The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps For Strategy

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Human nature insists on a definition for every concept. The field of strategic management cannot afford to rely on a single definition of strategy, indeed the word has long been used implicitly in different ways even if it has traditionally been defined formally in only one. Explicit recognition of multiple definitions can help practitioners and researchers alike to maneuver through this difficult field. Accordingly, this article presents five definitions of strategy—as plan, ploy, pattern, position, and perspective—and considers some of their interrelationships.

Strategy as Plan

To almost anyone you care to ask, *strategy is a plan*—some sort of *consciously intended* course of action, a guideline (or set of guidelines) to deal with a situation. A kid has a "strategy" to get over a fence, a corporation has one to capture a market. By this definition, strategies have two essential characteristics: they are made in advance of the actions to which they apply, and they are developed consciously and purposefully. (They may, in addition, be stated explicitly, sometimes in formal documents known as "plans," although it need not be taken here as a necessary condition for "strategy as plan.") To Drucker, strategy is "purposeful action"[1]; to Moore "design for action," in essence, "conception preceding action."[2] A host of definitions in a variety of fields reinforce this view. For example:

- in the military: Strategy is concerned with "draft[ing] the plan of war . . . shap[ing] the individual campaigns and within these, decid[ing] on the individual engagements."[3]

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- in Game Theory: Strategy is "a complete plan: a plan which specifies what choices [the player] will make in every possible situation."[4]
- in management: "Strategy is a unified, comprehensive, and integrated plan . . . designed to ensure that the basic objectives of the enterprise are achieved."[5]
- and in the dictionary: strategy is (among other things) "a plan, method, or series of maneuvers or stratagems for obtaining a specific goal or result."[6]

As plans, strategies may be general or they can be specific. There is one use of the word in the specific sense that should be identified here. As plan, *a strategy can be a ploy*, too, really just a specific "maneuver" intended to outwit an opponent or competitor. The kid may use the fence as a ploy to draw a bully into his yard, where his Doberman Pincher awaits intruders. Likewise, a corporation may threaten to expand plant capacity to discourage a competitor from building a new plant. Here the real strategy (as plan, that is, the real intention) is the threat, not the expansion itself, and as such is a ploy.

In fact, there is a growing literature in the field of strategic management, as well as on the general process of bargaining, that views strategy in this way and so focusses attention on its most dynamic and competitive aspects. For example, in his popular book, *Competitive Strategy*, Porter devotes one chapter to "Market Signals" (including discussion of the effects of announcing moves, the use of "the fighting brand," and the use of threats of private antitrust suits) and another to "Competitive Moves" (including actions to preempt competitive response).[7] Likewise in his subsequent book, *Competitive Advantage*, there is a chapter on "Defensive Strategy" that discusses a variety of ploys for reducing the probability of competitor retaliation (or increasing his perception of your own).[8] And Schelling devotes much of his famous book, *The Strategy of Conflict*, to the topic of ploys to outwit rivals in a competitive or bargaining situation.[9]

Strategy as Pattern

But if strategies can be intended (whether as general plans or specific ploys), surely they can also be realized. In other words, defining strategy as a plan is not sufficient; we also need a definition that encompasses the resulting behavior. Thus a third definition is proposed: *strategy is a pattern*—specifically, a pattern in a stream of actions.[10] By this definition, when Picasso painted blue for a time, that was a strategy, just as was the behavior of the Ford Motor Company when Henry Ford offered his Model T only in black. In other words, by this definition, strategy is *consistency* in behavior, *whether or not* intended.

This may sound like a strange definition for a word that has been so bound up with free will ("strategos" in Greek, the art of the army general[11]). But the fact of the matter is that while hardly anyone defines strategy in

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this way,[12] many people seem at one time or another to so use it. Consider this quotation form a business executive:

> Gradually the successful approaches merge into a pattern of action that becomes our strategy. We certainly don't have an overall strategy on this.[13]

This comment is inconsistent only if we restrict ourselves to one definition of strategy: what this man seems to be saying is that his firm has strategy as pattern, but not as plan. Or consider this comment in *Business Week* on a joint venture between General Motors and Toyota:

> The tentative Toyota deal may be most significant because it is another example of how GM's strategy boils down to doing a little bit of everything until the market decides where it is going.[14]

A journalist has inferred a pattern in the behavior of a corporation, and labelled it strategy.

