



Strategy emerges from delivery

Agreed strategy, realised strategy, and the learning that happens in between

The concept

Strategy is rarely executed faithfully as agreed. Drawing on the Mintzbergian tradition, it helps to distinguish between agreed strategy, unrealised strategy, and realised strategy, with delivery as the crucible in which the three meet. What is realised is almost always a combination of what was planned and what was learned along the way; for organisations serious about strategy, the learning that happens during delivery is one of its principal sources, not a departure from it.

In practice

A private-sector board had grown frustrated with a management team that was, in its view, failing to deliver. A series of workshops across the year worked through the proposition that delivery is always part realised and part unrealised strategy, and that the learning it generates is the point rather than the problem. The board's delegations and monitoring tools were redesigned so that governance and management could each play their proper part.

Questions we ask in client strategy conversations

- What did we set out to do, and what has actually come to pass in the past twelve months?
- Where has emergent practice taken us in directions we did not anticipate, and what should we make of that?
- Which parts of the agreed strategy have proven unrealisable, and what does their unrealisation tell us?
- If we asked those closest to delivery what the real strategy has become, how would they describe it?

Questions to ask yourselves

- Are we holding too tightly to an agreed strategy that the world has quietly overtaken?
- Do we treat divergence between intent and outcome as failure, or as information?
- When we last updated our strategy, did the evidence come from inside delivery or from a document review?
- Have we built the discipline of reflection into delivery, or is it the first thing abandoned under pressure?

Red flags we look for

- Strong attachment to the agreed strategy in the face of mounting evidence that it is not being realised.
- No visible mechanism by which learning from delivery feeds back into strategy refresh.
- A tendency to describe deviation from plan as underperformance rather than as adaptation.
- Strategy refreshes that take place on fixed cycles regardless of what has been learned in the interval.