



Liberating Strategy

Surprise and Serendipity Put to Work

By Keith McCandless and Johannes Schartau

*To be prepared against surprise is to be trained.
To rely on surprise is to be educated. James P Carse*

Overview

Organizations need a strategy to turn ideas and ambitions into reality. Individuals need a strategy to evaluate the interplay of their purpose and their actions. Traditional strategic planning is often characterized by the assumption that the future is going to play out across a relatively predictable path toward a fixed point. A “single monolithic plan” is drafted, typically accompanied by a stay-the-course, no-surprises tactical gameplan. This approach is at odds with the reality of unpredictable dynamics and fast moving markets. The idea of a linear future clashes with a rapidly changing environment and leaves companies inflexible and exposed to the risk of sudden disruption.

At the same time, methods like Agile development are enjoying growing popularity. These regularly lead to a different strategic mindset: one of reacting to dynamics in the moment, without shaping the future in a meaningful way. The future is seen as so complex and unpredictable that strategic planning is futile and unnecessary. This creates a “no plan” work culture where every whim seems like a good idea and every action feels successful.

Whenever a strategy is created it is usually done rarely and only by a selected handful of people. These select few are often removed from day to day work. They lack direct customer or market interaction. As such they miss out on crucial information that could influence the strategy. They then need to sell the results to the rest of the organization and fight resistance against a narrative that feels out of touch.

In this monograph, we propose an alternative method. We illustrate “how to” with a hypothetical business school example. The method poses six simple questions to be answered together by students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni stakeholders using Liberating Structures. A compelling strategic narrative is authored, owned, and then operated by everyone.

Together, Shaping a Compelling Story About a Business School

With this liberating method, school stakeholders specify their collective purpose, future operating context, complex challenges, baseline realities, shared ambitions, and a portfolio of investments as separate topics and as an interrelated whole. Each student, faculty member, or alumni has a story to tell in their own voice: “The **purpose** of our school is to develop leaders so skillful that organizations create entirely new positions for them.

Over the next ten years, we will operate in a critically uncertain **context** in regard to affordability and competition... and we make plans to succeed in whatever future unfolds. Unflinchingly, we face **paradoxical challenges** that include training students to succeed in today’s jobs while preparing them to shape a better future. We regularly revisit our **baseline** commitments to each other to coordinate across diverse functional and disciplinary boundaries. We tap our deepest **ambitions** and generate actionable plans by repeatedly exploring “what is possible now for our school and students?” And finally, we take **action** and **evaluate** our portfolio of strategic investments to advance our purpose in fast iterative cycles.”

This method includes and unleashes more people than ever before. This method is so firmly grounded in the present moment that we can act our way into a brighter future. This method continuously reacts, probes, invents, evaluates, and shapes at the same time. This method relies on surprise and plans for serendipity, not relying on the past as proxy for the future. This method can be applied immediately to liberate your strategic planning.

You may be starting to wonder if we, the authors, are hopeful dreamers. Yes, and we have our feet on the ground. The ideas and ideals we outline are nearly worthless if they can’t be put into practice. You will need methods to be able to do this, however. And there is a simple way to get started.

Background: Strategic Planning *Liberated*

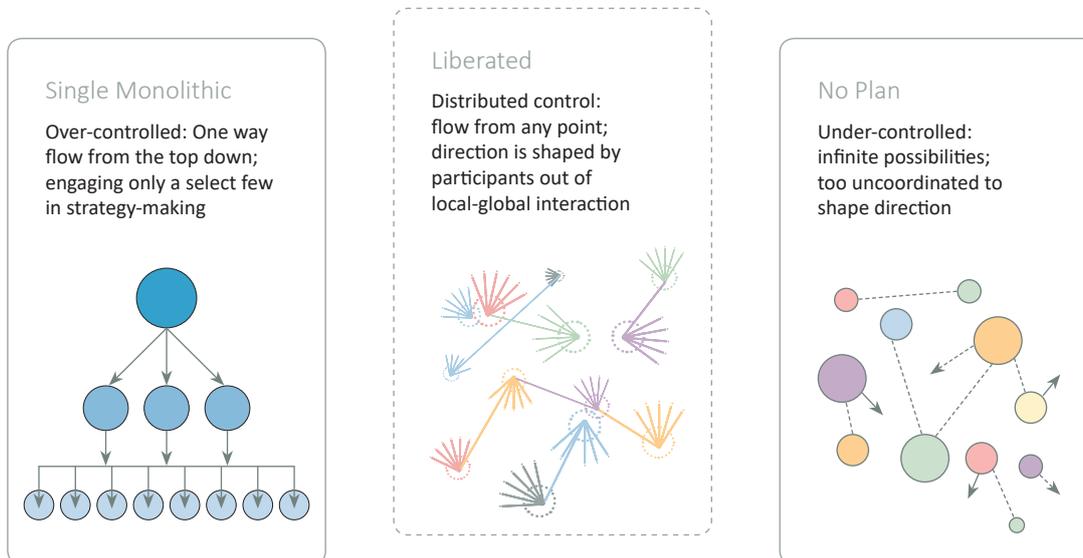
Liberating Strategy begins and ends with [Liberating Structures \(LS\)](#). They are simple rules that make it possible to include and engage every voice in shaping the future and strategy. The LS repertoire consists of 33 practical methods versatile enough for anyone to use for a wide array of activities and challenges. None require expert training.

