

# Emergent Strategy (Expansion of the SGEP)

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2026-01-18T09:00:00Z

## ***Collected Resources for Scrum Guide Expansion Pack***

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Strategy is not limited by scale; if it exists, it should be clearly articulated at the corporate, business unit, or Product level and remain coherent and integrated across these levels. Crucially, strategy should distinguish between ends (quantified, Stakeholder-valued outcomes) and means (initiatives or activities).

Drawing from and adapting Roger L. Martin's work (1) and Tom Gilb's work (3-8), strategy is about making integrated, explicit choices- deciding what and what not to pursue from a well-defined, measurable winning aspiration, not just a broad mission or vision. Effective strategy answers:

- Where will we play?
- How will we win ethically (9) and sustainably, balancing a multiplicity of expectations and limits?
- What capabilities and systems must be in place?
- What else must be true for this strategy to succeed?

For situations where expertise alone is sufficient (or perhaps bordering on being sufficient), to ensure strategy is iterative, actionable, and value-focused:

- Iteratively quantify and manage Stakeholder value, multiple impacts or side effects, risks, and trade-offs:
  - Identify all critical Stakeholders (including but not limited to customers) and define their value objectives in measurable terms (e.g., ‘reduce new-user onboarding time from 5-10 to 2-4 days’).
  - Explicitly quantify trade-offs and constraints, and revisit as new information emerges.
  - Use integrative thinking to resolve tensions creatively.
- Co-create and prioritize collaboratively:

- Develop the strategy by blending top-down and bottom-up insights and lateral collaboration.
  - Use structured workshops and feedback loops to foster alignment and adaptability, and continuously reprioritize unstated work.
- Deliver value incrementally and measure results:
  - Iteratively break down strategic aspirations into small, prioritized, measurable increments.
  - Deliver value in short cycles (e.g., Sprints or weeks), measuring actual outcomes and side effects against original quantified objectives.
  - Use regular reviews to adjust informed by real-world feedback.
- Enable emergence:
  - Allow strategy to evolve in response to new data and Stakeholder (including but not limited to user) feedback, within a framework of clear, quantified objectives, measurable trends, and regular risk/benefit reassessment.
  - Make course corrections rapidly and transparently as reality unfolds.
- Ensure strategy and strategy deployment are outcome-oriented and focused (deciding what to and what not to work on). Distinguish between:
  - Strategy including the intent, rationale, goals, and anti-goals (the *what* and *why*),
  - Strategy deployment: the operationalization of the strategy, iterative sequencing or decomposition of integrated choices for the strategy, usually in small outcome-oriented slices of the *what* and *why*,
  - Outcome-oriented, focused Product Backlog Items (smaller slices for *whom*), and
  - Lists of activities or initiatives (the ‘*what we’ll do*’ or *how*).
- Avoid mistaking a collection of projects for a coherent, value-driven strategy.

For situations where expertise is valuable yet insufficient, cause and effect are only coherent in retrospect, and uncertainty needs to be embraced, Scrum Teams and Stakeholders need to:

- Embrace the messiness of less structured and emergent outcome-oriented work in a direction of travel.
- Consider that detailed, long-term plans are ineffective. Instead, organizations should focus on creating conditions where useful patterns and innovations can emerge from interactions within the system.
- Instead of trying one idea at a time and sticking to what worked before, Scrum Teams should consider several small, parallel safe-to-fail experiments at once to see what happens and learn from what emerges.
- Foster a climate for creative exploration, innovation, and evolution from the present. Create processes and environments where people can connect novel ideas, learnings, informed hunches, and learn from each other, rather than imposing uniformity or rigid KPIs.
- Response options are not restricted to:
  - Map what is already known and understand the system’s evolutionary potential before attempting change
  - Foster self-organization

- Run safe-to-fail experiments (probes)—probes should be small, parallel, and designed so that failure is survivable and informative
- Seek fresh thinking
- Try solutions for different problems for the current situation at hand
- Test educated hunches
- Observe what emerges, and amplify successful patterns while dampening or stopping those that don’t work
- Innovation is important, but proven solutions should be reused for recurring problems
- Continuously sense-make
- Perform narrative capture
- Metaphor: The role of leaders is to actively prepare and manage the soil, boundaries, and conditions (the ‘substrate’) to encourage the growth of healthy plants (emergent solutions). This includes metaphorically weeding, pruning, and shaping the environment, not just passively waiting for results.

Generally, extrinsic motivation rewards should be avoided due to the ‘cobra effect’ (10) unless they are coherent with Beyond Budgeting. Equally, individual or team performance should be uncoupled from results as results might have been delivered, but in what way were they delivered, with what side effects, and what impact did delivery have on team morale, etc?

Nevertheless:

- There is disagreement in peer-reviewed papers (11-14) and a foundational non-peer-reviewed paper (15) on whether quantifying Stakeholder expectations, Stakeholder limits, or goals is helpful or unhelpful and whether it reduces intrinsic motivation.
- Consider the context. Also, consider whether quantification supports autonomy and meaning or imposes controlling constraints.
- For now, this document prefers to err on the side of clarification and shared understanding of an idea, quantifying Stakeholder expectations, Stakeholder limits, and the direction of travel, supported by high-quality and accurate storytelling narratives (more stories like this, fewer stories like that).

An Emergent Strategy is supported by an emergent outcome-oriented roadmap, which can range from the Sprint Goal to the Product Vision and beyond. Emergent Strategy Deployment (16-19) should not be confused with Emergent Strategy. Vector change models (30-35, 54), Product Operating Models (20-26), scaling and descaling models (27-40), and emergent goal-oriented models (16-19, 41-50) can be highly beneficial for Emergent Strategy Deployment. Err on the side of models coherent with vector-change, e.g., direction of travel over fixed goals.

Emergent strategy deployment involves allowing plans and actions to develop naturally as the Scrum Team and Stakeholders respond to real-world changes. Instead of following a fixed path, they pay attention to what is happening around them and make adjustments as they go. Over time, the steps taken form a pattern that becomes the actual strategy, even if it differs from what was initially intended.

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