



SUCCESS IN A COMPLEX WORLD

STRATEGY

Strategy is a system for producing success that everyone can access. It depends on following three simple rules. No matter how big your desire, three simple rules repeated over and over enough times will produce the success you desire.

EXECUTION

Tactics, the fundamental tools of strategists are defined by the results they produce; and they connect action to desire. Strategy without tactics is like a car without tires. There can be no execution without tactics.

OPERATIONS

Strategy and tactics will produce breakthrough results towards the success you desire but only if you survive long enough and well enough to achieve real results. Operations is survival. Performed well, operations keeps you healthy; performed with excellence, operations produces strategic advantage.



Ron B Palmer

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In a world that is growing increasingly complex and interconnected, the need for strategic performance from all individuals and organizations is immediate and real. Success in life today requires much more than it did only a generation ago. Simple manufacturing jobs are quickly disappearing and making a middle class income increasingly requires specialized education beyond a simple high school diploma. Businesses that were once in local protected markets are now exposed to global competitors and technologies that eliminate their protected markets.

Individuals and organizations are faced with a bewildering array of options and directions that previous generations didn't have to face. The world is changing so fast that many of us are working in careers that didn't even exist when we were children. Definitions of success in life are rapidly changing and the future is increasingly ambiguous. Individuals and organizations are faced with the daunting task of finding a path to success in the face of massive change and uncertainty.

While nothing in life guarantees success, strategy is the tool that increases our likelihood of achieving success in every effort we pursue. Leveraging purposeful strategy is no longer optional, it has become a necessity for everyone who seeks success in life.

Strategy can be taught quickly and easily and put into effect by everyone regardless of their position in an organization or in life.

For the entire history of humanity, up until this point, strategy has been the realm of Generals, Statesmen, and more recently Captains of Industry. Strategy was an art that few people pursued. It was an art that took a lifetime to master and was the realm of only a few of the top people in society. Common people made do with general rules of thumb for success and in a simple slow paced world this was often enough.

In today's ambiguous and rapidly changing world, rules of thumb no longer suffice. People and organizations need strategic performance today not in fifty years time. Antique definitions and attitudes about strategy must give way to a modern systematic approach to generating success that can be learned and applied quickly and effectively. Strategy must become accessible to everyone and must be learnable and applicable much earlier in our lives. To this end, I have spent more than a decade studying strategy in all of its forms and expressions. I have taken all of the nuggets applied to specific disciplines and rephrased them to apply in all disciplines. I have



Ron B Palmer

evaluated the activities of strategists across many disciplines and condensed the common best elements into a comprehensive framework that simplifies, clarifies, and modernizes strategy for wide use in a modern world.

This framework will empower individuals to more consistently achieve success in all of their efforts. It will also empower organizations to infuse strategy throughout their organizations, align efforts to the highest levels of organizational strategy, and unleash the pent up motivation of the organization towards common goals. With this framework, strategy can be taught quickly and easily and put into effect by everyone regardless of their position in an organization or in life.

If you are a serious student of strategy or just an individual seeking greater success in life, you will benefit from thinking of strategy in this new and exciting way.

RONBPALMER.COM



Ron B Palmer

THE LITERATURE

People have been talking about and writing about strategy for at least two thousand five hundred years since Sun Tzu wrote the Art of War. Like many writers of strategy, Sun Tzu didn't set out to define strategy or describe how to use it; instead he provided essentially a list of strategies to use at different times and under different conditions for the purpose of winning at war.

These kinds of authors may not be setting out to be considered experts on strategy in a general sense.

It is a common practice for writers on strategy to ignore the definition of strategy or to provide a limited definition and then dive

directly into giving advice on how to achieve some goal. Typically, the goal being addressed is loosely defined and the author provides little justification of why the goal was chosen. These books generally work for their intended purpose. However, for anyone trying to understand strategy as a concept in and of itself, these books can be very frustrating. If your questions relate to how do I apply strategy to all aspects of my life personal and professional, these books come up short.

These kinds of authors may not be setting out to be considered experts on strategy in a general sense. Their expertise is usually in a very specific field and they typically have ideas about how to achieve certain goals in their areas of expertise. They feel these goals are of vital importance for people in their field and worthy of discussion in a book where strategy is addressed, usually in terms of the specific goals the author has in mind. They also discuss the forces that influence strategy in their area of expertise. The general approach of these authors is to set up an initial premise with a cursory mention of the goals and sometimes a cursory industry specific definition of strategy and jump directly into presenting their ideas as viable strategies that presumably everyone should follow.