The point is that every time a journalist imputes a strategy to a corporation or to a government, and every time a manager does the same thing to a competitor or even to the senior management of his own firm, they are implicitly defining strategy as pattern in action—that is, inferring consistency in behavior and labelling it strategy. They may, of course, go further and impute intention to that consistency—that is, assume there is a plan behind the pattern. But that is an assumption, which may prove false.

Thus, the definitions of strategy as plan and pattern can be quite independent of each other: plans may go unrealized, while patterns may appear without preconception. To paraphrase Hume, strategies may result from human actions but not human designs.[15] If we label the first definition *intended* strategy and the second *realized* strategy, as shown in Figure 1, then we can distinguish *deliberate* strategies, where intentions that existed previously were realized, from *emergent* strategies, where patterns developed in the absence of intentions, or despite them (which went *unrealized*).

Strategies About What?—Labelling strategies as plans or patterns still begs one basic question: *strategies about what?* Many writers respond by discussing the deployment of resources (e.g., Chandler, in one of the best known definitions[16]), but the question remains: which resources and for what purposes? An army may plan to reduce the number of nails in its shoes, or a corporation may realize a pattern of marketing only products painted black, but these hardly meet the lofty label "strategy." Or do they?

As the word has been handed down from the military, "strategy" refers to the important things, "tactics" to the details (more formally, "tactics teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement, strategy the use of engagements for the object of the war"[17]). Nails in shoes, colors of cars: these are certainly details. The problem is that in retrospect details can sometimes prove "strategic." Even in the military: "For want of a Nail, the Shoe was lost; for want of a Shoe the Horse was lost . . . " and so on through

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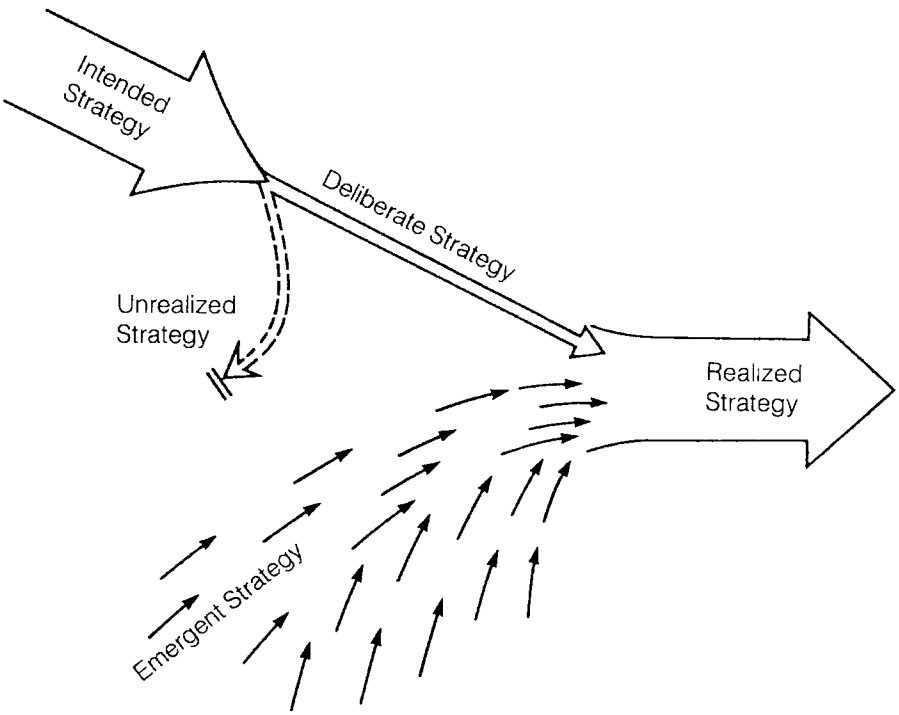
Figure 1. Deliberate and Emergent Strategies



the rider and general to the battle, "all for want of Care about a Horseshoe Nail."[18] Indeed one of the reasons Henry Ford lost his war with General Motors was that he refused to paint his cars anything but black.