These methods spark lively engagement by minimally structuring the way we interact while liberating content or subject matter. Very simple constraints unleash creative adaptability, generating possibilities where none seemed to exist before.

Liberating Structures (LS) can be used to not only create a different kind of strategy but also to transform the whole process of strategy-making. The approaches described below will help you:

1. keep the complexity of challenges you face intact (not flattening or over-simplifying)
2. balance predictability and unpredictability of possible futures (not putting all your eggs in one basket or losing yourself in a multitude of possibilities)
3. widen the circle of participation in strategic planning (not relying solely on a small circle of experts or leaders)

The Liberated approach to strategy is a way for each person and each organization to have influence and agency without attempting to predict the future with precision. It is neither over-controlled nor under-controlled. We continuously shape it without controlling it. It is a middle path between the single monolithic and the no plan extremes of strategy making.



To make strategy more responsive to emergent challenges and nascent opportunities, the Liberated approach invites each person to explore the interplay of action and purpose continuously (not relegated to the annual strategy retreat). Individually and collectively, participants pay close attention to how choices open and close possibilities to make progress toward a worthy purpose. Freedom and responsibility for strategy is part of every role in an organization. Participants act-and-sense their way forward as strategy is mutually shaped in the moment. Because the acting-and-sensing approach is distributed and linked to a shared purpose, strategy-making can be infused into everyday activities.

Key differences between the single monolithic, no plan, and Liberated approaches to strategy-making are outlined below.

	Single Monolithic	No Plan	Liberated
Core Concept	Predict and control; stay the course	Follow trends and react with agility and velocity	Designed serendipity; rigorous attention to what is possible now to advance purpose
Prediction	Multi year forecast	Limited or short-term forecasting	Long-term focus on plausible futures with short term sensing-probing
Influence	Small circle formulates the strategy	Product teams attend to new products and new features	Distribute strategy-making to everybody across scales
Goals	Company wide vision and goals	Product oriented goals	Continuously refresh goals as you act, learn, and fail forward
Implementation	Top-down rollout + buy in strategies + alignment initiatives	Implementation and tactics distributed to product teams	Distribute rapid-cycle implementing and evaluating across scales
Coordination	Tight coordination cascading down	Loose coordination across units	Both tightly integrated and loosely coordinated via Min Specs
Inclusivity	Frontline and middle have limited influence	Frontline and middle have influence on product features	Everybody is making sense of what is happening and shaping next steps
Surprises	Failure to plan comprehensively	Expected disruption	Serendipitous opportunities

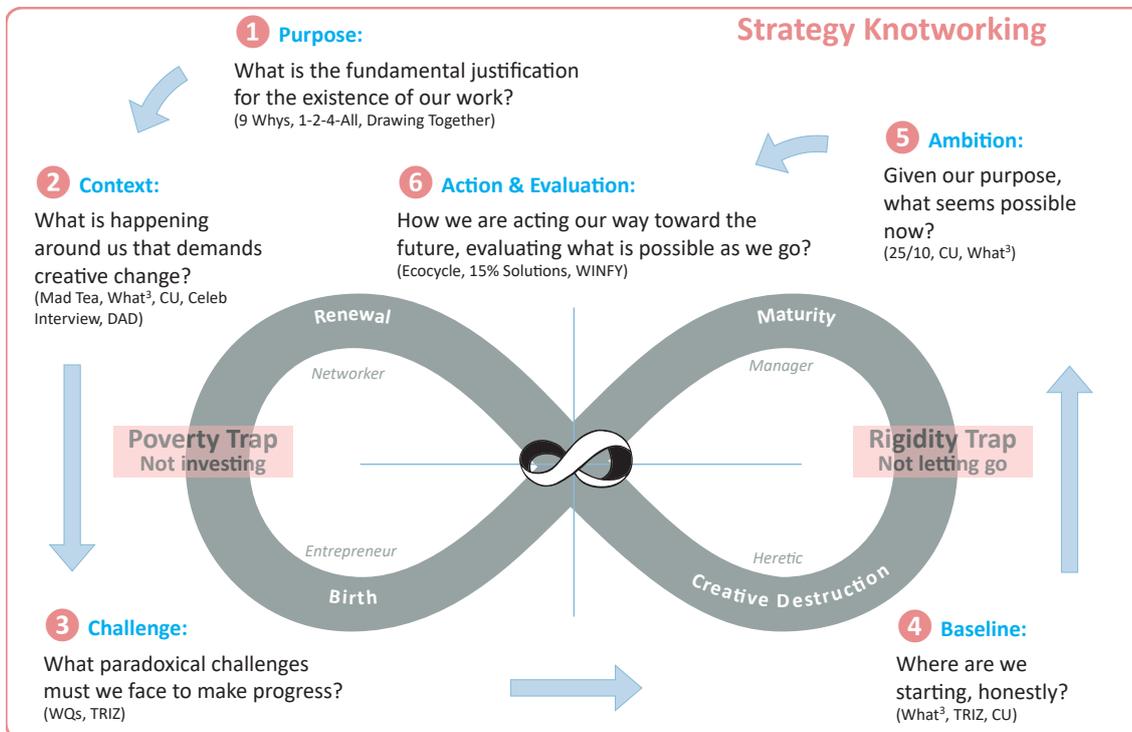
Exploring a Liberated approach to strategy that accepts serendipity and surprise seems simultaneously heretical and naïve. Methods that help us gain from surprise and rely on serendipity are not well developed or taken seriously. Even more heretical, we suggest that long-term forecasts, ambitious goals linked to the forecast, and step by step implementation schemes can be counterproductive. They narrow and cloud a more dynamic range of productive options that arise unexpectedly. As comedian Lily Tomlin suggests, reality is only a consensual hunch.

