



**Chris Nichols** is joint leader of the Strategy Engagement practice group in Ashridge Consulting. He consults with a range of blue chip corporations, governments and charities worldwide. His areas of expertise include strategic thinking, organisational change and leadership development.

---

Email: [chris.nichols@ashridge.org.uk](mailto:chris.nichols@ashridge.org.uk)

PERSPECTIVES

# Forget ‘buy-in’ – try engaged participation

**Chris Nichols**

In this article, based on 20 years of consulting in over 40 countries, Chris Nichols argues that to be successful, organisations need less buying-in to top down strategy and more genuine strategic participation in day to day activities. This has implications for the development of widely held strategic capability in our teams. Learning the strategy toolkit is not enough.

There is a world in which strategy comes 'from the top', where strategy is the analytical preserve of the CEO and top team, or the visionary and charismatic domain of the entrepreneur.

But in practice 'strategy' is rarely implemented in the way the originator expects. The actual strategy pursued frequently ends up different from the plan.

Breene *et al*<sup>1</sup> wrote with dismay how difficult it is to keep execution in line with intention. In fast moving and complex markets, they wrote: "An iron fisted control of execution often eludes the top team's grasp". To address this they suggested the appointment of a Chief Strategy Officer – a kind of internal guru, super-executive and strategic police-force rolled into one.

This reflects the reality of many clients I meet who are striving to get their teams to 'buy-into' the strategy, to 'live' the plan.

But I wonder if their attachment to a top down view of strategy may, however, be limiting and dangerous.

### Don't sell, engage

No one knows the future, so there is little prospect of a plan unfolding as written. Henry Mintzberg<sup>2</sup> and others describe 'strategy' as an emergent process – a combination of the interaction of planned intention with a changing world.

Here there is no separation between 'strategy' and 'implementation', The entire process of the pursuit of intent is 'strategy' and everyone involved in the process is contributing to the making of real world strategy.

No central strategy police-force can corral reality into line with a forecast intention. What is needed to work with the emergent reality is genuine participative strategy: a combination of the pursuit of strategic intent with the will and wisdom to use discretion

with intelligence.

This is very different to 'buying into' a strategy delivered from on high. It is a shared engagement in the messy work of pursuing intent intelligently within unknown terrain.

It places additional demands on the wider managerial team, who can no longer attribute all strategic leadership to a higher level.

### The developed strategic manager

How do we develop managers to engage really well in a shared strategy process? In my view it goes well beyond grasping the strategy toolkit.

The development of strategic capability needs to take account of at least three different dimensions of strategic capacity.

These are as follows:

- Dimension One: the grasp of the essential tools, models and concepts of strategy as a discipline and the ability to use these with adequate analytical rigour.
- Dimension Two: the development of 'strategic perspective' and genuine strategic mindsets, ways of thinking that feed analytical methods through alternative perspectives, creativity and curiosity.
- Dimension Three: the development of reflective skills by which leaders become aware of how their own behaviour, mindsets and biases impact on their own strategic thinking and strategic involvement of those around them.

These 'dimensions' are not hierarchical. We need to take account of all three dimensions when we develop strategic capability in our teams.

### Dimension One: Aren't tools the thing?

Tools matter. No one can be a competent strategic thinker without access to the vocabulary and discipline of the strategic toolkit. So we must develop the ability to use tools for various strategic tasks.

According to the context of the organisation, I would recommend that managers develop a familiarity with the tools and models that offer help in the following areas:

- Understanding strategic context
- Assessing markets and competitive dynamics
- Undertaking competitor analysis
- Exploring collaboration, partnership and merger
- Examining alignment and organisational design
- Communicating and managing strategic action and measuring performance.

Of course the list is not complete.

This dimension certainly has its place, just as awareness of, and facility with, tools is an important part of learning any craft. But just like in craft, the tools are not the point. I suggest that the test of a good strategic tool, intelligently used, is this: *does using this tool help us to ask better questions and to have better conversations?*

### Dimension Two: Developing a strategic outlook

No one can be a competent strategist if they approach tools mechanically or blindly. Developing this outlook is the business of Dimension Two.