For instance Michael Porter, in his book "On Competition", talks about and defines strategy in terms of gaining competitive advantage within an industry or a nation. He identifies a number of competitive forces that shape what he calls "Corporate Strategy." He explicitly states the goal of the corporate strategist, "...to find a position in the industry where his or her company can best defend itself against these forces or can influence them in its favor." He provides two different specific definitions of strategy "...the creation of a unique and valuable position, involving a different set of activities" and "...creating fit among a company's activities." Both of these definitions



Ron B Palmer

THE LITERATURE

are narrowly focused on corporate strategy. However, even with all his discussion of strategy, the theme of the book is competition and competitive advantage. All discussions of strategy are focused on the theme of increasing or gaining competitive advantage for the business.

In his 2008 speech, at the Leaders in London Summit, Porter states, “Strategy is what unique position will we be able to achieve? What’s our advantage going to be at the end of the day as we take these steps over time? How are we going to be unique? How are we going to have an advantage? How are we going to sustain that advantage over time?” All of this translates, at least in my mind, into goals that can and should be very clearly articulated as in: create a unique position; find or create an advantage in our market; and find a way to sustain that advantage over time. The strategy or the elusive magic is in the word “how.” It’s the “how we do it” that is the essence of strategy.

What I see happening in the literature is that each author struggles to explain their ideas without the benefit of a commonly shared framework that tells us what strategy is and how it relates to goals, tactics, and operations. As I read these and many other authors, I found myself constantly asking questions about how strategy, tactics, and operations fit together in a general way that could be applied universally. I have yet to find any author who answered these questions.

My purpose in bringing this up is not to disparage or discount any author or recognized strategy expert. Authors such as Michael Porter provide tremendous value to those people in the areas of expertise covered. Porter makes an excellent case for the need to focus on competitive advantage in business and national economies and to adopt strategies to support creation of competitive advantage as a goal. However, as much as I value his books, most of us will never be captains of industry in a position to put his ideas into practice. All of the rest of us need strategy defined in terms that apply to our desires, the goals we value, and the situations we face in our every day lives.

I found myself constantly asking questions about how strategy, tactics, and operations fit together in a general way that could be applied universally.

Those of us seeking to understand “strategy” find that we have to read a lot of books about specific areas of interest in business, military, politics, and even self-



Ron B Palmer

THE LITERATURE

help just to get a few insights into the idea of strategy. We are often left struggling to pull out those few nuggets and apply them in a more general sense to the challenges we face in our everyday professional and personal lives. This struggle has led me to believe that it is time for someone to consolidate all of this information on strategy and make it widely accessible to individuals and organizations as a tool for success in any endeavor.

Because each of these authors from Clausewitz to Porter assumes or declares a specific goal within a given field, their definitions of strategy are restricted by that goal and that field of expertise. Therefore, it is difficult to have meaningful

discussions of strategy outside of the context provided by a specific discipline, e.g. military or business. Often within a discipline, multiple definitions are proposed by experts and used by practitioners. Strategists within each discipline evolve their method of thinking about strategy from the starting point of the definition they prefer. There is no universally accepted concept of strategy for anyone to start from.

While this state of affairs suffices for strategists studying strategy related to specific disciplines and who have a long time to learn, it leaves a gaping hole for the strategist studying strategy as a general concept to be applied now. What is an average person faced with a complex world supposed to do with these very narrow definitions of strategy? How do the rest of us use strategy to achieve success in our lives right now, today?

Most of the definitions and discussions of strategy that I've come across suffer from this same limitation. If an author begins with a specific goal, any definition of strategy will by necessity be limited by that goal. Therefore, to really examine the concept of strategy in and of itself one has to recognize that strategy is a means to achieve a goal. Every strategy must have a goal either explicitly stated or implied and as we will soon see, the choice of goal is often more important than the strategy.

What is missing from the literature today is a way of thinking about and using strategy that is designed for everyday people to be put to use immediately. This omission is limiting the success of not only individuals but also organizations. As the

What is missing from the literature today is a way of thinking about and using strategy that is designed for everyday people to be put to use immediately.

RONBPalmer.com



Ron B Palmer

world becomes more and more complex and as decisions driven by local information made by local leaders are having global impact on organizations, many more people in organizations need to think and act strategically. As lifetimes get longer and the future becomes increasingly uncertain, individuals need better tools in the pursuit of success.

My purpose in writing this white paper and the books that will follow is to provide people a tool that will increase success across the board for everybody. I want everyone who reads my writings to achieve more success in life and to achieve it with less effort. I want to provide tools that everyday people can use immediately to improve their lives and that leaders can use to empower their organizations to excel in an ever changing ever uncertain environment.

RONBPALMER.COM



Ron B Palmer

THE FRAMEWORK

Having read everything on the subject of strategy that I could get my hands on, I've found the guidance both useful and frustrating. I've searched long and hard for universal definitions of strategy, tactics, and operations that make sense in the real world. As I began to face the reality that no such universal definitions existed, I began to develop these concepts for myself. As the ideas came together over the years, I began to organize them into a structured framework that makes the concepts accessible and useful to everyone. It is now time to open this framework to the scrutiny of my peers and the general public.

