

COMMUNITY RISK REDUCTION GUIDANCE NOTE No. 3

DEVELOPING & IMPLEMENTING STRATEGY

A clear strategy to guide your Community Risk Reduction program is one of the key components for success. It provides focus, a means of organising resources and a way of attracting both attention and support from the public, politicians and partners.

Strategy is traditionally seen as a structured and disciplined process, formalised, analytical and based on a rigorous assessment of the organisation's operating environment as a means of determining future action. Here is a simple process model;



Strategic Management – A Simple Process Approach

Strategic Analysis

- what are our expectations and objectives?
- what is happening in our operating environment?
- what resources can we bring to bear on the issue?

Strategic Choice

- what options can we generate?

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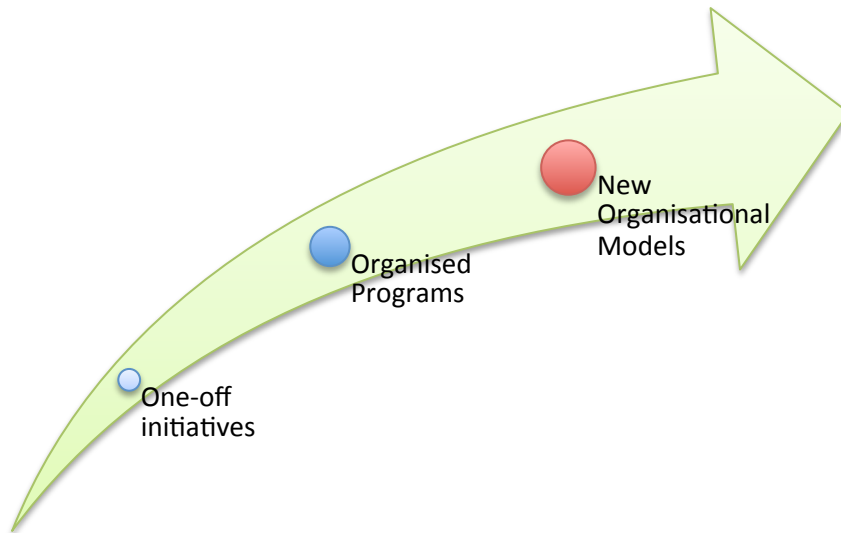
- which are the best options?
- which choice shall we make?

- Strategy Implementation**
- how best do we organise our people and systems?
 - what changes do we need to make to structures?
 - how best do we plan the use of our resources?

The key point is that this is a deliberate choice. The importance of good information and/or data about the operating environment cannot be overestimated. Strategy without good information is not much more than guesswork.

But being very rigid about strategy can prove to be unhelpful. So many organisations prefer to think in terms of “emergent strategy”; this recognises that the operating environment can change, and events can happen. Here, you can start with a clear and well-defined strategy but you also develop robust processes to monitor progress and are prepared to adjust the strategy – often quite radically – if circumstances change. Emergent strategy, allows for more experimentation and the learning that should result – i.e. what have we learned from what we’ve tried to do and how does that shape what we try next? In other words, an organisation arrives at its core strategy through a process of trial and error and learning. That sounds easy but requires real internal honesty about what is working and a degree of humility in admitting what isn’t.

In the UK, the early years of CRR are arguably a good example of emergent strategy. Many and varied approaches appeared across different services. Some worked, some didn’t. What became apparent in the more innovative services was that without a more radical rethink of the dominant resourcing model (i.e. the vast bulk of department resources devoted to operational response) CRR initiatives would have only a marginal impact as they were using a small fraction of the resources available. So the emergent strategy tended to tread a path from a variety of interesting (and often successful) one-off initiatives towards a carefully thought through programme, properly organised and resourced of equal status and importance to the more traditional response model. Over time it went even further to have response and prevention fully integrated to maximise the impact of risk reduction.



The Typical Strategic Pathway for CRR

The success, or failure of an emergent strategy approach depends in large part on the organisation's willingness to experiment and learn, and the effectiveness of internal communications and feedback systems that allow for lessons to be learned. Without these factors, there is a risk that chaos ensues as all sorts of directions are followed with no overall purpose.

One of things that stops this happening is the clear declaration of strategic intent, often embodied in a "strapline" or a vision. These alone are of very limited value, but as a rallying point for new activity they can be very useful. Experience also suggest that "simple is best"; vision statements that ramble on with complex language will alienate the very people who need to be inspired by them. Simple means it is remembered, quoted, cited and easily attached to actions and programs.

There's a really good example from Apple – they didn't even call it a strategy;

Steve Jobs' Operating Principles at Apple

1. Imagine a product that's insanely great.
2. Assemble a small team of the best engineers and designers in the world.
3. Make the product visually stunning, easy to use, and put the most creative effort into the user interface.
4. Tell the world how cool it is.

These are worth reflecting upon. These apparently simple principles are, in fact, a complex mixture of the visionary ("imagine a product ..."), and the practical (assemble a team...). They also embody lessons that the company has learned about what customers want and need (the emphasis on the user interface). In a world as complex and fast-moving as communications technology, to have such a simple and compelling - and practical - approach may help to explain why Apple is now one of the most valuable companies in the world.

