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The Evolving Craft of Strategy Making

A Reflective Essay

By

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Signature: Mitali Badkul
Date: 1 December 2024

The Evolving Craft of Strategy

Introduction

Strategy has always reminded me of chess—a game of anticipation, foresight, and calculated moves. Though I admire it, I have never been able to play it well. It demands not just understanding the present but also predicting future scenarios—a skill I initially thought was beyond me. Interestingly, before I formally studied strategy, I found myself crafting it in real-world contexts. I clearly remember working on a 15-year theory of change document for an NGO, divided into short-, medium-, and long-term goals. At the time, it seemed overwhelming and disconnected from ground realities. Yet, months later, I successfully created a strategy for my vertical that was well-received by the leadership and my team, all while feeling uncertain myself. Was this what strategy was supposed to be?

This module on strategic management has transformed my initial uncertainty into curiosity, prompting me to rethink what strategy truly entails. What once felt like a rigid chess match—defined by precision and predetermined moves—now reveals itself as a dynamic, iterative craft that blends science, art, and adaptability. Mintzberg (1994) described strategy-making as "*messy, experiential, and iterative,*" much like crafting pottery—a metaphor that deeply resonates with my own experiences. It is not merely about creating a fixed plan but about continuously refining it to align with shifting contexts.

Through this lens, I now see strategic frameworks as valuable foundations, not rigid templates but evolving guides that must adapt to complexity and context. Boundaries, while necessary, should remain flexible, enabling creativity and innovation without losing focus. The idea of core competencies as the roots of a tree, from which core products and business units thrive, as highlighted by Prahalad and Hamel (1990) and introduced by Catherine in class, further illustrates the importance of leveraging intrinsic strengths to drive growth and coherence. The module has also taught me that strategy is multifaceted. It can take many forms, from the vision of a single leader to open, participatory models that embrace collective input. These diverse approaches underscore the complexity and creativity inherent in strategy-making—a theme that has shaped my understanding throughout this journey (Class Discussions, 2024).

In this essay, I reflect on these insights, exploring Key Success Factors (KSFs), strategic frameworks, and the dynamic nature of strategy-making. Through case studies such as *The Economist*, Wikimedia, and FoodCloud, as well as course readings, nonprofit strategy articles and other standard Strategy books, I

analyze how strategy can adapt to different contexts. By contrasting nonprofit and for-profit approaches, I aim to demonstrate that strategy is as much about flexibility and vision as it is about structure and execution.

Strategy as Storytelling

One of the biggest takeaways from this module is that storytelling is not just a way to communicate—it is central to strategy. A strong narrative does more than explain plans—it brings people together, builds alignment, and inspires action. This became especially clear during our discussion of the FoodCloud case study. During a group discussion, a classmate described the strategy document as deeply moving, highlighting how it showcased FoodCloud's impact (Class Discussion, 2024). However, it didn't surprise me. From my experience with nonprofits, I have seen how storytelling connects people to a shared mission. FoodCloud's story wasn't just about logistics—it showed how a compelling narrative can unite diverse stakeholders and create strategic cohesion (even connect with a reader who wasn't even aware of the work done by them).

Storytelling closely relates to two key aspects of strategy: identifying key success factors and shaping the strategy-making process. FoodCloud's success comes from presenting its mission as a shared responsibility, essential for building trust with donors, beneficiaries, and partners. As we discussed in class, key success factors should align with an organization's core strengths and provide meaningful differentiation. FoodCloud's storytelling achieves this by blending operational excellence with emotional resonance, reflecting the idea that a nonprofit's theory of change must link actions to measurable outcomes while remaining clear and relatable (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2018).

However, storytelling alone cannot drive success. It must be reinforced by an inclusive and well-structured strategy-making process. Wikimedia's open strategy process illustrates this by engaging thousands of contributors to shape a shared narrative. While this approach fostered ownership and alignment, it also presented challenges such as managing complexity and maintaining clarity. Reflecting on my first essay's discussion of boundaries, I see the importance of involving people in the strategy-making process while ensuring that collective inputs are guided by a strong sense of direction. For nonprofits, this could mean selectively involving key stakeholders to balance inclusivity with efficiency, ensuring that diverse perspectives contribute meaningfully without diluting strategic intent.