Generating Strategy for Everybody to Own and Operate

A productive starting point for liberating strategy is anchored in six core questions. This set of questions is an approach called Strategy Knotworking. It introduces a dynamic, iterative, and adaptive way of planning with groups of any size. The questions are explored in order 1-2-3-4-5-6 but the answers order themselves as the relationships among the answers take shape.

1. Purpose: What is the fundamental justification and deepest need for our work?
2. Context: What is happening around us that demands creative change?

3. Challenge: What are the paradoxes we must face in order to make progress?
4. Baseline: Where are we starting, honestly?
5. Ambition: Given our purpose, what seems possible now?
6. Action and Evaluation: How are we acting our way toward the future, evaluating what is possible as we go?



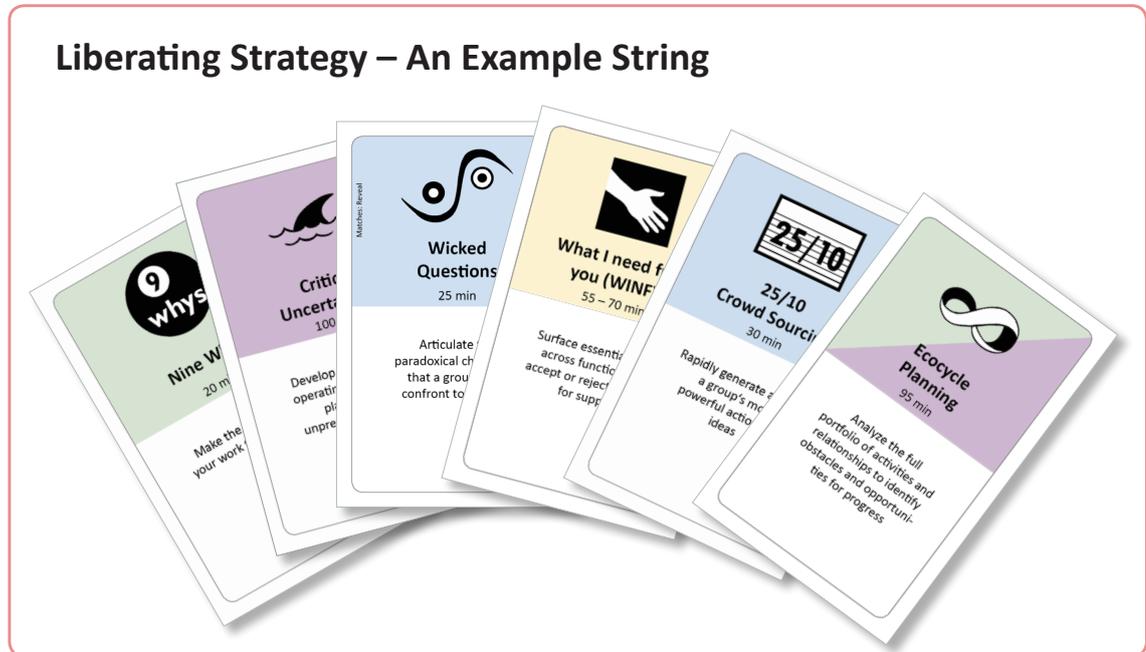
Six **Strategy Knotworking** questions arrayed graphically with LS methods useful for answering each question in parentheses. A visual approach reinforces the sequence of answers that reveal a story unfolding.

Together, these six questions help to compose a strategic narrative that is owned and operated by everyone. The process of answering them is nonlinear and the answers get constantly refreshed as new data are gathered, synthesized, and integrated into practice over months or years. Further, each question sparks more detailed questions that illuminate more layers and additional options. For example, in **Action and Evaluation** How are we acting our way toward the future, evaluating what is possible as we go? sparks: How are we cultivating more adjacent possibilities?; and, What do we need to stop doing that is no longer delivering value?