Most strategic failure occurs because of group-think and narrow perspective. Every

day this happens in organisations. We develop ways of seeing, ways of making sense that become deeply rooted. We come to see the world through the chosen lenses. Eventually, seeing any other pattern, or seeing in any other way becomes impossible or unspeakable.

*Strategy is a 'garbage in, garbage out' affair. If we use strategy models in a rote way, as a mechanical writing of our existing prejudices into the boxes and matrices of strategy models, we achieve nothing. Worse, we create the pretence of certainty that leads to failure.*

The development of an acute sense of the potential limitations of our worldview is the stuff of the second dimension of strategic capability – the development of a strategic perspective. The strategist with a well developed Dimension Two capability will be cautious about what they know and how they know it, and will try to be conscious of the limitations of the lenses they routinely see the world through, and of the deeply held assumptions they hold.

This is not something easily taught, but it is something that can be developed. Well developed strategists have acquired this capability by many means: by having experienced some surprises previously, by scientific or artistic training, by psychological preference for diversity in ways of seeing, by inclination of intellectual restlessness and by the simple enjoyment of being contrary. Effective peer challenge, perhaps through action learning groups, can be a very effective way of developing your Dimension Two capability.

There are probably many ways of coming to a deeper Dimension Two capability. But what is clear is that: *without this capability, all the tools in the world will not help you – they will simply analyse and record your strategic blindness in new ways.*

### Dimension Three: Developing reflective capability

If you want your people to engage and participate in strategy this raises another interesting point for the strategic leader. What is your personal impact on the strategic conversation and on the 'thinking together' that you are part of?

I have written elsewhere<sup>3,4</sup> about the psychological dynamics of strategic conversation and strategic facilitation – and do not want to go into that in depth here.

The point I want to make is that every one of us, when we lead, participate in or facilitate a piece of strategic work, have an impact on it. That work is done differently because of the individual impact we bring to it.

A range of factors impacts on how each one of us participates and engages, in working together on strategy making. These include the following:

- Our psychological processes and preferences. We all have preferred ways of thinking, perceiving and decision making.
- Past experience and prejudices. We come to our conversations and decisions with our history and our patterns. We will receive or reject, prefer or ignore data through these 'lenses'.
- Our use of power. Everyone has a range of sources of power and differing ability and willingness to access and use it. The impacts of the use of power in the strategy process are wide ranging and of consequence.
- Our ability to listen and work with group processes. We are not all equally skilled in interpersonal work – but developing 'good enough' interpersonal skills is critical for anyone seeking to work in engaging others in good strategic exploration and conversation.

*At the heart of this awareness is the development of self awareness and reflective capacity: the ability to pay attention to process and to one's own influence within the process. This is in part an individual capability and it is in part a willingness to open oneself to the observations of others through feedback, coaching and action learning.*

*There is no 'silver bullet', no wonder tool to teach here. It is a matter of willingness, attention and work over time, in the spirit of furthering the craft.*

### **Consequences for the development of broad strategic capability in organisations**

The consequences are significant for those who want to develop their strategic capability and that of their teams. What it means above all is that development based solely or principally on the teaching of tools and models is not sufficient. A more integrated developmental approach is needed.

*In my view the development of strategic capability is like learning a craft. No one is ever 'the finished article'. The development of strategic capability is a lifelong journey.*

## References

1. Breene, R., Timothy, S., Nunes, Paul F. and Shill, Walter E. (2007) The Chief Strategy Officer, *Harvard Business Review*, **85(10)**, 84-93.
2. Mintzberg, H., Ahlstrand, Bruce W. and Lamprel, J. (2001) *Strategy Safari*, FT Prentice Hall.
3. Nichols, C. (2006) Facilitating Good Strategic Conversations, *Converse*, April, 16-18.
4. Nichols, C. (2006) Strategy as Relationship: The Four-Sided Triangle, *360° – the Ashridge Journal*, Autumn, 38-42.