I've searched long and hard for universal definitions of strategy, tactics, and operations that make sense in the real world.

A framework is a tool for understanding abstract concepts, for effectively sharing those concepts, and for putting those concepts into action. Whether it

is dealing with global competition in our jobs or learning to use our smart phones, complexity and abstraction are real issues that everyone has to deal with on a daily basis. In today's complex and ever changing world, every individual needs at least a working understanding of the abstract thinking tools that lead to success and those tools need to evolve if they are to be used successfully to meet the world's new and ever larger and more integrated challenges. In today's world, everyone needs strategy.

The beauty of my proposed framework for implementing strategy is that it simplifies complex processes allowing us to easily manipulate the concepts in our minds without sacrificing any of the details that might destroy our grand plans. There are four key processes or activities that we give names to in the framework, goals, strategy, tactics, and operations. Goals are a concept that can be achieved through the use of strategy. Strategy is a concept that depends on the building blocks of tactics. And tactics are a concept that depends on the supporting flows of operations.

By setting up the framework in this way, the strategist can think about and work with each of these concepts independently without losing the linkages to the other concepts. This is a concept called chunking that helps us work effectively within the limits of our human minds. However, given that strategy is a complex undertaking, chunking must always be performed in a way that maintains the complex linkages, and no final plan should be made without first ensuring that all linkages remain unbroken and effective after we have recombined the chunks.



Ron B Palmer

THE FRAMEWORK

RONBPALMER.COM

The purpose of our strategy framework is to connect our desires with success more often than we could without it. In other words, to use logic and reasoning to be successful more often than we would by relying on random chance or rules of thumb. As we undertake large, complex and/or abstract efforts, the need for strategy only increases. This is exemplified in my favorite proverb “pray for a good harvest but don’t stop hoeing.” Praying alone is a tactic that many people have tried in the past and it is sometimes successful. However, thinking people know that prayers aren’t always answered the way we might hope and that a good work ethic makes it much more likely that we won’t go hungry.

The framework also provides a way for us to more clearly link the required elements for success in our minds. This empowers us to be more successful in achieving the complex, abstract, and large goals that all of us are increasingly faced with. One of the critical elements of success in a complex world and one that many people struggle with is the ability to delay gratification. The ability to take action today that will only bear fruit tomorrow is a key to success in many efforts. By showing the linkages in a clear and repeatable framework, many people will find it easier to have the faith and discipline required to take action today for gains that come tomorrow.

This framework is based on the study of complexity that has shown how very complex results such as the patterns of schooling fish and birds or the emergence of locust plagues that ravage thousands of square miles

are accomplished by independent actors executing a very small number of simple rules (usually three) over and over repeatedly, independently, and instinctually. It is also based on the study of fractal designs where very complex designs emerge from repeating a very simple design over and over again so that no matter how much you magnify the design or in which direction you look the same basic pattern emerges at every level of magnification and direction.

This framework consists of three simple major activities that anyone can learn to perform and that are repeated over and over again.

This framework consists of three simple major activities that anyone can learn to perform and that are repeated over and over again. Large successes start with performing the three activities at a very high level and recursively refining the level of detail and increasing the number of repetitions at every level. This follows the basic mechanistic logic of problem solving by breaking a problem down into smaller and



Ron B Palmer

THE FRAMEWORK

smaller sub-problems until they are small enough to solve.

In terms of goals, the high level goal might be to land a man on the moon and return him safely to Earth. This goal is handed to a strategist who determines the high level results that are required to meet this goal, there may be ten required results at this level. Those required results

are translated into goals that are assigned to the next level of strategist who performs the same activity at a greater level of detail. This cycle repeats until the goals

get so small that they can be directly achieved. Once that happens, things begin to roll

back up and the larger goals are incrementally achieved until in the end Neil Armstrong sets foot on the moon and comes home to tell about it.

The first major activity in the framework is to clarify our desires into a target that can be measured.

The first major activity in the framework is to clarify our desires into a target that can be measured. These targets we call goals and they result from combining desires with focus in a way that meshes with our concept of success. Goals can be very high level with measurements that are vague and they can be very precise with measurements to many orders of mathematical precision. However, in life there is never just one goal, there are many. Some goals have higher priorities than others and some goals are sub-goals that serve to further refine larger goals. Goals can be nested many levels deep as was the case with landing a man on the moon.

The second major activity in the framework is strategy. This is the innate hardwired ability that all living organisms have to achieve their desires. Even the smallest organisms connect desire to action in order to survive. As humans, our desires can become very abstract and require actions by others that impact our desires through very indirect means. Dealing with this level of abstraction and indirect action requires a logical tool that facilitates our success in these efforts.

