

# Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

## Crafting Strategy with Your Hands

*Peter T. Bürgi, Ph.D.*  
is a Research Fellow  
at Imagination Lab Foundation  
[peter@imagilab.org](mailto:peter@imagilab.org)

*Johan Roos, Ph.D.,*  
is the Director  
of Imagination Lab Foundation  
[johan@imagilab.org](mailto:johan@imagilab.org)

*Clarify the abstract ideas of strategy, infuse the strategy making process with passion, deeper involvement and a sense of discovery... Use your hands to craft strategy.*

### Make Strategy A New Way

The scene: a variety of LEGO constructions litter the conference table. Senior managers from the telecommunications company Orange are debating strategy...with their hands. Using LEGO pieces as building blocks, they are building a representation of their company and its business landscape.

The Orange Brand Director sets the LEGO model of a new competitor on a bookshelf behind the group, where it looms over the table. Why on the shelf behind the group? Because "the competitor," she notes, "is coming in from left field." Two workshop participants quiz her: Do you really think the competitor has its sights on *our* market? "Yes," she says, "that's why I have them coming *towards* the table." Do they have the resources to really shake things up? "Absolutely! Look how big and threatening I've made the model!" The rest of the group listens: around the table heads bob, glances shoot back and forth. Right up until this exchange, the group has been wholly unaware of this competitive threat, and now, as one member puts it, the revelation "hits them in the gut."

### The Power of Handcrafted Strategy

When you construct strategy with your hands, you make abstract ideas about your organization and its business landscape clear and immediate. You bring emotions into the oth-

erwise mostly rational, cognitive practice of traditional strategy making. Handcrafting strategy is more personal than traditional strategy making - and it has a more resounding impact.

*"This is a blooming good way of helping people visualize what they have and what they need to do."*

Companies often treat strategy making purely as a planning process, but building strategy with your hands can create new knowledge about the identity of an organization, its competitive position, and the behaviors that may help it respond to the unexpected. The benefit is immediate: strategy becomes more understandable and relevant.

When you build a representation of your organization with your hands, you reach a more profound knowledge of its full complexity. Neither abstract nor conceptual, the knowledge you gain is personal and deeper; charged with emotional energy and steeped in individual involvement. No small achievement!



*When you make the concepts of strategy more concrete, you can understand, and thus improve them more easily.*

## “Crafting” strategy means using our hands to construct, de-construct and re-construct strategy

Constructing strategy with your hands narrows the gap between thinking and acting. Strategy making is often simply cerebral – pose a question, reflect, articulate an answer. We use another technique: we have strategy-makers “think with their hands.” Why? Because “building” develops and, at the same time, represents solutions to a firm’s key strategic questions. By using their tactile senses, vision and imagination to craft strategy, managers experience strategy issues in a manner so real, so clear, and so immediate that thought and actions converge. The gap between thought and activity actually narrows.

### Three Observed Findings

Our study at Orange is part of a long-term research program on strategy making that combines theories of play, imagination, and emergence with the practice of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY™ (for more information: [www.serious-play.com](http://www.serious-play.com)). Three findings about the value of a handcrafted approach to developing strategy have already emerged:

#### 1. Intense engagement with strategy

In our research with Orange, participants showed a high degree of personal involvement and group identification. They reported (and we observed) intense engagement and extremely high levels of attention and awareness in all workshop activities. Participants noted that organizational strategy no longer seemed like some detached, intangible plan, but rather something they could see and, literally, hold in their hands -- for once, they noted, strategy was accessible and understandable.

#### 2. Unusual level of passion for strategy content

The individuals who developed strategy with their hands during the workshops reported that they were deeply involved. Their intense involvement is one key to the remarkable passion and fervour that suffused the program. All participants reported feeling intense energy. Several participants reported dreaming about the workshop during the days after. Almost all participants said the workshop had exhilarated them, but also drained them emotionally. They reported being surprised at the intensity of “presence” they felt during the event.

#### 3. Unexpected strategic discoveries

For participants, constructing and then sharing a 3-D model of Orange and its complex business landscape revealed vital strategic insights about the firm. In less

than two days, the group fashioned a coherent picture of the business that they could use to understand it from various angles. They identified, for example, threats and opportunities they had never before considered.

*“It’s like, once you get all the problems on the table, you can deal with them. And that’s what we’ve done – we’ve got them on the table!”*

### Conclusion

Crafting strategy with your hands is not about strategy making the traditional way. It’s a new technique: individuals working collectively use their hands to mold more potent strategy content. Strategy work, when it is “hand-crafted,” is no longer a detached and analytical activity inside organizations; it is, instead, a chance for company strategists to experience passion, involvement and discovery while strategizing. Many managers lament the all-too-common weaknesses of their strategies: they are abstract, difficult to implement, and detached from their everyday work. The solution to these problems may be simple: Managers -- get your peoples’ hands involved!

Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence and provides education focused on continuous strategizing for selected management teams. Imagination Lab was created in mid-2000 with the generous support of people who recognize the importance of play and imagination in human life. Today, we are funded by a range of private enterprises.

## Imagination Lab

Rue Marterey 5  
1005 Lausanne • Switzerland  
Tel +41 21 321 5544 • Fax +41 21 321 5545  
[www.imagilab.org](http://www.imagilab.org) • [info@imagilab.org](mailto:info@imagilab.org)

No parts of this publication may be reproduced without written authorization  
Editor: Jennie Gertun-Olsson ([jennie@imagilab.org](mailto:jennie@imagilab.org))