Rumelt notes that "one person's strategies are another's tactics—that what is strategic depends on where you sit."[19] It also depends on *when* you sit: what seems tactical today may prove strategic tomorrow. The point is that these sorts of distinctions can be arbitrary and misleading, that labels should not be used to imply that some issues are *inevitably* more important than others. There are times when it pays to manage the details and let the strategies emerge for themselves. Thus there is good reason to drop the word "tactics" altogether and simply refer to issues as more or less "strategic," in other words, more or less "important" in some context, whether as intended before acting or as realized after it.[20] Accordingly, the answer to the question, strategy about what, is: potentially about anything. About products and processes, customers and citizens, social responsibilities and self interests, control and color.

Two aspects of the content of strategies must, however, be singled out because they are of particular importance and, accordingly, play major roles in the literature.

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Strategy as Position

The fourth definition is that *strategy is a position*—specifically, a means of locating an organization in what organization theorists like to call an "environment." By this definition, strategy becomes the mediating force—or "match," according to Hofer and Schendel[21]—between organization and environment, that is, between the internal and the external context. In ecological terms, strategy becomes a "niche"; in economic terms, a place that generates "rent" (that is "returns to [being] in a 'unique' place"[22]); in management terms, formally, a product-market "domain,"[23] the place in the environment where resources are concentrated (leading McNichols to call this "root strategy"[24]).

Note that this definition of strategy can be compatible with either (or all) of the preceding ones: a position can be preselected and aspired to through a plan (or ploy) and/or it can be reached, perhaps even found, through a pattern of behavior ("the concept of strategy need not be tied to rational planning or even conscious decision-making assumptions. Strategy is essentially a descriptive idea that includes an organization's choice of niche and its primary decision rules . . . for coping with that niche"[25]).

In military and game theory views of strategy, it is generally used in the context of what is called a "two-person game," better known in business as head-on competition (where ploys are especially common). The definition of strategy as position, however, implicitly allows us to open up the concept, to so-called n-person games (that is, many players), and beyond. In other words, while position can always be defined with respect to a single competitor (literally so in the military, where position becomes the site of battle), it can also be considered in the context of a number of competitors or simply with respect to markets or an environment at large.[26] Since head-on competition is not the usual case in business, management theorists have generally focussed on the n-person situation, although they have tended to retain the notion of economic competition.[27] But strategy as position can extend beyond competition too, economic and otherwise. Indeed, what is the meaning of the word "niche" but a position that is occupied to *avoid* competition.

Thus, we can move from the definition employed by General Ulysses Grant in the 1860s, "Strategy [is] the deployment of one's resources in a manner which is most likely to defeat the enemy," to that of Professor Rumelt in the 1980s, "Strategy is creating situations for economic rents and finding ways to sustain them,"[28] that is, any viable position, whether or not directly competitive.

Astley and Fombrun, in fact, take the next logical step by introducing the notion of "collective" strategy, that is, strategy pursued to promote cooperation between organizations, even would-be competitors (equivalent in biology to animals herding together for protection).[29] Such strategies can

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range "from informal arrangements and discussions to formal devices such as interlocking directorates, joint ventures, and mergers."[30] In fact, considered from a slightly different angle, these can sometimes be described as *political* strategies, that is strategies to subvert the legitimate forces of competition.

Strategy as Perspective

While the fourth definition of strategy looks out, seeking to locate the organization in the external environment, the fifth looks inside the organization, indeed inside the heads of the collective strategist. Here, *strategy is a perspective*, its content consisting not just of a chosen position, but of an ingrained way of perceiving the world. Some organizations, for example, are aggressive pacesetters, creating new technologies and exploiting new markets; others perceive the world as set and stable, and so sit back in long established markets and build protective shells around themselves, relying more on political influence than economic efficiency. There are organizations that favor marketing and build a whole ideology around that (an IBM); others treat engineering in this way (a Hewlett-Packard); and then there are those that concentrate on sheer productive efficiency (a McDonald's).

Strategy in this respect is to the organization what personality is to the individual. Indeed, one of the earliest and most influential writers on strategy (at least as his ideas have been reflected in more popular writings) was Philip Selznick, who wrote about the "character" of an organization—distinct and integrated "commitments to ways of acting and responding" that are built right into it.[31] A variety of concepts from other fields also capture this notion: psychologists refer to an individual's mental frame, cognitive structure, and a variety of other expressions for "relatively fixed patterns for experiencing [the] world"[32]; anthropologists refer to the "culture" of a society and sociologists to its "ideology"; military theorists write of the "grand strategy" of armies; while management theorists have used terms such as the "theory of the business"[33] and its "driving force"[34]; behavioral scientists who have read Kuhn[35] on the philosophy of science refer to the "paradigm" of a community of scholars; and Germans perhaps capture it best with their word "Weltanschauung," literally "worldview," meaning collective intuition about how the world works.