Strategy is nothing more than using our hardwired mental abilities to connect desire to action and to create success. A baby has desire to eat, cries and gets fed. The baby detects a pattern between crying and getting fed. Through feedback over time the baby eventually learns to communicate sometimes through signs and ultimately through speech. This doesn't take a framework to achieve, but it is strategy. An adult who wants to feed his family and send his children to an expensive university has to combine many seemingly unrelated actions into a complex pattern that allows him



Ron B Palmer

THE FRAMEWORK

to earn an income substantial enough to achieve his desires. This is a more complex application of strategy which benefits tremendously from the use of a strategy framework for achieving success.

The third major activity in the framework is tactics or the combining of resources and capabilities in unique ways to create specific results. Tactics allow the strategist to think in terms of the specific results needed in order to achieve the desired goal. Tacticians don't deal with all the results required by the strategist just results specific to their specialty. Strategists work from lists of results that they can confidently depend upon. From this list they pick and choose the results needed for a specific goal and they order the results in a way that will achieve the goal. Tacticians focus on combining resources and capabilities in unique ways to create new or improved results for the strategist to choose from. In this way, the strategist is free from worrying about the details of resources and capabilities as they formulate the pattern for success.

These three activities repeated over and over again at high levels and at low levels, for the long term and the short term, are the three simple activities that produce such amazing feats as landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth. As with many things that seem amazingly complicated, such as the patterns of schooling fish or locust plagues, complex successes can be achieved by many independent actors following a small number of simple activities over and over again as the study of chaos and complexity have demonstrated.

“You’ve got to think about big things while you’re doing small things, so that all the small things go in the right direction.”

When it comes to strategy, Alvin Toffler had it correct when he said, “You’ve got to think about big things while you’re doing small things, so that all the

small things go in the right direction.” The power of the framework is that it provides the strategist with a means of freeing themselves from the details at least for awhile. The strategist needs freedom from detail to formulate patterns of success to achieve large and complex goals. But at the same time, they need to be assured that all of the many details that must ultimately be dealt with will fall in line with the pattern they create. The framework provides the connections that make this doable on a large scale, for complex goals, in uncertain environments.



Ron B Palmer

THE FRAMEWORK

RONBPALMER.COM

Underpinning these three major activities is the concept of operations or keeping the organism alive efficiently and effectively enough to allow effort to be expended on these higher order activities. Operations deals with the day-to-day flow of materials in line with the day to day activities that are required to keep the organization or individual alive and healthy. These are the details that must map directly to the resources and capabilities that make up tactics and the tactics that make up strategies.

Together the framework provides an unbroken chain between the smallest operational details necessary for survival all the way to the grandest desires imaginable. Most importantly, it organizes all the different elements into digestible chunks that allow higher order thinking and planning while ensuring that the details are in place to support the desires. In other words, it provides a way for the strategist to think clearly about the desires to be achieved, to refine those desires into measurable and achievable goals, and to ensure that all actions taken by everyone involved are directly aligned with achieving those goals.



Ron B Palmer

GOALS

The goals of any engagement define the scope of the engagement. For instance, in Vietnam, General Westmoreland pursued a goal of military victory for the U.S. while General Giap pursued a goal of political victory for North Vietnam. The U.S. pursued sound strategy and employed excellent military tactics resulting in winning every single battle fought in Vietnam. However, the war was ultimately lost in the larger theater of politics. American forces withdrew because of political pressure at home and North Vietnam took over the South. This outcome had profound impact on our nation and dramatic impact on our military that wasn't turned around until 20 years later.

It is as if one general was playing checkers while the other was playing chess.

General Giap's choice of goals changed the nature of the engagement between the U.S. and North Vietnam from a strictly military engagement with military definitions of victory to a political engagement with political definitions of victory. General Westmoreland's strategy and tactics were limited to military options as defined by his goal. General Giap, by adopting a higher level goal had a wider range of tactics and therefore strategic options available to him. For General Giap, Military engagement was one tactic of many whose purpose was not to win battles but to bring about political change. It is as if one general was playing checkers while the other was playing chess.

Goals define what is to be achieved. People are naturally goal oriented and can be depended on to take actions toward any goal that they feel personally vested in, particularly where the rewards outweigh the recognized or perceived costs. People will naturally filter out actions that do not conform to achieving the goal. This is a contributor to situations like the Vietnam War where larger political issues were not adequately addressed at least in part because the military goal was clear and it was therefore easy to dismiss concerns in the larger context. It is also hardwired into our brains as evidenced by acts of concentration where all outside influences are filtered out.

Strategy defines how to achieve the goal. There are many paths to achieving any goal depending on the size and scope of the goal as well as the tactical and operational options available to the strategist. Formulating this path is the essence of what the strategist does. The variables involved in formulating strategy are generally unbounded for goals of significant size and scope: making the job of strategist an amazingly complex one. The core elements that must be accounted for are the environment in which the goal is to be achieved, the available assets (resources and capabilities), the human



Ron B Palmer

GOALS

elements of the strategist, and the operational abilities of the organization. The human mind combines these elements and produces a plan to achieve the goal. Strategy is both the system of achieving goals through a reasoned and properly sequenced application of tactical results with supporting operations and it is the specific intellectual act of creating that plan or solution. Strategy in its specific sense is the act of creating a solution to a goal, through the application of a specifically crafted set of specific results (tactics). In its larger sense, strategy incorporates all of the elements of the strategy framework and the leadership required to drive strategies to fruition.

