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Less Planning, More Strategy

by John McCann

In the early 1990s I was just starting out as a ‘planning’ consultant. I had no clue what I was doing. And now, I shudder to think about how ineffective I must have been. Then, over time, I learned some helpful lessons.

Lesson One: Strategy is continually reshaping our relationship with reality.

I came across “[Crafting Strategy](#)” by McGill professor Henry Mintzberg, who was also the author of [The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning](#). But it was the short article, *Crafting Strategy* published in the Harvard Business Review in 1987 that really awakened me to the fact that what Dwight Eisenhower said a few decades earlier was actually true, “Plans are worthless, yet planning is everything.”

In his article, Mintzberg describes observing his wife Yvette working at her potter’s wheel. And then, using the metaphor of a potter shaping clay, Mintzberg suggests that *strategy is “crafted” over time through close attention to feedback and learning rather than imposed through rigid long-range plans*. He argues, persuasively I might add, that effective strategy often emerges through experimentation, reflection, and adaptation vs. being the product of formal planning, analysis, and prediction.

Now, some 40 years on, this insight is quite useful in today’s uncertain environment. No organization I know operates in a steady state within stable conditions. So, Mintzberg encourages leaders to *remain attentive to what is actually happening*, to notice emerging opportunities and challenges, and to adapt accordingly. *In practice, this means we treat strategy not as a static document, but as a living process of learning, adjusting, and continuously shaping direction in response to reality.*

Lesson Two: The roadmap is no longer a sufficient metaphor for strategy and planning.

I recently bought a new car! A modest Kia, yet with a beautiful touchscreen that shows me the road I am on, the surrounding area, and my relationship to all that’s around me for miles. One day, I put in a destination about 30 miles away, and then I got busy, changed my mind and didn’t go. I also started using my phone GPS because it was more familiar to me. Yet, for months I left that destination in my vehicle GPS, and over all that time, with me being in varied locations (I travel for a living!) the system kept working, and no matter where I was, no matter the conditions, it continually adjusted and showed me the best route to that 30 day old destination.

Wow, isn’t that what we want from our strategy? To keep us true to our destination...our goal...while adjusting our course based on what’s happening in real time?

So, maybe, it’s no longer strategy as roadmap, it’s strategy as GPS!

There may have been a time when it was sufficient to analyze past performance, assess current conditions, project trends forward, and develop a multi-year roadmap designed to achieve a defined future state. To develop a detailed document...a roadmap...outlining objectives, tactics, timelines,

responsibilities, and metrics, all intended to guide the organization over three to five years. That would be a strategic plan.

Adaptive strategy, however, is based on a different premise: *uncertainty is not a temporary disruption to overcome*; it is the permanent condition within which we operate, in which events regularly alter the landscape faster than plans can anticipate. In this environment, strategy cannot function primarily as prediction. Instead, it must function as disciplined learning and continual adaptation.

So, the distinction. Strategic planning often treats strategy as a roadmap: a fixed route from point A to point B. Adaptive strategy functions more like a GPS system. The destination may remain constant, but the route changes continuously in response to real-world conditions. This means *leaders must remain attentive, and willing to adjust course as new realities emerge*.

This distinction fundamentally changes the role of leadership. In traditional planning, leaders are expected to provide answers, reduce ambiguity, and create certainty. In adaptive strategy, leaders are responsible for framing meaningful questions, surfacing assumptions, encouraging experimentation, and helping the organization learn its way forward. The emphasis shifts from control to curiosity; from certainty to responsiveness.

Lesson Three: The leader's job is to remain vigilant on outcomes, and open to new pathways for getting there

Finally, adaptive strategy does not imply the absence of clear direction or rigorous thinking. It requires vision, disciplined decision-making, and accountability. Yet, with the path forward unknowable in advance, success depends less on adherence to the plan and more on adjustments over time. Adjustments more readily made when leaders do two things.

First, accept uncertainty as a given. *Nobody knows what will happen, so let's stop pretending*. With the acceptance of uncertainty comes great relief, 'wow, I don't have to have it all perfectly figured out...we can adapt...and all be the wiser for it'.

The second requirement is to recognize the steep cost of what's called the sunk cost bias. This principle basically says, 'well, we spent much time, effort and money on the plan, we must follow through on what we thought would work'...even when the evidence points toward the futility of following through on our earlier thinking. This holding tightly to earlier thinking must be replaced with, 'where do we now find ourselves, and what should we do to sustain progress toward the goal'?

So, in summary, follow Mintzberg's advice and see that crafting of strategy is the only legitimate way to move forward; replace roadmap with GPS as our way of understanding the value of a supply strategy; and together, improvise our way through the uncertain days ahead.