinking. A necessary condition for effective strategy development is to be able to drill down to the root of the situation, to develop a clear understanding about the real issue, and to be able to tackle this problem from first principles. Issues need to be well defined, and this might require looking at the situation from different perspectives, developing models and concepts to help understanding, and trying different approaches until you discover the right solution.

Strategic planning involves the consideration of options: working through various scenarios, testing hypotheses, evaluating the implications and assessing risks. There are aspects of linear programming too in determining the 'best fit' solution, the optimum balance between aspirations and resources. And developing a strategic plan often means working through several iterations, refining and improving, until the organisation reaches a sufficient level of confidence in a solution which it believes is the strongest plan to drive it forward.

As in mathematics, there is elegance in a good strategy. In every strategic planning process in which I have worked, there has been one important idea – concept, expression, diagram, model, analysis - that has crystallised the thinking and enabled the rest of the strategy development work and planning to flow. This is the one pivotal idea, the one chart or phrase that remains unchanged through the subsequent development and iterations leading to the final planning outcome. And like an elegant proof in maths (or indeed a defining chord or melody in music), once created a strategy can seem so simple, so obvious, so reasonable, and feel so right that it belies the effort and the struggle involved in its development.

Strategic planning needs creativity and innovation, too – as does mathematics. The ability to search for new ways of looking at a situation, to try different approaches, to think around a problem until the solution becomes clear; all contribute to the development of an effective strategy and plan. And creating strong, simple themes that express the essence of the story about the organisation's situation and the ideas about why and how it will develop, then orchestrating how the various parts of the organisation need to work together to bring them to life – evident parallels with musical composition.

Like both maths and music, strategic planning uses a language, a means of expression that is understood by the people in the organisation. The roots of this and the notation are implicit, providing the axioms on which the thinking is developed, and the shorthand by which it is interpreted. An organisation's strategic plan is the score, the directions and shape it will follow – and as in music, interpreting and delivering the score successfully is dependent on the players that perform it. There is scope for flair and improvisation, and the players in the organisation need to adapt to how the music flows rather than follow their individual parts slavishly – but at the heart of a successful 'performance' of a strategic plan is how well everyone understands the context and intention that lie within it.

Yet perhaps the most important analogies with maths and music take this to another level. In mathematics, the real value of developing a new proof, solution, or technique is how this can then be applied in other situations. It provides a new way of looking at a problem, another approach and

way of thinking that might lead to a solution. So it is with strategic planning: the thinking that has been applied in the process, the collective learning that both individuals and the organisation have gained, are invaluable benefits that they take forward and can apply to other challenges that they will encounter. For me, this is one of the most powerful and rewarding benefits of working with the people of an organisation to help them develop an effective strategic plan: the knowledge, skills and experience they gain strengthens their ability to deal with the future.

Like music, an effective strategic plan shares the ability to inspire and to motivate: just as music is about the sounds and harmonies that are played, and not just the score written on the page, so a strategic plan should be about what and how people in the organisation are doing every day, the encapsulation of shared core values and ambitions, and a guide to decisions and action. It is how each player interprets the meaning behind the score as well as the notes, how thorough the understanding, and how skilful the conductor in guiding and motivating each individual that distinguishes a great performance – and likewise a successful organisation.

So, strategic planning has depth and meaning within an organisation. Although the context for each organisation, the process by which it is developed, and the style and detail of its content will vary, it is the combination of analysis and creativity, the maths and the music, involving the minds and the hearts of the people in the organisation, that ultimately make strategic planning so powerful, alive and relevant.

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