

Cases

Solution Focused Strategy Canvassing

An Approach To Enabling Collective Effort In Making Strategy Happen

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Abstract

An organisation's strategy by its nature influences the conversations of tens, hundreds or the thousands of people influenced by it. The default position in strategy planning and management is a problem focus. This paper explores the application of Solutions Focus (SF) to strategy facilitation. In particular, through the example of a case study, the paper describes the use of SF 'strategy canvassing' as a way to support managers to develop and implement strategy in practical and pragmatic ways so people at all levels in the organisation are aligned in collective effort: pulling on the same rope, at the same time, and in the same direction.

The word 'strategy' is often met with a sense of dread. In many cases the dread is justified: strategy can frequently turn into a meaningless exercise consisting of attending drawn out problem focused away days and producing a hefty document that few read or engage with.

So is strategy a useless exercise or are there other, less dreadful ways of tackling it? The case for strategy is compelling – it provides the framework for governance and direction that all organisations need to succeed. Hence, it is certainly not a useless exercise. More open to creative

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suggestion are the approaches to doing it. This paper draws on the first author's experience of utilising the SF approach in strategy facilitation. In particular, through the example of a case study, the paper describes the use of SF 'strategy canvassing' as a way to support managers to develop and implement strategy in practical and pragmatic ways so that people at all levels in the organisation are aligned in collective effort: pulling on the same rope, at the same time, and in the same direction.

SF and Strategic Planning

Vision and mission statements have become standard parlance in organisations, whether public or private, in whatever sector and, increasingly, on whatever continent. The need to have a future orientation is accepted wisdom to many managers. The issue in strategic planning is the weighting of focus between past, present and future frames. Where the weighting falls dictates the predominance of the conversation in the organisation – all too often this being problem saturated talk focused on the past to tackle the present – the future focused vision statement being a neglected poster on the wall.

How come the obsession with past and present when strategy is so much about the future? Think of a line connecting two points 'A' and 'B' (see Figure 1). 'A' represents the present – here and now. 'B' is the future – an organisation's vision.

Most organisations engage in 'A-to-B' planning. They define a vision ('B'), then focus in depth on their current position ('A') and action plan forward – moving 'A' to 'B'. This is traditional gap analysis. SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis and the like are conducted post vision-setting to drill into the present position. Not being caught out by Weaknesses and Threats is a particular concern and so these aspects (risk management) will often dominate planning conversations. The result is defensive strategy-focused problem mitigation. Unexpected

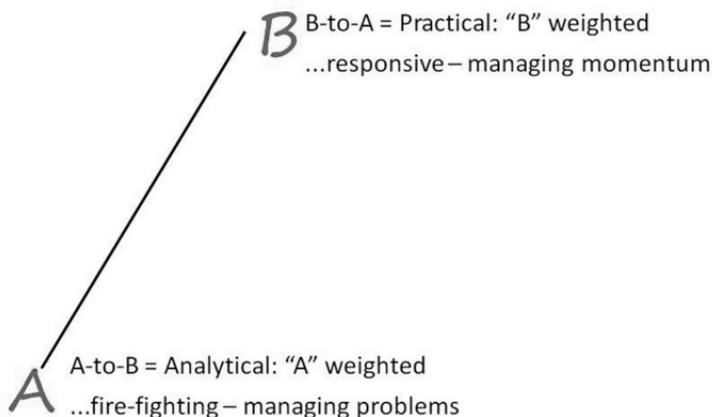


FIGURE 1. Problem (A-to-B) and solution (B-to-A) perspectives on strategic planning¹

change that inevitably appears expands the problem obsession, the result being a reactive organisation with lost vision.

'A-to-B' planning is the norm driven by ever increasing Business School tools for identifying and expanding the past orientated problem focus. SF shifts the emphasis in strategic planning to a 'B-to-A' approach. Through disciplined application of detailing a preferred future, scaling, identifying what's working and specifying signs of progress, the whole strategic planning process is literally turned on its head. In the first author's experience, "strategy canvassing" is a way of packaging SF into a wholly acceptable and credible, yet very different, way of doing strategic planning.