This fifth definition suggests above all that strategy is a *concept*. This has one important implication, namely, that all strategies are abstractions which exist only in the minds of interested parties—those who pursue them, are influenced by that pursuit, or care to observe others doing so. It is important to remember that no-one has ever seen a strategy or touched one; every strategy is an invention, a figment of someone's imagination, whether conceived of as intentions to regulate behavior before it takes place or inferred as patterns to describe behavior that has already occurred.

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What is of key importance about this fifth definition, however, is that the perspective is *shared*. As implied in the words Weltanschauung, culture, and ideology (with respect to a society) or paradigm (with respect to a community of scholars), but not the word personality, strategy is a perspective shared by the members of an organization, through their intentions and/or by their actions. In effect, when we are talking of strategy in this context, we are entering the realm of the *collective mind*—individuals united by common thinking and/or behavior. A major issue in the study of strategy formation becomes, therefore, how to read that collective mind—to understand how intentions diffuse through the system called organization to become shared and how actions come to be exercised on a collective yet consistent basis.

Interrelating the Ps

As suggested above, strategy as both position and perspective can be compatible with strategy as plan and/or pattern. But, in fact, the relationships between these different definitions can be more involved than that. For example, while some consider perspective to *be* a plan (Lapierre writes of strategies as "dreams in search of reality"[36]; Summer, more prosaically, as "a comprehensive, holistic, gestalt, logical vision of some future alignment"[37]), others describe it as *giving rise* to plans (for example, as positions and/or patterns in some kind of implicit hierarchy). This is shown in Figure 2a. Thus, Majone writes of "basic principles, commitments, and norms" that form the "policy core," while "plans, programs, and decisions" serve as the "protective belt."[38] Likewise, Hedberg and Jonsson claim that strategies, by which they mean "more or less well integrated sets of ideas and constructs" (in our terms, perspectives) are "the causes that mold streams of decisions into patterns."[39] This is similar to Tregoe and Zimmerman who define strategy as "vision directed"—"the framework which guides those choices that determine the nature and direction of an organization."[40] Note in the second and third of these quotations that, strictly speaking, the hierarchy can skip a step, with perspective dictating pattern, not necessarily through formally intended plans.

Consider the example of the Honda Company, which has been described in one highly publicized consulting report[41] as parlaying a particular perspective (being a low cost producer, seeking to attack new markets in aggressive ways) into a plan, in the form of an intended position (to capture the traditional motorcycle market in the United States and create a new one for small family motorcycles), which was in turn realized through an integrated set of patterns (lining up distributorships, developing the appropriate advertising campaign of "You meet the nicest people on a Honda," etc.). All of this matches the conventional prescriptive view of how strategies are supposed to get made.[42]