The whole set of interrelated answers becomes a compelling story of where we have been and how we are moving forward – much more than the individual elements reveal. Additionally, a variety of Liberating Structures are employed to make it possible to include more voices well beyond the small circle of usual suspects in generating answers. Shaping answers together builds ownership, trust, and momentum for action.

Liberating Structures Matched To Six Core Questions

Illustrated below are examples of specific Liberating Structures that we use frequently to answer the six Strategy Knotworking questions. These LS or others as simple as [1-2-4-All](#) can be used to explore the questions with depth and breadth.



Step by step, progress on each element builds on and informs the next piece of the complex puzzle. With the use of the Strategy Knotworking questions as a map of the territory under exploration, an exciting strategic narrative begins to take shape. Strategy-making is never static. Everyone is connected, making unique contributions to shared challenges, and relying on one another to generate ideas. LS distributes control in a way that helps people transcend functional roles and positions. The gulf between the deciders and the doers narrows. Most importantly, trust and relationships among the participants deepen and expand as the work progresses.

The need for elaborate buy-in schemes and incentives after the fact fades away because participants jointly own and operate the results. The small circle of strategists gets much wider. With people working in synchrony, momentum arises from all voices authoring their future. The results are non-linear, more than the sum of the parts. And yet, the work proceeds step-by-step.

Step 1. Purpose

9 Whys to clarify the fundamental justification and deepest need for your work



9 Whys clarifies the deepest need for your work before you start developing a plan. A powerful purpose may be worthy-yet-elusive, giving meaning to every step of your journey and yet never fully realized. It provides a touchstone for individuals, justifies your work to the larger community, and helps each individual evaluate the interplay of intention-and-action in their day to day work. Plus, clarity and boldness will attract others and lend depth to your actions. Internal and external stakeholder interviews – using 9 Whys – inform and deepen purpose clarity.

To do this, participants are asked to form pairs and each generate a list of current activities related to the organization’s strategy. One in each pair then starts an interview asking the other one why it is important to them and their community to engage in these activities. By waiting for the answer and asking the same question again and again the interviewer gently leads the interviewee to discover the hidden or deeper purpose behind these activities. Other questions like “If last night, while you slept, your dream came true, what would be different?”, “Why would people spend their money with you?”, or “Why would leaders want you to operate your business or your school in their region?” can be asked as well. Ideally, the group comes up with a purpose statement in the form of “We exist to stop or end...” or “We exist to start...”. Below, “stopping” and “starting” examples are generated by diverse business school stakeholders using 9 Whys.

A graphic titled '9 Whys' with the subtitle 'Make the purpose of your work clear'. It features a large background number '9' and the word 'whys' in large white letters. On the left, three blue speech bubbles contain the questions: 'What is the fundamental justification for the existence of our school?', 'Why is it important?', and 'What is the deepest need we serve?'. On the right, under the heading 'We exist to:', there are two bullet points: a red minus sign followed by 'end the myth that business as usual will solve chronic social problems' and a green plus sign followed by 'develop leaders so skillful that organizations create entirely new positions for them'. A small '9 Whys' logo is in the top left corner of the graphic.

The Central Clarifying Role of Purpose

Traditionally, a strategy shows the way to achieve a (long-term) goal. This is usually what is being presented to “the doers”. The underlying reasons of why this goal is desirable remain fuzzy. Further, the reasons may not be clear to the people who develop the strategy. When you ask a senior leader you generally get vague answers like, “The company needs money to stay in business,” or “We need to keep our shareholders happy!” That’s not a purpose.

We define purpose as the fundamental reason for a group or an activity to exist. It gives meaning to every step along the way. The reason frequently identifies a deep human or social need. It shapes a group’s identity and informs individual actions. It guides discernment of what is “in” and what is “out”. A purpose is the difference between letting someone know what to do and letting them know why to do something.

Examples of well-crafted purpose statements include:

- we exist to reduce suffering from all diseases for which we have treatments
- we exist to replace unwitting practices that exclude, stifle, and over-control people
- we exist to create content that educates, informs, and inspires
- we exist to give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers

In the context of liberating strategy, a clear and compelling purpose is indispensable because:

- It creates coherence in an unpredictable environment
- It never loses meaning even as the environment or market evolves
- It justifies your work to the larger community and users / customers
- It attracts more users, customers and employees to your work
- It builds understanding how each person’s role and authority serve the purpose
- When purpose is articulated by individuals, teams, and units across an organization, it builds ownership and capacity for vigorous implementation

The Difference Between Vision and Purpose

A tool that is often used in an organizational context is the vision statement. It describes a desirable, often lofty future state related to the way the company is supposed to transform and find its place in the market. We have seen several examples of organizational leaders endangering the future of their company by keeping a tight grip on their vision and ignoring reality.