Koch and Lockwood's Simplify: How the Best Businesses in the World Succeed emphasizes the value of reducing complexity to enhance coherence and storytelling in strategy. Their focus on distilling large goals into clear, impactful narratives resonates with the way nonprofits like FoodCloud effectively communicate their mission. By using simple but powerful stories, nonprofits foster trust and

collaboration. Similarly, corporates prioritizing CSR and ESG goals can leverage storytelling to align business objectives with social impact, creating stronger stakeholder relationships. Having said that I strongly believe that, storytelling must reflect reality. A gap between narrative and action can erode trust and weaken the foundation of strategy. Authenticity ensures that storytelling inspires action and builds lasting credibility. Whether in nonprofits or corporates, storytelling is not just an extra—it is fundamental to creating alignment, building trust, and driving meaningful impact.

Strategy as a Craft

One of the lessons that feels intuitive yet deserves continuous reinforcement is the importance of coherence in strategy. Strategy, as emphasized by Catherine, is not a laundry list of choices but a set of mutually reinforcing decisions. The Strategy Diamond (Hambrick and Fredrickson, 2005) exemplifies this principle, connecting arenas, vehicles, differentiators, staging, and economic logic to create a unified strategy. A great example of this is *The Economist*, whose niche differentiation strategy perfectly embodies coherence. Its commitment to quality journalism for a specific audience is evident in every aspect of its operations—from the editorial tone to its premium subscription pricing. This alignment between strengths and market needs demonstrates the power of clarity and focus on effective strategy-making.

Reflecting on the Ansoff Matrix (Ansoff, 1957), I've come to appreciate how a framework developed in the 1950s remains strikingly relevant even today. Its simplicity, organizing growth strategies into Market Penetration, Market Development, Product Development, and Diversification—offers clarity in decision-making while managing risk. For corporates, it is a roadmap to balance resource allocation, evaluate opportunities, and stay competitive in dynamic markets. What pleasantly surprised me is how its principles also apply to NGOs. For example, NGOs can use Market Penetration to deepen their impact within existing communities or Market Development to expand into new geographies.

Exploring Ansoff's 3D Matrix (1987), which during the class seemed to me a bit confusing and felt unnecessarily complex, but revisiting it further broadened my perspective. By introducing three growth vectors it provides a richer framework to address modern complexities. For instance, nonprofits can evaluate not only what they offer and to whom, but also how they build internal capacity to scale their impact sustainably. Similarly, corporates can use the third dimension to align growth strategies with evolving competencies like digital transformation and ESG priorities. What I have learned from this is that the Ansoff Matrix's value lies in its flexibility. It offers a structured starting point, but it's true strength is in its ability to evolve with context. This has taught me that timeless frameworks, when reimagined, can provide clarity and direction in navigating contemporary challenges for both corporates and NGOs.

Strategy as a Journey

If coherence and storytelling are the "what" of strategy, the strategy-making process is the "how." Lecture 6 emphasized that strategy is not a fixed destination but an ongoing, iterative journey—a concept that resonated deeply during our discussion of *The Economist* in Lecture 5. The class largely agreed that the organization had achieved sustainable competitive advantage through its niche differentiation strategy. Yet, as Whittington et al. (2020) highlight, sustainable competitive advantage is not static but a moving target, requiring constant renewal and adaptation to remain relevant.

This iterative nature of strategy becomes especially significant when revisiting traditional frameworks. During class, we explored the increasing role of technology in shaping modern strategies. Catherine highlighted how the Strategy Diamond could be adapted to reflect this growing importance. Suggestions included rethinking how organizational structure and culture form a parallel base and redefining "Economic Logic" to encompass more purposeful goals, such as those tied to ESG reporting (Class Discussions, 2024).

