

The Adaptive Strategy

What do you want? What don't you want?



Howard Lees

The Adaptive Strategy

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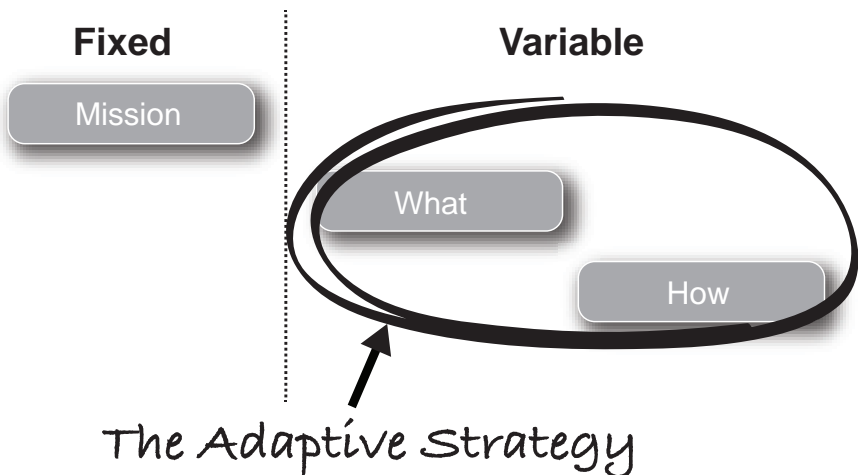
Section A: Background

1.0 Introduction

Every business or undertaking needs a ‘mission’, something simple that describes its overall reason for being. The mission of a nurse may be to ‘heal the sick’. The mission of a teacher may be to ‘create an environment for learning’. In terms of a business or organisation, it may define the product or service to be delivered, perhaps include a customer type and even location. The mission will be something that paints a clear picture of the overall pursuit in fewer than ten words; something that everyone will understand without further explanation.

“Ship this cargo from Liverpool to New York” would be the mission. The choice of vessel, route etc. would be the purview of the manager in charge, and this would be what I would call the strategy. The Captain will set out with a plan and as weather or other circumstances impact the journey, ongoing changes will be made to that strategy in order to satisfy the overall mission and a successful landing in New York. This type of strategy is an Adaptive Strategy.

The mission is fixed, but the strategy is adaptive. This is the basic tenet of this book.



Section C: Contributory Factors

13.0 Strategic, Tactical, Operational

I spoke about ‘operational brain’ and ‘strategic brain’ in chapter 4. I want to open this concept up further. This book focuses on strategy, so we have not ventured far into either tactical planning or operational detail.

The terms ‘strategic’, ‘tactical’ and ‘operational’ are from the military. ‘Strategic’ is defined as the decision where a nation or nations decide to go to war. ‘Tactical’ would be the decisions made regarding which parts of the military machine are going to do what. ‘Operational’ would be the day-to-day battle decisions. The feedback gained regularly from operations either confirms or puts doubt on the efficacy of the strategy, and points to what needs adapting.

13.1 Strategic

Many years ago, I worked for US Marine General Jack Sheehan. He used to say, “When I was Supreme Commander at NATO, I had a million people working for me, most of them in ‘operational’ mode. If I jumped down into ‘operational’ that would have made a million and one in ‘operational’ and no-one in ‘strategic’. Does that sound dumb to you?” I most certainly admired his ability to stay in strategic and never get dragged down into the detail. I now admire his ability to avoid stepping in and solving a problem. One or two searching questions followed by a “Let me know how you get on” used to irritate me, but I believe I understand the wisdom in his behaviour now. The seeds of effective delegation and responsibility germinate when leaders allow people to do their own jobs - in fact, insist on it at every turn.

It can be true that the day-to-day throws up lots of interesting problems and situations and they can be very tempting. The successful leader realises this and learns how to be a strategic leader and stays in that box despite the temptations; more strains of “let me know how you get on.”