Vision and purpose are not the same. While a vision projects into the future, a purpose is always true and relevant now. There are three reasons why purpose is a valid replacement for vision:

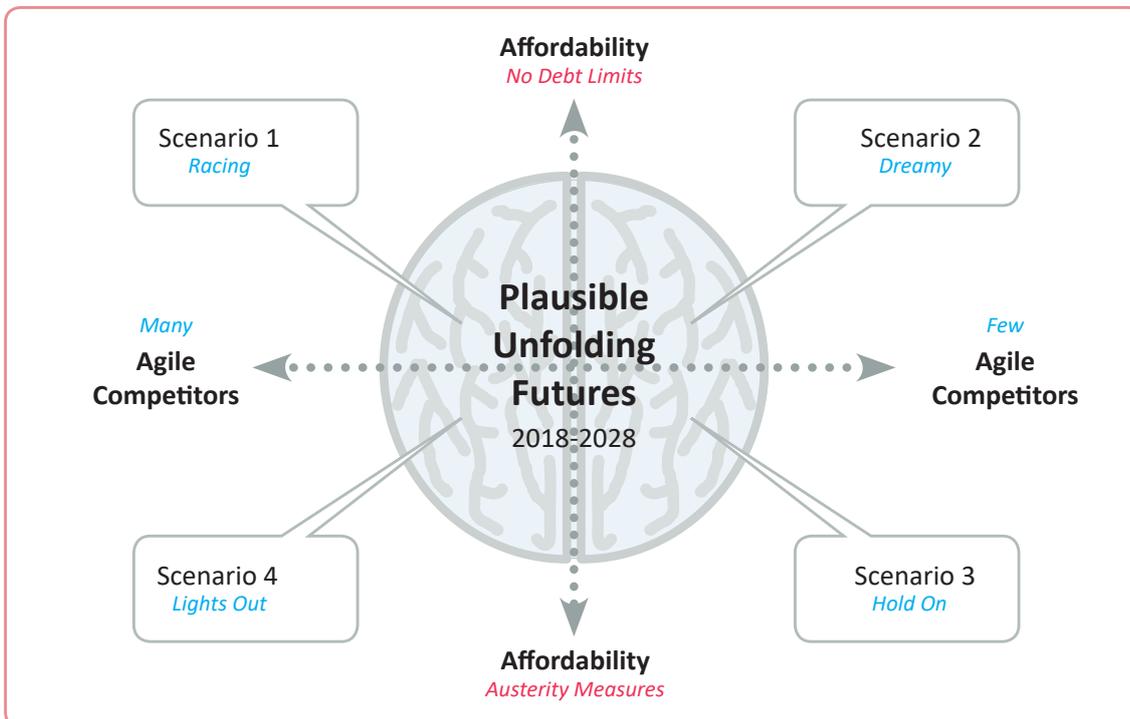
1. You can rely on being surprised. Your vision of the future will be inaccurate and may increase organization fragility.
2. Visions of the future distort how you see the present AND can keep you from noticing something better than what you envisioned is possible.
3. Visions are often too static. In practice, they are regularly used to over-control in a way that excludes purposeful variation.

Step 2. Context



Critical Uncertainties to explore what is happening around us that demands creative change and to develop options for operating in a range of plausible yet unpredictable futures (not a singular or static prediction)

This Liberating Structure prepares a group for strategy making in complex markets and environments full of surprises. It does not produce a plan to be implemented as designed but rather builds creative adaptability: the capacity to actively shape the system and be prepared to respond to surprise. This means being better able to see different futures unfolding, better prepared to act in a distributed fashion, and more ready to absorb disruptions resiliently. CU emphasizes possibilities and believing before you see.



An appreciation of plausible futures is achieved by identifying the factors that are both critical and uncertain for the organization. The example above represents two critically uncertain elements facing business school institutions: 1. affordability of education or the amount of debt a person is willing to bear; and, 2. and the number of agile, often non-traditional, competitors in the same market for students. A grid is created with the two most critical and uncertain factors making up the x and y axes in a “more of” and “less of” fashion. This creates four quadrants. The participants split into four subgroups and create a name and a short description of market dynamics for each scenario. After sharing the results the groups come up with three strategies to operate successfully in this scenario. They share the results again and then identify robust

and hedging strategies. Robust strategies work in more than one scenario. Hedging strategies only work in one but can help you adapt “just in case.” The group then debriefs and decides what to do next.

Step 3. Challenges

Wicked Questions to face paradoxical challenges that we must confront to succeed



Wicked Questions invite participants to identify the two most opposing-yet-complementary realities that make progress challenging and elusive. Then, you are invited to accept that a strategy which addresses both realities simultaneously and vigorously will help you succeed. Not an either-or but rather a more-of-both scheme.

For our business school, stakeholders wrestle with a dizzying array of managerial and pedagogic challenges. They ask themselves, “How is it that we are:

- training students to succeed in today’s jobs while preparing them to shape a better future?
- respecting faculty autonomy while integrating operations across disciplines to improve student experience?
- promoting evidence-based practices while cultivating practice-based evidence making?
- graduating specialists while preparing them to work across disciplines and boundaries?”

Autonomy and integration. Train for today and shape the future. Specialize and generalize. Participants explore how can both challenges be valid and actionable at the same time!?

Wicked Questions focus the mind, spark novel ideas among stakeholders, and guide evaluation of new options.