As I reflect on these discussions, I believe adding a *technological adaptability* dimension to the Strategy Diamond as a core component makes strategic sense. Technology is no longer just an enabler but a central driver of innovation, agility, and resilience, impacting how organizations create, execute, and sustain strategy. By capturing this dimension alongside *collaboration and networks*, the Strategy Diamond evolves into a framework better equipped to address modern complexities and navigate shifting landscapes with greater agility (**see Appendix**).

For nonprofits, such adaptability is particularly vital. As Forbes Nonprofit Council (2024) notes, trends like technological integration and community engagement are reshaping the sector, necessitating frameworks that accommodate these shifts. NGOs, for example, can leverage digital tools to enhance their reach or adapt their programs for virtual delivery. Ultimately, the process of adapting frameworks and structures is not a one-time effort but a continuous journey. Whether nonprofit or corporate, sustainable competitive advantage emerges not as a fixed outcome but as a byproduct of balancing ambition with adaptability, coherence with creativity, and planning with iteration.

The Future of Strategy: Balancing Ethics, Technology, and Adaptability

Reflecting on the evolving nature of strategy, I see a future shaped by three critical forces: ***ethics as a guiding principle, technology as an enabler, and adaptability as a core capability***. These forces, while distinct, are deeply interconnected and essential to navigating the complexities of modern organizations.

Ethics has always been a core value guiding my decisions, and this module reinforced the importance of embedding ethical considerations into strategy-making. In today's rapidly advancing technological landscape, this is more relevant than ever. The guest session on AI highlighted a key tension: while technology can amplify strategic outcomes by enabling data-driven decisions, its deployment must be human-centered and equitable (Guest Lecture, 2024). Transparency and accountability are no longer optional—they are strategic imperatives that build trust, a cornerstone for both nonprofit and corporate success.

From my nonprofit experience, I've seen how ethical strategies foster trust, enhance credibility, and deepen community engagement. The FoodCloud case study brought this to life, illustrating how aligning operational decisions with purpose can inspire stakeholders and reinforce mission-driven goals (Class Discussion, 2024). For nonprofits, embedding values into every stage of strategy-making is non-negotiable. For corporates, this could mean integrating ESG priorities into their economic logic, ensuring strategies resonate with societal expectations while maintaining competitiveness.

This ethical lens becomes even more critical in the context of technology. AI and machine learning are revolutionizing strategy-making by offering unprecedented insights through predictive analytics and real-time data processing. These tools enable organizations to anticipate disruptions, optimize resource allocation, and make agile decisions. However, they also present ethical dilemmas: biases in algorithms, potential workforce disruption, and risks to stakeholder trust. Organizations must address these challenges by embedding transparency, fairness, and accountability into their tech strategies.

The interplay between strategy and organizational structure will also play a pivotal role in the future. As digital tools flatten hierarchies and enable cross-functional collaboration, traditional models may need to evolve into more fluid, adaptive systems. For nonprofits, this might involve breaking down rigid hierarchies to foster innovation and inclusivity. For corporates, decentralized decision-making models can enable quicker responses to market changes. These structural shifts underscore that strategy is not just about planning—it is about creating systems that support sustainable growth and adaptability.

Looking ahead, the future of strategy will demand leaders who can balance innovation with responsibility, align purpose with performance, and design adaptive systems that embrace change. Strategy, then, is not just a tool for achieving objectives but a framework for navigating complexity with integrity. This reflects the essence of what I've learned: *strategy is a living, breathing process that shapes and responds to the world responsibly.*

Conclusion: Strategy as a Living, Breathing Process

This module has encouraged me to see strategy as a process that blends coherence, foresight, ethics, and adaptability while responding to the complexities of modern organizations. The discussions and case studies—from FoodCloud's ethical and mission-driven approach to *The Economist*'s coherence in differentiation—have underscored that strategy is not only about achieving goals but also about creating value that resonates with stakeholders.