There is a very old saying about plans: if you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans. Strategies as plans should never be set in stone. The size and scope of the goal will determine how fluid the strategy must be. A grand goal such as that posed by President Kennedy of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to Earth before the end of the decade, required a very fluid strategy. When this challenge was issued nobody knew how to produce most of the key results required to achieve the goal. The first part of crafting a strategy to meet this goal was to identify all the elements (sub-goals) at the next lowest level of detail that must be achieved to make this a reality and then to assign someone to figure out what realistic options we had for producing the desired results.

Engineers had to figure out how to reliably get people into earth orbit. They had to survey the Moon for suitable landing spots. Landing craft had to be created that could get people down to the Moon and back into Moon orbit. Life support had to be maintained for the long journey. These problems can and were translated into goals: develop lifting vehicles, identify landing location, develop landing craft, and develop life support systems. Once each of these goals was accomplished a new tactic was made available. Each of these in turn had many sub-goals to be accomplished.

A tactic can be as simple as combining a wrench and a person to tighten a nut or it can be as complex as an Apollo space capsule to transport people safely to the moon and back. Complex tactics can be broken down into lower level tactics as many times as makes sense to do so.

When this challenge was issued nobody knew how to produce most of the key results required to achieve the goal.

Problem solving and goal attainment have much in common. To do either often



Ron B Palmer

GOALS

requires breaking things down into smaller pieces recursively until each piece is small enough to solve independently. The challenge then is to solve each piece in a way that when all the solutions are combined they serve to achieve the original goal or to solve the original problem. The goal of landing a man on the Moon was broken down into countless thousands of sub-goals at many levels of detail and assigned to teams across the world. Each of these teams crafted a strategy to achieve their assigned goal and ultimately succeeded. As these small goal achievements rolled up, we developed more and more of the tactics required to meet the President's challenge to the nation. On July 20th, 1969, the United States landed a man on the Moon and subsequently returned him safely to the Earth. The desire of a nation was achieved through the purposeful application of strategy by its President.

RONBPALMER.COM



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

Many authors on strategy specifically those concerned with war and military matters make distinctions between strategy and tactics. For instance, Clausewitz in his book speaks of strategy and tactics in these terms:

The Art of War thus viewed in its limited sense divides itself again into tactics and strategy. The former occupies itself with the form of the separate combat, the latter with its use. Both connect themselves with the circumstances of marches, camps, cantonments only through the combat, and these circumstances are tactical or strategic according as they relate to the form or to the signification of the battle.

These distinctions were meaningful to him and too many others concerned with military engagements in the eighteen hundreds but the distinctions are not very rigorous and they lead to many difficulties when applied to strategy as a recursive activity. They also do nothing to address the concepts for non-military use. Clausewitz was one of the first to write down these distinctions and deserves significant credit for his contributions. However, in today's complex world we need a definition of tactics that empowers strategic action in all areas of application. That definition needs to provide tools to the strategist that allow the creation of grand solutions such as landing a man on the moon without requiring the strategist, President Kennedy in this case, to understand all the details required to realize the goal.

One of the most important elements of tactics as a tool for the strategist is the idea of abstracting the details to make planning easier.

One of my all time favorite quotations or proverbs, “pray for a good harvest, but don't stop hoeing,” provides an excellent and simple example of a viable strategy for success made up of two simple and distinct tactics. Praying for a good harvest is a unique tactic for producing a good harvest so is tending your farm a unique tactic as indicated by the phrase “don't stop hoeing.” Combined, these two tactics represent a viable strategy for achieving the goal of producing a successful harvest that arguably has a better chance of success than implementing either tactic alone.

One of the most important elements of tactics as a tool for the strategist is the idea of abstracting the details to make planning easier. If President Kennedy and his Senior Space Science Advisors had to worry about every detail of putting a man on the



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

moon they could never have developed a workable strategy. They would have been overwhelmed by the details. By defining tactics in terms of results produced through specific combinations of resources and capabilities, we free the strategist from worrying about the details at the time of strategy formulation. This allows the strategist to work at a higher level when that is called for. Once a strategy is formulated however, the strategist must ensure through appropriate leadership that all of the details are in place to support the strategy.

Thinking of strategy in this way breaks the barrier of strategy being only “the art of the Generals” and transforming it into a practical tool for all thinking people who strive to achieve goals.