Step 4. Baseline



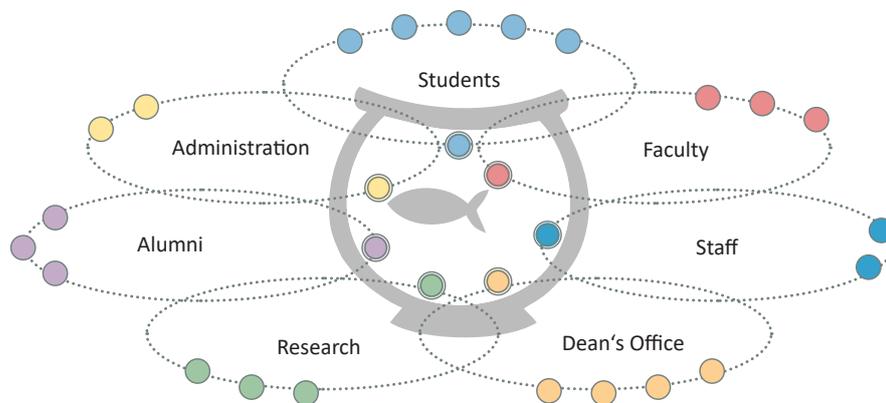
WINFY to honestly review where we are starting and to make commitments – across functions – to work out the knots

What I Need from You (WINFY) surfaces essential needs across functions and makes it possible to accept or reject requests for support. It clarifies the current state of coordination and status of working agreements. Rather than pushing or cajoling buy-in or engagement, WINFY builds trust as you go by including and unleashing every voice in sifting and sorting what is needed to succeed.

Three to seven functional clusters are asked to position themselves around the room. Using the Liberating Structure 1-2-4-All they make a list of their top needs from each of the other functions across the room. The clusters then reduce their list to the top two needs, write them down in the form of “What I need from you is...” and elect a spokesperson. All spokespersons gather in the middle of the room. One by one they state their needs to each of the other spokespersons. They take notes but don’t reply at this point.

What I Need From You

Cross-Functional Knot-Working



1. In functions, formulate top needs to operationalize your strategy
2. Elect a leader to share your needs in the Fishbowl
3. Develop & share your top needs as individual requests to each of the other 6 functions or roles
4. Answers limited to: *Yes, No, Huh?, Whatever*

For the business school, WINFY focuses attention on redesigning the curriculum and improving the student experience from admission to graduation. These are worthy-yet-elusive challenges that require interdisciplinary collaboration and cross-functional coordination. Functional groups include students, staff, faculty, alumni, research, and the dean's office. The first round of WINFY reveals a baseline plus significant room for improved coordination and opportunities to build trust as requests are sifted and sorted.

Each spokesperson returns to their group and the group formulates answers to the requests only using "yes", "no", "huh?" or "whatever". The spokespersons gather in the middle again, repeats the requests that were made to them and their answers. Again, the group debriefs and decides what to do next (via [1-2-4-All](#) or [What 3X](#)). Given the messy complexity of working cross functionally, WINFY establishes baseline commitments among participants to follow through while sharpening ongoing action and evaluation. It can be used productively before and after Ecocycle Planning (see below).