The FoodCloud case (inclusion of which as part of class discussion is something I deeply appreciate) brought much-needed attention to the nonprofit sector, highlighting its critical role in addressing societal challenges. Yet, in my humble opinion, traditional strategic frameworks often overlook these mission-driven organizations. This reinforced the value of tailoring strategy to context, ensuring it aligns operational goals with ethical considerations and stakeholder needs.

This module also emphasized the inherently forward-looking nature of strategy, particularly in an era shaped by technological advancement and societal change. By integrating technological adaptability and collaboration into frameworks like the Strategy Diamond, organizations can remain relevant in dynamic environments. Similarly, the interplay between strategy and organizational structure was a valuable insight, demonstrating how adaptive designs and decision-making processes can support innovation and agility. These lessons have broadened my perspective, teaching me to balance ambition with responsibility in crafting strategies that are not only effective but also sustainable.

As I prepare to apply these insights in the strategic company project and beyond, I am looking forward to explore how strategy can bridge innovation, ethics, and impact. I plan to leverage what I have learned, to create strategies that align organizational goals with stakeholder expectations (if I get to be a part of the strategy making process, even if not, having this understanding is valuable). Strategy is no longer a linear roadmap—it is a continuous journey that adapts to shifting landscapes, balances ambition with accountability, and leaves a meaningful legacy. Much like chess or crafting pottery, strategy demands continuous learning, creativity, and adaptability—a dynamic process that not only achieves goals but also shapes the future responsibly and meaningfully.

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Appendix: Evolved Strategy Diamond

Below is a novice attempt to visualize an evolved Strategy Diamond, integrating reflections and insights from the essay.

Suggested Adaptation of Strategy Diamond
(for future Organisations also considering the Not For Profits)

Arenas
Where will we compete?
(e.g., target markets, geographies, product categories)

Vehicles
How will we get there?
(e.g., partnerships, organic growth, acquisitions)

Tech Adaptability
How prepared are we to adopt and leverage technology?

PURPOSEFUL LOGIC

Collaboration & Networks
How do we build relationships to amplify impact?

Staging
What will be the speed and sequence of our moves?
(e.g., priority actions, phasing growth).

Differentiators
How will we win?
(e.g., value propositions, brand image, operational excellence)

○ The pace of technological change demands organizations embed adaptability into their strategic foundation, not as an afterthought.
○ It aligns with the growing recognition that digital capabilities are critical for competitive advantage and survival.
○ The inclusion emphasizes readiness for change, a vital factor for both nonprofits and for-profits.

○ No organization operates in isolation; the systemic impact often comes from partnerships and ecosystems.
○ For nonprofits, this dimension is particularly crucial given their reliance on donor relationships, government partnerships, and community alignment.
○ Collaboration is not merely a vehicle (how to compete) but a strategic focus in itself (with whom and to what end).