The Strategy Canvas Approach

Strategy canvassing has a long history, but more recently the approach has found popular appeal through the work of W Chan Kim and Renée Mauborgne on Blue Ocean Strategy[®] at INSEAD Business School (see for example "Charting Your Company's Future", *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002).

Two central principles underpin the Canvas approach:

1. Strategy needs to be defined in terms of *value delivered to customers* (or stakeholders). In this way the language of strategy is simplified and described in a way that enables a shared view of success.
2. Strategy is best represented *in a single picture* so that it can be communicated simply and rapidly, and can be reviewed with frequency and ease at all levels to ensure focused collective effort in making strategy happen.

These two principles fit hand-in-glove with an SF approach. The SF practice of detailing a preferred future brings a rigour to the first principle that goes beyond merely stating broad brush statements of the value customers may experience. Indeed, many senior managers find detailing a preferred future from a customer perspective difficult and yet enriching as it connects them back to the purpose of their endeavours – a purpose that gets lost in the traditional ‘A-to-B’ planning routines (see case study below). The second principle of simplicity again complements SF’s desire for being brief.

Mapping the links between the respective SF and strategy canvas approaches, developing a canvas with a management group will typically involve engagement with the following three sets of questions:

1. *Detailing a preferred future*
What does our strategic success look like to our customers and key stakeholders? In what ways will interactions be different? Will whom we are interacting with be different?
2. *Identifying scales that underpin the preferred future*
What are the five to eight ‘critical success factors’ (high-level aspirational objectives) that we must deliver on to have any chance of strategic success? Is each scale (‘critical success factor’) absolutely necessary to our success? Are they collectively sufficient to enable success?

3. *Graphing and multiple scaling*

On a scale of '0' to '10', how would we know we were at '10' on each 'critical success factor'? Where are we on each scale at present? What puts us at each respective score? Where is "good enough" for us; for other tiers of management? What would be signs of progress on each scale?

The final question results in a graph like the one in Figure 2. This is the strategy canvas – strategy defined in a simple picture. Once this is agreed, a management team can play with it in a variety of ways: strategic assets (strengths) analysis, comparing competitor profiles to their own, conducting SWOT analysis, and even scenario planning. The consistent theme to these activities is the need for management to safeguard and progress the scales – the critical success factors underpinning the vision. As such, senior managers manage forwards and are more likely to grasp opportunity as well as safeguard against risks. This is in contrast to an 'A-to-B' planning approach where managers are problem fixers and, at best, are maintaining the "status-quo" – putting problems right to stay on track. As well as enabling collective planning, the canvas is also central to the strategy cascade process, engaging tiers of management in exploring their respective contribution to the strategic critical success factors and in defining their own, local level operational plans, i.e. drawing their own canvasses.

The strategy canvas is by no means a new approach to strategic planning. However, doing it in an SF way, the nature of the planning dialogue is fundamentally different. As with any SF intervention, in whatever context, the orientation towards possibility expands people's sense of hope and empowerment – the separation of problems and solutions provides space for managers to think in new and creative ways. In an organisational change context, the simplicity of the SF dialogue implies that conversations of possibility can spread virus-like across a community of people – aligned and collective transformation hence becomes a real possibility itself. The following case

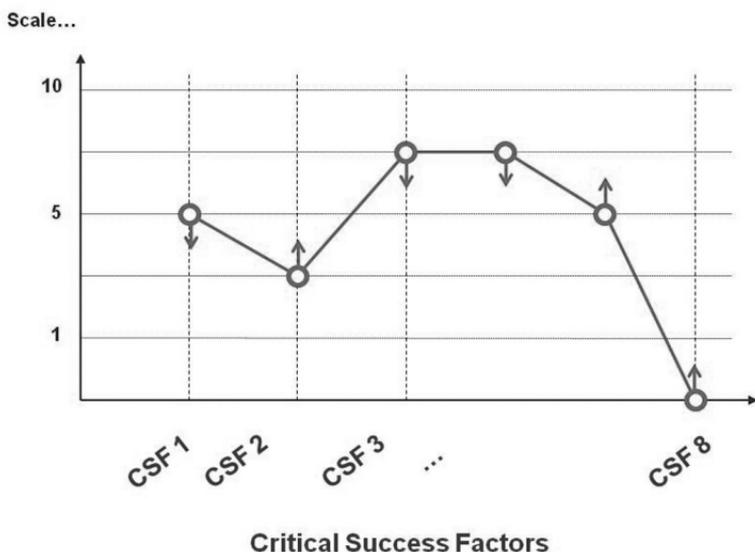


FIGURE 2. The Strategy Canvas graph (in this example including trend arrows illustrating the perceived trend of a score on its respective scale)