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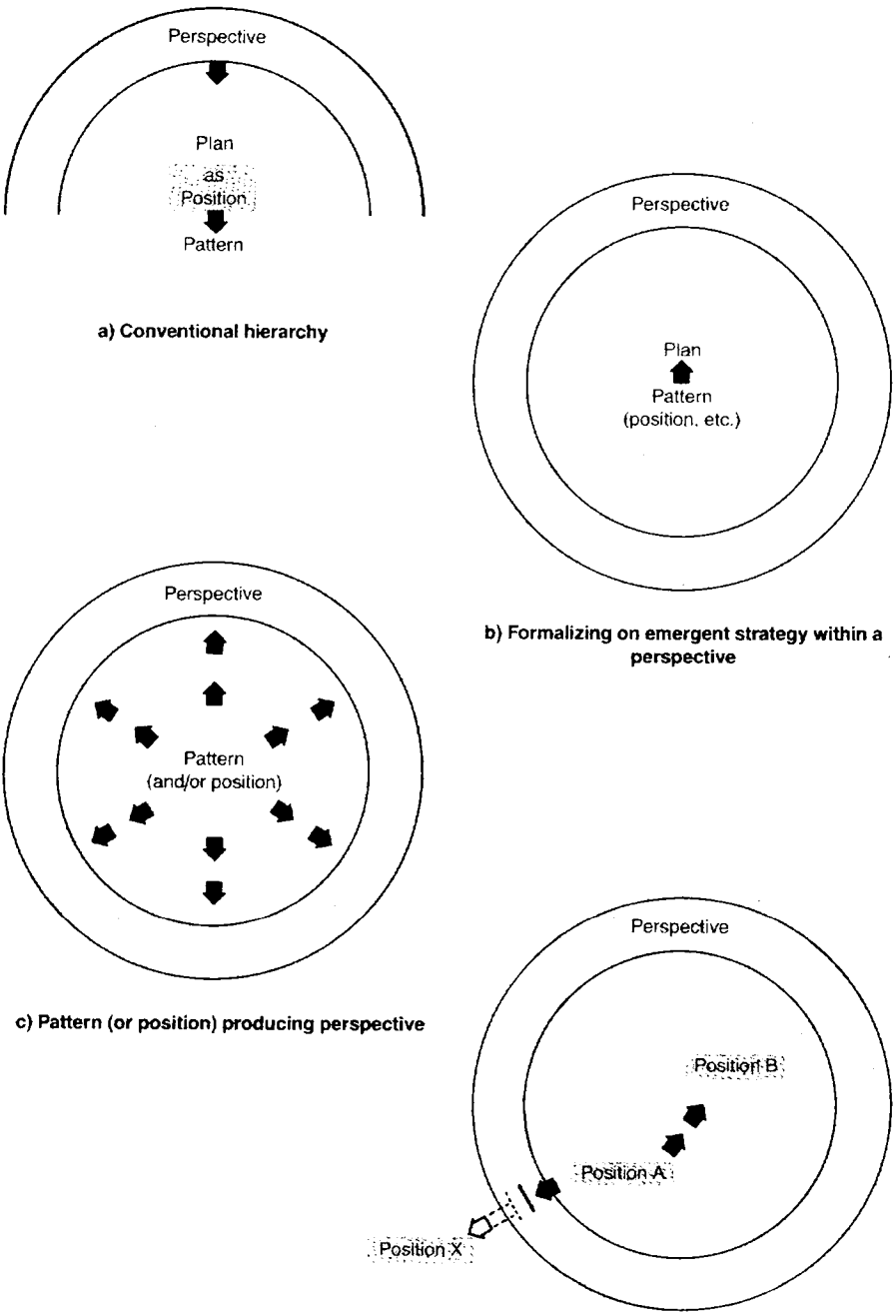
Figure 2. Some Possible Relationships Between Strategy as Plan, Pattern, Position, Perspective



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But a closer look at Honda's actual behavior suggests a very different story: it did not go to America with the main intention of selling small, family motorcycles at all; rather, the company seemed to fall into that market almost inadvertently.[43] But once it was clear to the Honda executives that they had wandered into such a lucrative strategic position, that presumably became their plan. In other words, their strategy emerged, step by step, but once recognized, was made deliberate. Honda, if you like, developed its intentions through its actions, another way of saying that pattern evoked plan. This is shown in Figure 2b.

Of course, an overall strategic perspective (Honda's way of doing things) seems to have underlaid all this, as shown in the figure as well. But we may still ask how that perspective arose in the first place. The answer seems to be that it did so in a similar way, through earlier experiences: the organization tried various things in its formative years and gradually consolidated a perspective around what worked.[44] In other words, organizations would appear to develop "character"—much as people develop personality—by interacting with the world as they find it through the use of their innate skills and natural propensities. Thus pattern can give rise to perspective too, as shown in Figure 2c. And so can position. Witness Perrow's discussion of the "wool men" and "silk men" of the textile trade, people who developed an almost religious dedication to the fibers they produced.[45]

No matter how they appear, however, there is reason to believe that while plans and positions may be dispensable, perspectives are immutable.[46] In other words, once they are established, perspectives become difficult to change. Indeed, a perspective may become so deeply ingrained in the behavior of an organization that the associated beliefs can become subconscious in the minds of its members. When that happens, perspective can come to look more like pattern than like plan—in other words, it can be found more in the consistency of behaviors than in the articulation of intentions.