The interesting problems that crop up day-to-day can be noted and added to the list of subjects for the next coaching session.

13.2 Tactical

This is the middle management role, the crucial bridge between the operational business and the strategic leader, board of directors etc. In large organisations, the job of the people in this layer is to figure out how to make the strategy work in the various divisions of the company.

13.3 Operational

This layer within the business is where most of the direct wealth-creators are. Most of the folks in strategic and tactical are a cost overhead, whereas most of the folks in operational do tangible things for the company. This is where the work occurs.

13.4 Stay in your lane

When the various officers within the organisation stick to their ideal zone of involvement - whether strategic, tactical, or operational - business is usually more effective. Leaders often struggle to stay in 'strategic' and dive into the detail. Similarly, managers often struggle to stay in 'tactical', as there is a constant temptation to carry out operational work, especially for those people promoted from the shop floor. There are lots of behavioural reasons why this happens, but it's mostly because 'immediate reinforcing consequences' abound down in the weeds.

For leaders, staying in strategic is hard. It requires focus and cannot be improvised. The leaders are there to stay focused and get the strategy right, and this requires strength of character. Great leaders have already learned how hard it is to see things, know the answers and still say nothing. Great leaders know that the hard-learned lessons had a great impact on their understanding of leadership. I am not saying that great leaders will stand by idly and watch someone fail. I am saying that an open question here and there is about all the interfering great leaders do.

14.0 Creating The Environment That Delivers The Strategy

Execution of the strategy occurs in the workplace; the workplace environment is created and maintained by the leadership. What would you expect from a great leader? For balance, what would a poor leader do?

The two stereotypes are extreme, however the great leaders I have encountered display most of the attributes on the left-hand side of the list below. Likewise, the poor leaders I have encountered displayed most of the attributes listed on the right. I have an idea of the proportion of these character types I have observed over the years and it weighs more on the poor leader than the good one, sadly.

Great Leader	Poor Leader
Seeks out, disrupts and dismantles cliques	Maintains cliques or is unaware of them
Recognises that the leadership team, together, must decide the strategy	Carries the strategy around in their head
Is known for being calm and considered	Is susceptible to knee-jerk reactions
Works to improve quality of all relationships; is collaborative	Uses divides between executives as a source of control
People have a problem	People are a problem
Recognises that problems are too complex for any one person to have all the answers	Asserts their need to be right
Is always makings observations about patterns and routines	Reacts and wants action when there is discomfort/uncertainty

This book provides a new take on strategy - one that actually works. It explores the background to strategy, a brief history and some techniques that will help you to create a successful strategy using simple, proven scientific tools.

Its author, Howard Lees, is a British Chartered Civil Engineer. In 2004 he set up Hollin Ltd, specialising in Behavioural Management Techniques (BMT), which combines applied behavioural science tools and leadership skills to improve effectiveness in organisations, businesses and projects.

"Howard has written a short handbook on strategy. Its primary value is that a reader can go through the book and reference a particular issue/problem they are facing to look for ideas. If I were going to talk to a group of aspiring leaders about strategy, I would start by saying, "I am now going to talk about what we are going to accomplish." I would call this the mission, the simple focus of everyone's attention. Then I might say, "This is how we are going to accomplish our mission." That would be our strategy.

The mission does not change; it becomes the forcing function for the organisation. It is the one thing that everyone should understand. The 'what' is going to be their strategic lists of activities. The 'how' will always be one or more variables that can change for multiple reasons.

The tools used to achieve the mission, the 360s, the performance report cards etc. all play a role in this process, but they are no substitute for a leader wandering around and politely talking about the mission and asking everyone how their current activity contributes to it. In other words, leadership is not a wiring diagram or pyramid function. Clarity of purpose (mission), the list of activities (the what) and leading the change process (the how) are what Howard is discussing in this exceptionally readable book."

- General Jack Sheehan, USMC, Retired.



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