Authors tend to make distinctions in their discussions regarding tactical operations and strategic impact as if every reader should intuitively understand the difference between the two. As a

result, there are many misconceptions about the distinction such as the idea that time is a significant factor. Many people say that tactics are short-term activities while strategy takes a long-term view. While this may make some intuitive sense, it does not seem to provide value as a reason for distinction. In developing a generally applicable framework, distinctions between terms must provide value to those using the framework or they are meaningless.

If we accept that strategy relates to achieving a goal then we can say that strategy is the effort to find the best path or method for achieving the goal. From this perspective, we can say that anytime an actor has opportunity to make decisions about how to achieve a goal that actor is acting strategically. Any Non Commissioned Officer (NCO) in the military can therefore make a strategic decision when given a goal or objective such as to occupy a building. That NCO may only have a few short moments to decide how to achieve his objective, but that is enough time to make it a strategic decision. It is strategic for two reasons. First, he is working towards achieving a goal. Second, he uses the defined tactics or the different results his team is capable of producing in a combination that he devises. Thinking of strategy in this way breaks the barrier of strategy being only “the art of generals” and transforms it into a practical tool for all thinking people who strive to achieve goals. This simple distinction is the key to demolishing the ivory tower walls of strategy and making strategy accessible to everyone.



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

RONBPALMER.COM

Many people think of tactics almost as the opposite of strategy. They might make the statement that if it is not strategy then it must be tactics. This is a distinction without meaning and leads to a situation where tactics are considered unimportant and are often ignored. The reality is that tactics are critically important and the current situation of mostly ignoring tactics, at least in business, is at the heart of what people commonly refer to as the execution gap. Tactics are the primary tools that strategists use to formulate strategy. Tactics are the pieces of the puzzle that the strategist must assemble in the right form to realize their vision of success. Tactics must be defined in terms of tools that strategists use to generalize solutions to complex problems or goals.

What seems to me to add value and to provide logical consistency is to say that tactics are the means by which the strategist executes strategies in pursuit of goals. Tactics are best defined in terms of the results that they can produce. In chess, each playing piece produces specific results in the way in which it can move across the board and thus threaten the enemy. Each represents a tactical asset to the strategist who develops a plan for capturing the opponent's king by aligning or ordering his assets more effectively than his opponent. In this case, execution in the form of maneuvering, blocking, or capturing is inherent in the tactical asset. The reason chess is a game of strategy is that each side has exactly the same tactics available to them. Success comes from combining those tactics better than your opponent.

This distinction also provides a clear explanation of what a tactician does. The tactician experiments with combining resources and capabilities in novel ways to produce different or better results. He also takes these tactics

and wrings every bit of efficiency and effectiveness out of them. These combinations of resources and capabilities can be defined as tactical assets. Execution is the focus of the tactician where defining or structuring desired results is the focus of the strategist.

Thinking in terms of tactics and tactical assets helps steer us clear of a common trap. That is the trap of thinking that we can achieve success by simply allocating resources and ignoring the concept of capabilities either individual or organizational that make it possible to actually produce results. Capabilities are the human element of producing results and they depend on things like knowledge, experience, and training.

Tactics are the primary tools that strategists use to formulate strategy. Success comes from combining those tactics better than your opponent.



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

RONBPALMER.COM

It is often the case that the exact same resources can be used by different people to produce dramatically different results. The difference between success and failure often comes down to the human element (capabilities). This can be easily demonstrated in military terms by outfitting two units with the exact same resources but training only one unit in basic infantry tactics and then pitting them against each other. In fact, history is full of examples where inferior forces in terms of headcount and resources defeated vastly larger and more equipped forces, perhaps most famously at the battle of Thermopylae in Greece where 300 Spartans held off tens of thousands of Persians long enough for Greece to form a large enough army to defend itself.

In the military, tactics are most often defined around a technical weapons system. One of the most granular or smallest of these assets is the infantry soldier with his kit and rifle. A single infantry soldier can produce quantifiable results that a strategist can rely upon to make decisions. A group of infantry soldiers can combine with a tank, its crew, and standard equipment to produce more significant results. When the infantry soldiers are supplied with trucks and communications gear, warfare becomes rapid and mobile. In this sense, the strategist can combine assets in whichever configuration best serves to meet the goal. Not only is the combination of assets important but their configuration is also important.

As assets get more complicated they can produce an increasing variety of results. For instance, a fighter bomber aircraft can be configured for many different missions. Its payload can be changed to produce different effects. It can deploy single large bombs for maximum destructive effect. It can deploy multiple small smart bombs for attacking specific targets with minimal collateral damage. It can deploy missiles to destroy other aircraft. Therefore the fighter bomber is an asset that provides a range of tactics for the strategist to employ depending on the goals to be achieved.

Not only is the combination of assets important but their configuration is also important.

General Patton is well known for his efforts in developing tank tactics and for being a premier tank commander. As a tank tactician, Patton looked at results that were needed and compared that with the tank technology available. He developed methods (capabilities) of using tanks to produce those results. His work as a tactician produced novel ways of using existing technology and capabilities but also identified more desirable methods that required improvements in technology and capabilities.



