

Next Practice

from Imagination Lab

Facilitating Strategy Execution

Johan Roos

Director of the Imagination Lab Foundation



Why do so many company leaders assert that “95% of strategy is execution”? Could it be that there is a wide disconnect between the abstract output of strategists and the real concerns of managers? Although they are well educated and armed with the latest management tools, many strategy-makers are constrained by blinders in the system. The conventions of corporate life force them to behave as if the intricate process of analyzing the business landscape, developing a compelling mission, or making an investment decision is only a matter of simple logic.

The unfortunate result is that most strategizing consists of overwhelmingly routine exercises governed by logical rules, resulting in thick documents and dry presentations that interest few and energize even fewer. In conforming to these expectations rather than genuinely seeking to make sense of a complex world, strategists simply produce what is expected of them – a document and/or a slideshow riddled with numbers. In a further ironic twist, hordes of consultants typically rehearse the same process, and logic, using different tools. No wonder that perhaps 95% of strategy may be about execution.

But execution can be facilitated, provided that strategists abandon some of the conventions of how to strategize. The potential for improvements is dramatic and includes the deep discovery, shared understanding, and strong commitment needed to turn credible strategy into compelling action.

Thinking alone isn't enough

When strategizing, abstract reasoning is not enough. When management students explore strategy case studies in classrooms, abstract reasoning skills suffice – the setting calls for precisely such reasoning. Unconsciously, though, many strategists do what they did in the classroom at their jobs, practicing a purely rational, objective, and context-free analysis of reality, excluding the *physiological and environmental* inputs to their reasoning. Their world instead constricts to the safe and conventional machinery of corporate life – spreadsheets, emails, flipchart,

and PowerPoint presentations. They leave out much of what actually makes us human – such as the wide-ranging input from our motor-sensory system as we physically and physiologically occupy space. Is it surprising that strategists' understanding becomes limited, that strategizing becomes a fancy budgeting exercise, and company leaders come to rely more and more on “execution” than on the ideas, suggestions and suggestions of the strategists? The real business world is no classroom, and abstract reasoning governed by logical rules will not suffice.

Over the last few years, my colleagues and I have used action research to help hundreds of strategists working in dozens of companies to create, communicate, and implement strategies, and to deal with a range of tactical and strategic issues. In this research we have seen even the best managers have difficulties identifying problems and opportunities, sharing their understanding, and suggesting coherent action. Furthermore, we have verified the idea that the reality of these strategists is shaped not only by logical proofs, but by everything that makes them human – especially how they experience space and how they use their bodies. When strategizing, people create meaning most effectively through their entire bodily experience.

The implication is, happily, unconventional. To overcome the problem of its diminishing returns, traditional strategizing needs to draw on a much broader range of bodily experience, only part of which is abstract reasoning, quantitative analysis, and logical proof. This does not mean dispensing with intellectual skills, but rather strengthening them with the sense and affect that comes from the body.

Conventional Strategizing	Embodied Strategizing
Pure thinking	Multi-sensory experience
Two-dimensional	Spatial
Abstract reasoning	Crafting together

Turning strategizing into embodied experiences

The range of activities that produce intensely multi-sensory experiences is vast. Within this range, we have identified three crucial variables that make some experiences particularly productive for strategy-makers.

1. Select an inspiring setting

First of all, embodied experience approaches require new settings. Criticized as “corporate tourism”, the thinking behind off-site management gatherings is that they help remove participants from the distractions of daily operations to focus on a specific subject. However, the deeper, implicit wisdom is that the new settings stimulate us as whole human beings, providing experiences that can yield new ideas, surfacing new relationships, or point in unexpectedly promising directions.

Since the challenge lies in remaining connected with the task at hand, selecting an appropriate milieu is not a facile task. While traditional outdoor exercises are a well-known choice for team building, their very ubiquity and familiarity suggests that they may not be the answer. But, orchestras, mountain tops, archipelagos, hospital wards, fire brigades, ancient ruins, or camp fires may. Closer to the everyday life of business, the docking station or reception area of the client or supplier, or the trading floor, may also do wonders to create conditions for seeing the familiar in new light, or entirely new knowledge about important business considerations. Vision, goals, and obstacles look, sound, feel, or smell very differently next to the violins, swinging in a cable car, or marveling at Stonehenge. Company leaders should encourage strategists to meet elsewhere and/or under entirely different circumstances than typically provided for in the office or the conference center next door. Ideally, the setting should inspire.

