



Working towards achieving strategic outcomes

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For me, developing a strategy is like climbing a tall tree. When you're on the forest floor you're surrounded by trees that obscure your view of the horizon. So, you find a tall tree and the higher you climb, the further out into the horizon you can see. At the top, senior leaders can join together to agree on a purpose, a vision of the future (intended destination), values, what success looks like, and key areas of focus to arrive at the intended destination.



While there is typically much fanfare and excitement at this point in the process, there is often a gap in understanding between those who developed the strategy and middle managers who will implement the strategy. If you climb back down the tree, all you can see is the forest, trees in all directions with no clear pathway forwards.

So, with the middle managers in tow, you need to return to the top of the tree and look out to the intended destination. This is when you start developing a shared understanding of what the future state looks like, how it will feel; you work towards developing a pathway to get from where you are today to where you want to be in the future. Using another analogy, this time from the great Pacific navigators, the journey will involve island hopping – the islands represent outcomes in strategic logic speak. They create natural points along the way to refuel, to reflect on whether you're heading in the right direction, and to consider what adjustments (if any) need to be made.

Once you've identified the islands, you then have the task of identifying critical conditions for success. On a great sea journey, this will include a fit-for-purpose ocean going vessel, ensuring that the weather conditions are conducive to travelling, that you have sufficient resources such as food, water, people with the right skills. None of these conditions are static, rather they exist in a state of flux diminishing and increasing in quality and quantity over time. More than that, the state of the islands themselves is variable – sometimes you can land, other times you can't, sometimes they're visible and other times they might be hidden from view.

So what does all this mean for agencies looking to achieve their strategic outcomes, to arrive at that intended destination – future state?



I can think of three key areas that need careful consideration.

Firstly, while still at the top of the tree, public agencies need to take time to envision the future state in terms of the outcomes story they want to tell – what difference they’re trying to make. At Allen + Clarke, we’ve been using an engaging, creative, visual storytelling approach to work with clients through this process. A key advantage of visual storytelling is that it supports the development of a deep shared understanding of what the future state looks like at different time periods, such as in the short-, medium- and long-term, and the critical conditions (enablers) for success.

A dark blue banner with a background of colorful, abstract icons and lines in shades of green, blue, and yellow. The text is white and centered. On the left, there is a DNA helix icon, a leaf, and a gear. On the right, there is a bicycle icon and a group of people icon.

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The next area involves working back from the vision and the outcomes to identify the goals, objectives and initiatives involved. It shows the flow of change from action to impact; how the different components are connected by mapping out the intended pathway, from implementing specific initiatives through to realising our vision. This approach is useful for signalling what expected changes and success looks like and how we can get there. It can be used to identify any co-dependencies between initiatives and/or objectives, to determine which outcomes need to be achieved first in order for other outcomes to be achieved. It also enables us to measure progress towards our desired short-, medium- and long-term outcomes and

ultimately our vision. In turn this information can act as a feedback loop indicating when we need to adjust our approach to stay on track.

The third area involves identifying which outcomes are directly within an organisation's control, which outcomes you have influence over, and which outcomes are of interest. Even those outcomes that appear to be directly within an organisation's control are typically impacted by the broader system. Complex systems theory teaches us that unless the broader conditions are conducive to sustained change, outcomes return to the status quo as soon as energy and resource into changing these outcomes stop. More than that, although we might be carrying out the right types of initiatives, there may be no or minimal early indications of success, and what indications there are may be not much more than an illusion. In essence we may be making temporal improvements, essentially going round and round in circles, before returning to the original state. To make a sustained long-term difference, organisations need to adopt a more holistic approach, to look at the entire ecosystem, to identify what conditions across the system would need to be met for an outcome to become sustainable. This requires organisations to think more broadly about who their stakeholders are, who they need to work with, and what conditions would need to be in place for a sustained change in outcomes.

Adopting this broader systems approach requires us to reconsider our starting point, at the top of the tree. There are a number of questions I think need to be answered. For example, as we look out to the horizon do we want to take everything on board that we can see, or do we need to put in boundaries? What organisations or stakeholders do we need to connect with or start developing relationships with that also have an interest in the outcomes we're seeking to achieve? What might their involvement be when developing our strategy or strategic plan? It is clearly not possible to address everything within a system; I think there needs to be careful consideration of what is manageable and clarity about the rationale behind the decisions that are made and their potential impact.



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