example illustrates the potential of the strategy canvas approach.

Strategy canvas possibilities: A case exampleⁱⁱ

This case study concerns a medium sized service organisation in the UK. Over a three year period the organisation had grown its customer base fivefold. Though financially successful, this rapid growth had created constraining dilemmas for the organisation – as put by the Managing Director (MD): “How do we maintain quality delivery in the face of continuous and expanding customer demands with limited resources and support infrastructure?” At the first contracting meeting, the MD described the organisation as being “fuelled by entrepreneurial zeal”. However, the need to stabilise the business and formalise processes was a pressing issue and one causing debilitating conflicts between various teams.

Exploring the “best hopes” from a consultant intervention, the MD stated “to lift morale and engender a sense of collective hope and effort”. Asking “what difference” this would make, the MD provided a description of people pulling on the same rope – making strategy happen in an inclusive way.

Keeping the MD’s best hopes firmly in mind, the intervention design involved three half-day events (one per month) plus one-to-one coaching support for the MD (one session post each half-day).

The first half-day involved 20 managers (including the senior team) and had the purpose of introducing people to the principles of SF dialogue and its practical use. Essentially people identified key frustrations limiting their performance and utilised an SF approach to explore their personal possibilities for progress. A follow-up one-to-one session with the MD was held two weeks post intervention. Exploring “what’s better”, the MD described small differences in interactions: in particular, greater positive collaborative interactions between key stakeholders where previously these interactions were either absent or in conflict. Of note here was the MD’s observation that there seemed to be a link between people’s preferred future descriptions and people’s subsequent “doing” in their job roles. Though signs of progress were noted to be “small”, the desire to further enhance the link between thinking and doing of the strategy set up the second intervention.

The second half-day involved the four members of the senior team drafting a strategy canvas. Having become familiar with SF in the first session, and experienced its benefits at a personal level, the team were fully engaged in developing a strategic approach that amplified an SF, B-to-A, orientation. The team worked through the stages of developing the canvas and produced a rough draft which they then worked on further as a team independently. Coaching follow-up with the MD two weeks post the second session again explored “what’s better”. A real sign of progress she had observed was the way in which the senior team had worked together – the “most collaborative and conflict-free team-

work” she had experienced. Also, she noticed that her team, having been involved in devising the canvas, were working more independently – she had noticed less need to “micro-manage” operations. The desire to further promote collaborative yet independent working into the next management tier underpinned the final session.

The final half-day involved cascading the strategy canvas approach to the 20 managers who had attended the first session – going through the same experience the senior team had. The MD used the outputs of this session to produce a finalised canvas for the business.

A last one-to-one with the MD highlighted sufficient progress against her initial best hopes to bring the work to a close. An independent “progress” review with the MD was held six months after completion of the work by the second author. Below are the MD’s verbatim comments describing the perceived ‘pay-offs’ of adopting the canvas approach:

- **Team Alignment**

“The first time we ran the strategy canvas process as a senior team, what it showed us was that in many ways we were all, as individuals, at different places on the scales. We were working against each other! The strategy canvas allowed us to rise above that. The discussions we’re now having about how we do things – for example paperwork, processes and systems – are now focused on the end result. Instead of focusing on the steps to the end point, we start with the successful end result and then work back. What that means is that we’re all aligned and get fewer and fewer surprises because we’ve worked it through as a customer would.”