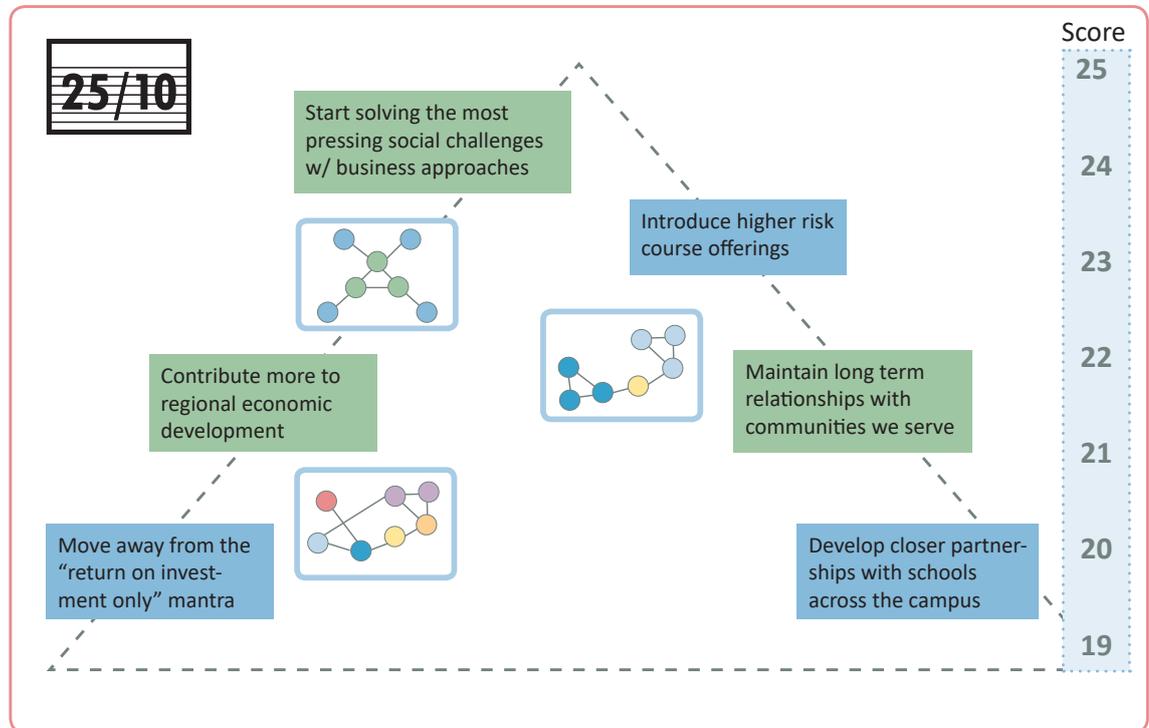
Step 5. Ambition

[25/10 Crowdsourcing](#) to generate ambitious and actionable plans by reflecting on our purpose and what is possible now

25/10 Crowdsourcing is used to rapidly generate and sift a groups most powerful ideas. Each participant is asked to come up with and write down their boldest-yet-actionable idea for moving forward. In quick cycles the ideas are passed around and rated on a scale from one ("I would not want to spend any time on this idea.") to



five (“I’m in and will fully support this idea!”). The scores are summed up and the top 10 ideas ranked. In the business school example, bold ideas are linked to market dynamics revealed in Critical Uncertainties and the 9 Whys purpose. Ideas for shifts in internal operating structure (illustrated via Network Pattern Cards) and competitive market strategies are illustrated below.



The anonymity of scoring makes it possible for the group’s most varied and powerful ideas to rise to the top, independent of who came up with them. Given the group’s purpose and unique context, the participants debrief and decide what actions are possible now (via [1-2-4-All](#) or [What 3X](#)).

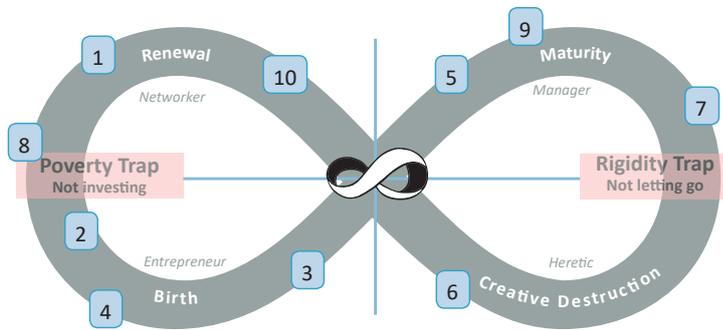
Step 6. Acting and Evaluating

Ecocycle Planning to review how we are acting our way forward toward the future, evaluating the full portfolio of our activities and relationships looking for opportunities and obstacles



Ecocycle connects each participant to current activities and relationships and invites them to react continuously, evaluating, and shaping next steps. Participants learn from failing forward and are invited to creatively destroy to make space for innovation.

Business School Ecocycle Planning



Key Activities:

1. Implementing new internal organizing patterns across faculty departments
2. Making choices about faculty hiring priorities
3. Reinforcing international partnerships with other universities
4. Invest heavily in innovation teaching and pedagogy
5. Resign how career fairs operate
6. Actively convening the regional business community
7. Seed funding of student clubs that advance a higher purpose
8. Fundraise for an urban social venture fund
9. Establish an international incubator/ consulting firm
10. Review and reallocate endowment funds toward social benefit

The participants are invited to map the organization's portfolio on an Ecocycle template, as in the example above. The graphic illustrates a set of top 10 strategic activities generated by school stakeholders. With 25/10 Crowdsourcing ambitions and WINFY cross-functional commitments in mind, each activity advances the school's purpose.

After there is consensus about the placement of each item, the group is invited to come up with action steps to stop activities stuck in the Rigidity Trap and start activities stuck in the Poverty Trap. Additionally, it draws attention to the portfolio as a whole. The contribution of each part can be evaluated by everyone simultaneously. Everyone can see the forest and the trees; the big picture and the tactical view simultaneously. Importantly, participants can mutually shape actions while evaluating past choices in rapid iterative cycles. A strategic narrative for the school and operational tactics for each activity has taken a definite shape.

Putting it all together

We believe that with Strategy Knotworking it is finally possible to deliver on the promise of a Liberated Strategy. More people than ever can participate in the creation of a strategic narrative through the use of Liberating Structures. Answering the Knotworking questions takes all the participants seamlessly from purpose over ambition to action. It becomes surprisingly easy to not just talk about lofty aspirations but immediately take steps towards making them a reality across an entire organization. While doing so this new approach keeps the ambiguous nature of complex challenges intact, without oversimplifying or prematurely killing valuable options.