Organizational Structure

⚠ *Conceptualisation and Illustration by Mitali Badkul (Disclaimer: This is an initial attempt and may contain inaccuracies.)*
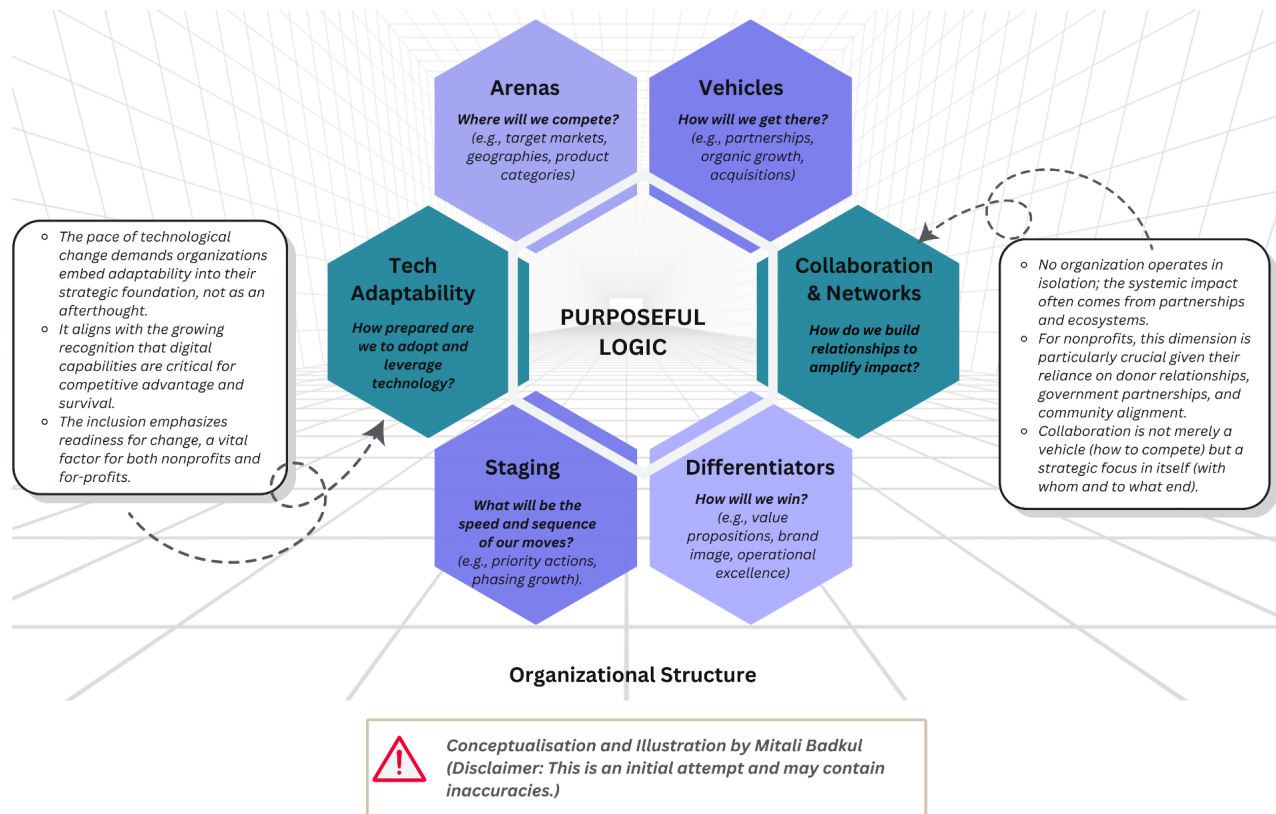
Figure 1: Attempted adaptation of the Strategy Diamond*
To access the web version of the image - Click Here

Core Dimensions (Original):

- **Arenas:** Where will we be active?

- **Vehicles:** How will we get there?

- **Differentiators:** How will we win?

- **Staging:** What will be our speed and sequence of moves?

- **Economic Logic (Updated to Purposeful Logic):** Incorporating economic, social, and ESG goals for a more holistic focus.

Added Dimensions (New):

1. Collaboration/Networks: Reflects the importance of partnerships, advocacy, and systemic impact.

- **Key Focus Areas:**

    o   Leveraging partnerships for systemic change.

    o   Fostering trust and alignment with external stakeholders.

    o   Building collaborative ecosystems that complement internal capabilities.

- **Guiding Questions:**

    o   How can partnerships amplify our impact?

    o   What networks are critical to achieving our mission?

    o   How do we build trust and alignment with collaborators?

2. Technological Adaptability: Highlights readiness for and integration of technology as a strategic enabler.

- **Key Focus Areas:**

    o   Assessing readiness for digital transformation.

    o   Identifying tools that enhance stakeholder engagement and operational efficiency.

    o   Balancing automation with human-centered values.

- **Guiding Questions:**

    o   What technologies can support our mission and goals/enhance our strategy?

    o   Do we have the systems and skills to adopt these tools effectively?

    o   How can technology improve stakeholder engagement and operational efficiency?

This evolved Strategy Diamond addresses the complexities of modern strategic challenges while retaining the coherence of the original framework. It integrates forward-looking dimensions essential for both nonprofits and for-profits to achieve sustainable impact.