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

His early work developing a range of tank tactics was instrumental in our ability to defeat the Axis Powers in WWII.

In WWI tanks were developed for the result of ending the stalemate of trench warfare even though the war ended before they could prove themselves in this area. The Germans then developed tactics for the use of tanks that when combined with similar tactics from other weapons systems such as fighter and bomber aircraft and improvements in technology lead to a new strategy of blitzkrieg or lightning war. This strategy was made possible by the development of new tactics and proved itself in the early days of WWII as Germany quickly took over Poland and more meaningfully rapidly bypassed the Maginot Line, which most strategists believed impregnable at the time, to capture France.

In this example, we see tacticians developing tactical assets with new technologies and new capabilities to produce results that were previously unknown. German strategists were able to combine these new tactical assets all related to mobility and communications to formulate a new method of winning battles in war. They developed tactical advantages in the use of technology and combined them into the blitzkrieg strategy that proved devastating during the early years of WWII. French and British strategists failed to recognize the power of these tactics in time and were powerless

In this example, we see tacticians developing tactical assets with new technologies and new capabilities to produce results that were previously unknown.

to react to the rapid advances of the Germans as they quickly overran France and threatened to invade England.

Businesses operate in the same fashion. They develop assets around people and technologies that give them the ability to produce specific results, e.g. generate sales, process orders, support customers, produce products, etc. The way in which the business manager deploys these assets is strategy. Likewise the choice to develop certain assets over others or to keep certain assets in house versus outsourcing is a strategic decision.

Individuals also develop and employ assets. An immigrant painter might come to this country with nothing but experience and work for someone else who has painting related assets. He has a goal of financial success in his new country. He looks



Ron B Palmer

STRATEGY VERSUS TACTICS

at the assets he has currently, his skilled labor, and asks how he might become more successful. Working for someone else provides money (capital) which is a resource that he can use to purchase basic painting supplies. Combining his capabilities with the newly acquired resources, the painting supplies he purchased with his earnings, enables him to produce greater financial results than he could before.

With this new tactical asset he might hire himself out on the weekends for painting jobs in his neighborhood. The additional resources he acquired allow him to capture a larger profit than working for someone else would allow. Acting as a tactician, even if

he doesn't know it, he has combined his skills (capabilities) with the painting supplies (resources) to produce better results. Developing a plan to repeat this process, adding more sophisticated resources such as ladders and a truck, and improving capabilities such as learning to sell more effectively combine to create a strategy for financial success using tactics/assets as the building blocks.

A framework, that clearly defines strategic terms and relates all of the ideas into a powerful whole, provides significant value to any individual or organization seeking success.

Organizations excel when everyone is on the same page working in the same direction towards coordinated goals. Complex efforts succeed when all decision makers can incorporate local and timely information into good individual decisions that all roll up to keeping the organization marching in that common direction. A framework, that clearly defines strategic terms and relates all of the ideas into a powerful whole, provides significant value to any individual or organization seeking success. Having clearly defined concepts, designating something as strategic or tactical is much more than a semantic activity. The differences between the two roles, strategist and tactician must make clear to everyone involved what is expected from people in those roles. The clear common definitions of strategy and tactics make the terms valuable in communicating ideas and expectations throughout an organization.

RONBPALMER.COM



Ron B Palmer

OPERATIONS

All of the high order thinking in the world won't help one bit if you can't keep the lights on. A strategist who sits around and makes grand plans while his army goes hungry is a useless strategist. As a strategist, you are responsible for all of the elements of success. The most undersold and underappreciated element of success is operations; keeping the army fed, paid, and happy. Some of the grandest adventures in history have failed not because they didn't have a great plan but because they could not sustain the day-to-day activities necessary to keep the adventure moving forward.

I remember in college, our business management class was presented with a challenge that went something like this. Your uncle just died and left you his small business that you know nothing about running. You walk in and the books are a mess. What is the first thing you would do? I remember many answers from my classmates that can be summed up by one single answer, hire a consultant.

Our ability to be successful as individuals and as organizations springs directly from how much cushion we can put between ourselves and the reality of survival.

I had a different answer from all of my classmates at the time to what should be done first and now that I am a professional business consultant I find that my answer continues to be

different. You must first find out when your employees expect to be paid and how you are going to pay them. Most employees of small businesses can't afford to miss a paycheck while you go shopping for consultants. All of the knowledge about how to run the business on a day-to-day basis is in the heads of your employees. If they leave, it is very likely that the business will stop operating and you won't have any cash flow with which to pay your consultant when you find him. The basic thought process of any strategist should be survival first and always, then develop a wealth of tactics so that you always have good strategic options as the world changes around you.

