

STRATEGY DEFINED AND REDEFINED

There are volumes of material that attempt to define strategy. They borrow from every discipline and philosophy. They bring together economic and social themes. They reflect upon the human condition and the talents of people. We believe that strategy means different things to different groups. We are comfortable with the collections of theories about strategy and the concoctions of strategic practice in business. We find that most organizations are not so comfortable in their approach to balancing strategy discipline and practice. Strategy remains elusive as a concept, a disjointed practice.

The matter comes down to this, however. Business research shows that there is little relationship between strategy and performance. That is troubling, if taken at face value. It surely bothers academics like McGill Professor Henry Mintzberg, as he expressed in his 1994 book, *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*. We think this challenge begs another view of what strategy really means, and what it's all about. A better, more useful definition of strategy is surely in order, and taking a broader approach to strategy is a start.

Strategy is something that can be described in many ways. We can look at strategy as a set of ideas that give meaning to a business. Strategy supports ***meaning and purpose***. Strategy frames enterprise intention, identity and ideology. Strategy shapes what a company stands for, what it's all about in the world, what it has evolved from, and what it intends to become. Strategy is a company's rationale for existence. ***Strategy is the agenda for growth, performance and change, and we use that as the fundamental premise of this book, and our work.*** The strategic agenda is the big idea here.

We can also look at strategy as an ***intellectual process***. It's how we learn, and it's how we go about the engagement of learning in the business. What we see in the business and how we process our thoughts about the business are sometimes the exclusive domain of our so-called "strategic thinkers" in the organization. In successful companies, we're convinced that strategic thought, behavior and action are the province of people at every level, in every corner of the organization. We need to disperse the processes of strategy, so that we get the right people engaged in the right manner, in the right mode. This is too important to be left to a few strategy wonks.

Strategy is a *cultural component* in organizations, reflecting the company's values, tendencies, ethos and principles. Some companies have cultures that are curious and discerning in their strategic behaviors. Some companies are seemingly oblivious to the linkages between culture and strategy. Some blend perspective, discovery and adventure in their strategy. Some adhere to strong and steady principles. Strategy is manifested, more or less, in company cultures. This is a part of the reason why strategic change can be tough. The attitudes of stakeholders toward strategy are important as change catalysts. Many people have a stake in the strategy.

Strategy is a *mechanistic process* as well. It's used to gauge decisions and direction. It connects analytic and creative activity. It provides order. It sets the context for action through pathways and processes. It helps define and engage priorities. Strategy organizes ideas and people. It seeds a company's agenda, and in that context, it puts boundaries around what could be done, and what should be done to drive business success. Strategy is really a prime collaborative device, connecting business thought and behavior.

Above all, strategy is what *informs business evolution*. Strategy nags us to transform our business models and our business intentions. It provokes us to consider our challenges and our opportunities. It forces us to ask the most difficult questions about direction and execution. It sometimes tests our values and principles. It introduces ideas that disturb our status quo, our comfort levels. It encourages risk and it mitigates risk. Strategy makes us think hard about where we've been and where we're headed, and the reasons for our business existence. It challenges who we are.

In summary, strategy is something that deals with meaning and purpose, intellectual practice, culture, planning, mechanics and the essence of business evolution. We need a pragmatic framework that encompasses each of these ideas. We need a framework that is more relevant to everybody responsible in the business. Such a framework would help us think about the business in evolutionary terms. It would provoke what some refer to as fierce conversation about the key issues that shape the key choices of the company. Strategy is all of these things. Strategy is everything that goes into the agenda for growth, performance and change, and it sets the way we think and act. As such, strategy is a broad and dynamic responsibility, one that may extend well beyond orthodox planning practices.