2. Use your hands to craft sense

For most of us, the experience of space and the production of knowledge is profoundly connected to the use of our hands. Our language is riddled with evidence of this: we try to “grasp” an issue, get a better “feeling” for what is “at hand,” etc. Furthermore, physiological research shows that when we use our hands zillions of neurons fire to help us describe, create and challenge what we are touching. Effective embodied experience activities for strategists, therefore, require participants to use their hands to identify, make sense of, and deal with problems and opportunities – to “craft sense”.

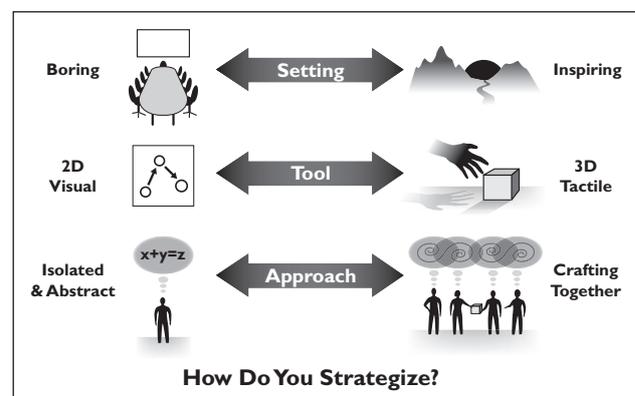
In fact, the most natural approach for strategists to use their hands is to make a visual representation of something, which in many cases may improve their output. Yet, as compelling as maps or drawings are, they are two-dimensional and flat, and so lack the crucial depth, and third dimension of space. Adding a third dimension can do wonders: for the better part of a century psychologists have shown that our ability to think spatially and to manipulate objects can dramatically improve how we make sense of things. To really understand something we may have to touch and turn it. Otherwise, we may remain “out of touch”. Company leaders should, therefore, welcome the idea that manual skills can also be useful when strategizing. Building, craft-work, or other manual activities beyond hitting a return key or moving a mouse are what is needed!

3. Make strategizing a truly shared experience

Despite the transformational power of certain individuals in organizations, strategies need to make sense to those tasked with execution. When presented with a strategy people in organizations often ask a simple question: “What does this

mean for me?” Unfortunately, the abstract reasoning of a select few risks disenfranchising many more, and often precisely those required to deliver the strategy. While vast resources are required to execute the strategy, unless it makes sense to others, at worst things just do not get done.

Sharing ownership of a strategy is easier said than done, but crafting strategies with your hands in an inspirational setting helps. Seeing, hearing and feeling together creates the conditions for the new shared understanding, deep discovery and strong commitment required for a smooth transition into the actual execution of the strategy. When strategists and operational managers together craft their perspectives and desires into a single coherent whole, the journey to execution is likely to be easier.



Conclusion

By transforming the strategy process from one dominated by abstract reasoning to a richer bodily experience, strategists can gain the deep discovery, shared understanding and strong commitment that facilitates strategy execution. But precisely because they trigger emotions and sometimes startling perceptions, the use of such experiences in strategy is a delicate process. Managers must select new and stimulating contexts, involve the right sort of manual activities, and work this together with the people tasked with execution. To reap the potential benefits, stage and facilitate such activities with great care.

The ideas in Next Practice represent the collective interests of the Imagination Lab Foundation research team. Contact Johan Roos (johan@imaginationlab.org) if you are interested in the topic of this issue.



Imagination Lab

Rue Marterrey 5
1005 Lausanne • Switzerland
Tel +41 21 321 5544 • Fax +41 21 321 5545
www.imaginationlab.org • info@imaginationlab.org

Established in 2000, Imagination Lab Foundation is a non-profit research foundation that conducts research on play, imagination and emergence as it relates to life, primarily in organizations.

Editor: Johan Roos (johan@imaginationlab.org)
Editorial Associate: Antoinette Price