- **Purpose & Creativity**

“The single biggest benefit of the canvas was re-focusing the senior team back to what we existed for. Instead of focusing on what was important to our jobs, we started to look at ourselves through the eyes of our

stakeholders. We also came away with a shared view of where we should be focusing our efforts and resources for the best advantage of our customers. We stopped getting bogged down in the hard wiring of funding, compliance, audit – in a nutshell there is a renewed sense of shared values and the creativity has come back into the team.”

- **Common Language & Shared Vision**

“Within hours of drawing our canvas, we had changed the way we do business with each other. If I had to articulate the difference in the management team from going through the strategy canvas process, it was that we had changed our language. We have changed the way we looked at our business and talk more about the success we want and strengths and resources to get there rather than the problems we don’t want and constraints. Also, the broader team are starting to articulate their part in the strategy on a daily basis. This means they are reinforcing the strategy for themselves. Hence, as a senior team we can move to actually running the business rather than being run by it.”

- **Ownership & Empowerment**

“For me, what came out of the whole group session was that the team owned the strategy within moments – relating what they do on a daily basis to strategic success. This has driven positive change in the way that the whole of the team behaves because they now have ownership of something that was previously agreed at high level and cascaded down – it was ‘show and tell’ and now it’s ‘own and do’. An example of this is dealing with unexpected change. Rather than seeing tough problems and seeking out senior managers to take responsibility, people strategy canvas the issue. In most cases, within thirty minutes we have a canvas and a way of moving forward. The way people look and deal with problems has changed. As such, every member of

the team is a leader, a shaper of the business and that is priceless in business terms.”

- **Control & Freedom**

“I think one of the biggest challenges for leaders is that you can be inspirational and you can bring everybody with you, but it takes so much time to paint the picture. What the strategy canvas does is allow people to paint their own picture, in your framework – you have control and they the appropriate freedom to get things done. And that’s its strength. If there’s one thing that has completely taken my breath away, it’s the speed at which this has moved to action. I wouldn’t have believed how empowering that could have been for every member of the team. It’s really made a difference. Being able to go to work and know you’re going to succeed, how great is that?”

Closing Thoughts

Susan Scott, author of ‘Fierce Conversations’, states: “What gets talked about in an organisation and how it gets talked about determines what will happen *or not*”. Strategy by its nature influences the conversations of tens, hundreds or the thousands of people influenced by it. The default position in strategy is a problem focus. Tools for formulating strategy predominantly emphasise past analysis and the need to identify threats and weaknesses. The types of problems that arise in making strategy happen are what can be termed as “wicked problems” characterised by inter-related extremes of uncertainty, risk, and social complexity (Rittel & Webber, 1973). They are problems that attract, like iron to magnet, a problem focus and problem talk.

The strategy canvas is one possible approach for breaking out of the problem orientation of strategy consulting and engendering, albeit in a packaged way, an SF orientation. The principles of strategy canvassing and SF are complementary. The case study outcomes presented here are those

expected from the type of dialogue SF promotes – a curiosity in a preferred future, an interest in strengths and what’s working, a desire for empowerment and for people to find their own ways to progress. The possibility illustrated in the case study is the propagation of SF dialogue amongst a community of people in a minimalist way and short time frame.

A consistent observation in facilitating the strategy canvas across an array of organisations is that the approach, underpinned by SF, supports senior managers in balancing the dilemma of retaining a sense of control whilst allowing people freedom to perform. As managers get familiar with the canvas approach and seek to embed it, inevitably they raise conversations regarding what action planning, performance management, performance monitoring and other problem-rooted management practices could look like if seen through an SF lens. The tangible possibility is a more SF-full organisation. Mae West’s wisdom may yet hold true: “Too much of a good thing can be truly wonderful”.

References

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- Chan K. W. & Mauborgne, R. (2002). Charting Your Company’s Future. *Harvard Business Review*, 80, 76–85.

Notes

- i Thanks to Haydn Rees for introducing the first author to the idea of A-to-B versus B-to-A planning.
- ii The case study was made possible by the generous cooperation of Business Base (a commercial unit of Harrow College). The Managing Director (MD) quoted is Jeannie Cohen-Brand. Many thanks to the Principal and CEO, Tony Medhurst, for permission to release the case study.

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