As living beings operating within living organizations, survival is always our first and most important priority. Our ability to be successful as individuals and as organizations springs directly from how much cushion we can put between ourselves and the reality of survival. Operations are the foundation upon which all success emanates. We must keep that foundation strong and always retain a healthy dose of respect for our need to survive. From a systems perspective we should always ensure that we have a healthy feedback loop that keeps survival realities at the forefront of



Ron B Palmer

OPERATIONS

strategy formulation. Strangely enough, the more cushion we have the more important this loop becomes. Cushion creates a delay between our taking action and survival coming into question. That delay can lead to catastrophically bad strategic decisions.

The most basic element of life for individuals and for organizations is survival. Without survival nothing else matters. However, if strategists had to deal with survival details every day they would never have the ability to formulate successful strategies. What strategists need and what the framework provides is a way to chunk groups of details into concise ideas that can be used as building blocks to achieve great things. Operations can be defined as the day-to-day allocation and assigning of materials and activities to individuals and to functional groups in support of tactics and strategies.

For some organizations, operational excellence is a tactic that produces dramatic strategic effect.

Operations deals with the life flows that must continue for survival. A profoundly personal example is the breathing and blood flow that are critical to your body functioning. Even here there are priorities, “stop the bleeding, start the breathing,” is the mantra we were taught in military combat life saving courses. In normal situations when dealing with the individual, operations is concerned with food, water, safety, shelter, and self fulfillment. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a commonly recognized mapping of personal operational requirements. If individuals are going to develop tactics and strategies to achieve great things they must first ensure that the basic elements of Maslow’s hierarchy are securely met.

Likewise, organizations have basic survival needs that must be met before they can progress to higher levels. There must be a location for activities; there must be electricity, water, and communications. Paying the bills, moving money between accounts, cashing checks, performing maintenance on facilities and equipment are all operational activities. They deal with flows at the materials and activities level. They are critically important to the success of any organization and should never be looked upon as less important than strategy or tactics, for without survival nothing else matters.

For some organizations, operational excellence is a tactic that produces dramatic strategic effect. Toyota is in the forefront of organizations that have promoted operational excellence as a vital tactic in their corporate strategy. In fact, Toyota’s



Ron B Palmer

OPERATIONS

operational prowess and resulting low cost structure and excellent reputation for quality has produced profound long term success.

Operations is a vital element of the strategy framework that individuals and organizations ignore at their peril. Individual and organizational health and vitality are essential for success. Too many people and organizations find themselves within sight of success only to run out of gas just before they cross the line that would change everything.

RONBPALMER.COM



Ron B Palmer

CONCLUSION

Hopefully, this first glance at my strategy framework for the 21st Century has given you a new and useful way of thinking about strategy as applied to every aspect of your life. As you seek to achieve goals and solve problems in your personal and professional lives you should find that solutions come easier and your advancement in life becomes more rapid and consistent. You are now equipped with a robust tool to evaluate success and failure and to produce more of the former and less of the latter.

As you look at strategies that have been applied in the past and you review writings about strategy, hopefully you will have more insight into why particular strategies worked or why they didn't. You will begin to notice when strategies failed because they didn't have a clearly defined goal. You may see gaps in execution in a new light, recognizing where tactics were ignored and how that impacted execution. You may come to think, if only that leader had been able to more effectively link his grand plan to the necessary operational details, failure might have been avoided.

In formulating the framework, I've taken great care to create definitions and to structure associations in a way that maintains the continuity of the great body of strategic insight that is already available. In most situations, this framework can be applied over what has been done or written about before to provide additional clarity and precision to those experiences and ideas. Doing so will provide a bridge of understanding from invaluable advice that may be narrowly tailored to a specific domain and to make it generally applicable across other domains.

Regardless of your station in life, your age or experience, this framework can be applied today.

I've taken great care to make this framework accessible to everybody. It is intended to lead quickly to targeted execution

towards whatever desires you seek to fulfill whether large or small. Regardless of your station in life, your age or experience, this framework can be applied today. You don't have to wait until you have reached the top of your field to be a strategist. Your life as a strategist begins right now. If you are at the top of your field already then this framework provides a common reference point for creating strategic performers throughout your organization.

This white paper is just an introduction to the ideas and concepts that make up the Palmer Strategy Framework. There is significant detail underpinning each of the



Ron B Palmer

CONCLUSION

concepts and ideas that make the framework robust and that tie together each element into a coherent whole that is more than just the sum of its parts. I've spent more than a decade developing these concepts, testing them in the real world, evaluating them in relation to every bit of strategy advice I could get my hands on and refining the details until they fit together in a powerful way. It is time to share with others the fruits of my labor. It is time for many more people to see how success can be produced more often with less effort than ever before. To this end, I will be releasing a book providing detailed guidance on the strategy framework and how you can put it into practice in the real world immediately.

If you seek true success in life then these three simple rules are for you. Apply these rules consistently; repeat them with purpose and intent; and you will find success happening more often for you.

RONBPALMER.COM