A Newer Approach To Strategy

"A good strategy does more than urge us forward towards a goal or a vision. A good strategy honestly acknowledges the challenges being faced and provides an approach to overcoming them. And the greater the challenge, the more a good strategy focuses and coordinates efforts to achieve a powerful competitive punch or problem-solving effect.... Bad strategy tends to skip over pesky details such as problems. It ignores the power of choice and focus, trying instead to accommodate a multitude of conflicting demands and interests. " (Richard Rumelt 2011¹)

¹ "Good Strategy, Bad Strategy" Richard Rumelt Profile Books 2011
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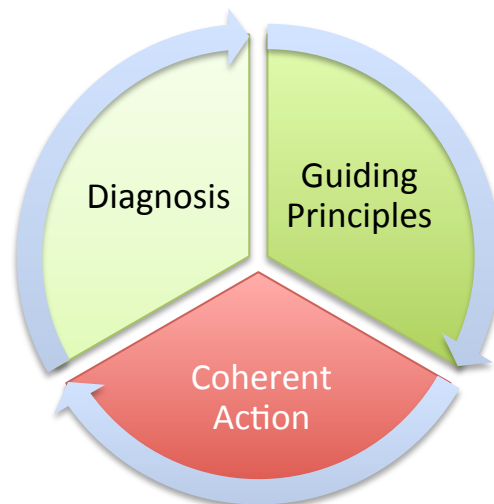
More recent thinking and writing on strategy emphasises the importance of strategy execution (or implementation) and values practicality over theory. It is born out of experience of “fashions” in strategy which have resulted in many companies and organisations basing their strategy in terms which are so broad and ambitious as to be almost meaningless.

One way of defining strategy is the application of strength against weakness or, put another way, strength applied to the most promising opportunity. There are two important sources of strength;

- A coherent approach that coordinates policies and actions
- The ability to shift viewpoint and create new strengths

The Heart of Good Strategy

The heart of “Good Strategy” consists of three elements;



A diagnosis – this defines or explains the nature of the challenge. A good diagnosis simplifies the often overwhelming complexity of reality by identifying certain aspects of the situation as critical.

A guiding policy – an overall approach chosen to overcome the challenges identified in the diagnosis.

Coherent action – steps that are coordinated with each other to work together to accomplish the guiding policy.

You might want to reflect on these three components when you are developing your pilot program.

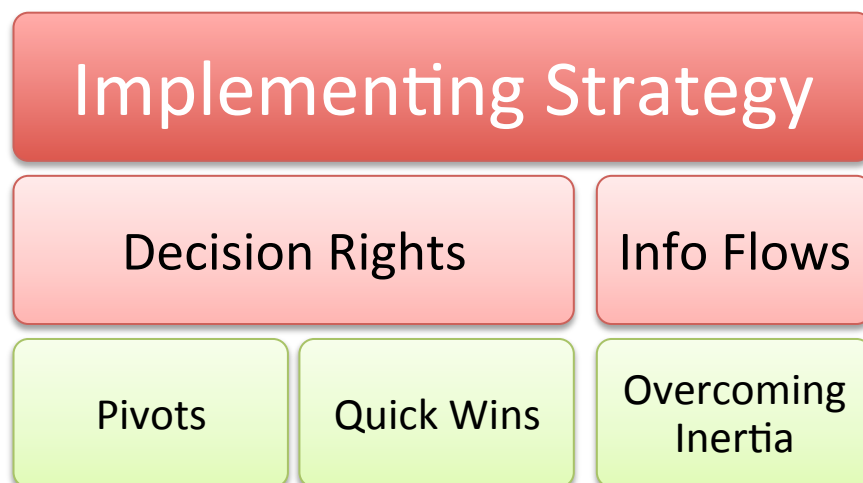
Good strategy is not just deciding what you are trying to do; it's also about how you are trying to do it. Strategy is primarily about deciding what is truly important and focusing action and resources on that objective. It is a hard discipline because it involves making difficult choices about what not to do.

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IMPLEMENTING STRATEGY

Developing a good strategy is one thing; implementing it successfully is another. There are many examples of apparently sound organisational strategies that failed to deliver the promised results because the approach to implementation – or execution – was done poorly.

Research in the USA in to successful strategy implementation suggests that there are five key “building blocks” which have a positive influence in executing strategy;



Clarifying Decision Rights

This is concerned with who has the “ownership” of each decision to be made and who is responsible for providing input or support to that decision. This can sometimes be referred to as “empowerment”. Good decisions made as close to the front line as possible are a key determinant of success in implementing strategy.

Managing Information Flows

Corporate HQs can make good decisions about market strategy and promoting new practices throughout the business, but only if they have up to date intelligence about what is happening “on the ground”. Similarly, without a clear understanding of the overall business strategy, and the vision and value that underpin that strategy,

operational managers run the risk of allocating scarce resources to the wrong thing. Good, reliable information needs to flow both ways.

Understanding the “Pivot Points”

There will be aspects of the organisation’s strengths and abilities (capacity) which could logically provide the greatest amount of leverage in any given situation. Who holds the necessary skill or experience to tackle a particular challenge? What do they need in terms of support and resource to get the best from them? What they are capable of doing is far more important than where they sit in the hierarchy or structure.

Creating Momentum

Any strategic plan will usually have some obvious goals or milestones which should signify progress and achievement. If these are all too far into the future there is a risk that momentum for change (which is always greatest at the outset of a project) will be lost and people will become discouraged or disillusioned. Looking for “quick wins” – obvious improvements or achievements that everyone can see as a change for the better – helps to boost confidence in the change process and enhances people’s willingness to commit to more. Often you can use these to influence stakeholders who maybe unconvinced at the outset.

Overcoming Inertia

All organisations of any age and size will have, in part at least, layers of established way of working and thinking which may need to change. These are often tried and tested routines with which people feel comfortable. These routines limit action for change. At best this will be demonstrated by people being passive and unresponsive to new ways of doing things. At worst it can manifest itself as opposition and hostility to new ideas. This inertia must be challenged and, if necessary, broken. New procedures and practices, and often new leaders will be introduced in order to establish new and different ways of working which better reflect the new business need. This is particularly true in the fire sector where there are a number of strong cultural norms which emphasise the primacy of response activities above all else.