By regularly inspecting the current situation and looking out into multiple futures we avoid betting the farm on a single outcome. At the same time this method is specific enough so that the group doesn't get lost in a multitude of perspectives. Liberating Structures reveal a wide array of [adjacent possibilities](#) in the immediate future that grow as they are explored. Rearranging and combining ideas that are possible now generates immediate movement. Each exploration

opens a neighboring door... and another adjacent door. Most combinations fail but they reveal the next possibility. And, a few succeed spectacularly.

Artifacts are created that can be used and inspected continuously in day-to-day interaction without having to wait for the next retreat. Thus, the strategic focus easily becomes part of everyday action and evaluation.

All you have to do is get started.

Implications and Next Steps

*History says, Don't hope / On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime / The longed-for tidal wave / Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme. Seamus Heaney*

The path toward liberating strategy often begins with one or two people intent on finding a more effective approach. Going all in is not always possible or practical. We recommend that you start simply by conducting action research with people who play diverse roles in your organization. With a personal touch, interview individuals with the Strategy Knotworking questions. It could be one question at a time or all together in brief 15- to 30-minute sessions. You can conduct the interviews yourself or invite pairs of your colleagues to interview each other. For example, the string of questions could include: What is the deepest need we serve? What do you think justifies our work to others? What do you see happening around us that demands innovation? What tough paradoxical challenge are we avoiding but must face down? Really, where are we starting? If your dream came true last night, what do you hope and believe is possible? What are we exploring right now that reveals new possibilities? Simply posing these questions and comparing answers may spark interest in taking a deeper dive with Liberating Structures.

To sharpen the first answers and bring strategy-making into the fabric of routine work, more experience across the organization is required. The inclusive trust-building LS approach makes it possible and relatively easy to spread this way of working to more people. We recommend using one or a handful of the LS described above into your next strategy retreat or meeting.

Building on momentum with your colleagues, three Liberating Structures are well suited for periodic use to spread participation in strategy-making. These include [Critical Uncertainties](#), [Ecocycle Planning](#), and [WINFY](#). In monthly or quarterly sessions, strategy-making is acted out via updating the diverse experience of participants. Every bit of customer knowledge, market opportunity, and user experience comes into play as sharper answers to the six key questions – about purpose, context, baseline, challenge, ambition, action & evaluation – come into focus. The explorations launched and patterns experienced with Strategy Knotworking set the stage for strategy-making as part of everybody's work every day.

We are not suggesting this will be easy. However, we recommend that you try it. Liberated strategy-making is a radically different orientation to the future, strategy, and leadership. For leaders, it invites you to responsibly let go of control. To be in charge but not in control. This will take imagination to believe before you see.

You are inviting every person in an organization to notice threads in the present that if tugged might unravel a more attractive future. You are inviting every person to notice how hints of a more ideal future are present now – just not widely distributed yet. Rather than imposing a monolithic plan to be implemented or defaulting to no plan, you build momentum, imagination, and confidence in noticing subtle and incremental signals. This increases capacity to actively shape next steps and pounce on opportunities.

What We Hope and Believe Is Possible

At the heart of all of this lies a much bigger change. The creation of an alternative to conventional approaches to strategy-making doesn't only touch the use of methods. It starts with the very definition of the word strategy. The fundamental understanding of what that word actually means has to change.

An approach like Strategy Knotworking transcends the conventional definition of strategy as a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim. [Source: Google Search] Our own working definition of the term addresses directly the complexity of responding creatively in dynamic markets.

Strategy is a collective activity / designed to make progress continuously / on a worthy yet elusive purpose / by focusing on and sharpening the interplay of actions & intention.

For strategists of all stripes, we are inviting you to: accept that surprise is inevitable rather than the consequence of faulty forecasting (be kind to yourself!); move from a small circle of the usual suspects forming strategy to including every voice in shaping the future; and, trust you are shaping the future responsibly without knowing precisely what will unfold.

Our message is don't be cynical about strategy-making. Now it is possible and productive to let go of predicting the future with precision, following trends mindlessly, and seesawing between over-controlling and under-controlling. It is now possible to include every person in seeing the world as it is, to creatively adapt to what is really going on, and to shape a brighter future. It is now possible to unleash every voice to question, explore, and make strategy together.

To be prepared against surprise is to be trained.
To rely on surprise is to be educated... [and liberated](#).

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Sources and Learning Options

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About the Authors

Keith McCandless

Keith is the co-developer of Liberating Structures and co-author of *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash A Culture of Innovation* (2013). He consults with business, government, philanthropic, research, educational, and health organizations worldwide, focusing on how to address complex challenges and include everyone in shaping the future. Born in Cincinnati Ohio, he holds a Masters in Management of Human Services from Brandeis University in Boston and a BA from Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Keith lives in Seattle with his wife Annie and Deacon the whippet with talent to amuse.



Johannes Schartau

Johannes is a consultant, trainer and coach for Agile product development and organizational improvement. As a Liberating Structures enthusiast he believes in the power of collaboration and providing groups with a space to create momentum. His toolset includes systems, complexity and integral thinking, empathy, and a good dose of humor. Johannes works for the beautiful company Holisticon in Hamburg, Germany, but is active worldwide.



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