Of course, if perspective is immutable, then change in plan and position is difficult unless compatible with the existing perspective. As shown in Figure 2d, the organization can shift easily from Position A to Position B but not to Position X. In this regard, it is interesting to take up the case of Egg McMuffin. Was this product when new—the American breakfast in a bun—a strategic change for the McDonald's fast food chain? Posed in MBA classes, this earth-shattering (or at least stomach-shattering) question inevitably evokes heated debate. Proponents (usually people sympathetic to fast food) argue that of course it was: it brought McDonald's into a new market, the breakfast one, extending the use of existing facilities. Opponents retort that this is nonsense, nothing changed but a few ingredients: this was the same old pap in a new package. Both sides are, of course, right—and wrong. It simply depends on how you define strategy. Position changed; perspective remained the same. Indeed—and this is the point—the position could be changed so easily because it was compatible with the

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existing perspective. Egg McMuffin is pure McDonald's, not only in product and package, but also in production and propagation. But imagine a change of position at McDonald's that would require a change of perspective—say, to introduce candlelight dining with personal service (your McDuckling à l'Orange cooked to order) to capture the late evening market. We needn't say more, except perhaps to label this the "Egg McMuffin syndrome."

The Need for Eclecticism in Definition

While various relationships exist among the different definitions, no one relationship, nor any single definition for that matter, takes precedence over the others. In some ways, these definitions compete (in that they can substitute for each other), but in perhaps more important ways, they complement. Not all plans become patterns nor are all patterns that develop planned; some ploys are less than positions, while other strategies are more than positions yet less than perspectives. Each definition adds important elements to our understanding of strategy, indeed encourages us to address fundamental questions about organizations in general.

As plan, strategy deals with how leaders try to establish direction for organizations, to set them on predetermined courses of action. Strategy as plan also raises the fundamental issue of cognition—how intentions are conceived in the human brain in the first place, indeed, what intentions really mean. Are we, for example, to take statements of intentions at face value? Do people always say what they mean, or mean what they say? Ostensible strategies as ploys can be stated just to fool competitors; sometimes, however, those who state them fool themselves. Thus, the road to hell in this field can be paved with those who take all stated intentions at face value. In studying strategy as plan, we must somehow get into the mind of the strategist, to find out what is really intended.

As ploy, strategy takes us into the realm of direct competition, where threats and feints and various other maneuvers are employed to gain advantage. This places the process of strategy formation in its most dynamic setting, with moves provoking countermoves and so on. Yet ironically, strategy itself is a concept rooted not in change but in stability—in set plans and established patterns. How then to reconcile the dynamic notions of strategy as ploy with the static ones of strategy as pattern and other forms of plan?

As pattern, strategy focusses on action, reminding us that the concept is an empty one if it does not take behavior into account. Strategy as pattern also introduces another important phenomenon in organizations, that of convergence, the achievement of consistency in behavior. How does this consistency form, where does it come from? Realized strategy is an important means of conceiving and describing the direction actually pursued by

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organizations, and when considered alongside strategy as plan, encourages us to consider the notion that strategies can emerge as well as be deliberately imposed.

As position, strategy encourages us to look at organizations in context, specifically in their competitive environments—how they find their positions and protect them in order to meet competition, avoid it, or subvert it. This enables us to think of organizations in ecological terms, as organisms in niches that struggle for survival in a world of hostility and uncertainty as well as symbiosis. How much choice do organizations have, how much room for maneuver?

And finally as perspective, strategy raises intriguing questions about intention and behavior in a collective context. If we define organization as collective action in the pursuit of common mission (a fancy way of saying that a group of people under a common label—whether an IBM or a United Nations or a Luigi's Body Shop—somehow find the means to cooperate in the production of specific goods and services), then strategy as perspective focusses our attention on the reflections and actions of the collectivity—how intentions diffuse through a group of people to become shared as norms and values, and how patterns of behavior become deeply ingrained in the group. Ultimately, it is this view of strategy that offers us the best hope of coming to grips with the most fascinating issue of all, that of the "organizational mind."

Thus, strategy is not just a notion of how to deal with an enemy or a set of competitors or a market, as it is treated in so much of the literature and in its popular usage. It also draws us into some of the most fundamental issues about organizations as instruments for collective perception and action.

To conclude, a good deal of the confusion in this field stems from contradictory and ill-defined uses of the term strategy, as we saw in the Egg McMuffin syndrome. By explicating and using five definitions, we may be able to remove some of this confusion, and thereby enrich our ability to understand and manage the processes by which strategies form.

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20. We might note a similar problem with "policy," a word whose usage is terrible confused. In the military, the word has traditionally served one notch in the hierarchy above strategy, in business one notch below, and in public administration in general as a substitute. In the military, policy deals with the purposes for which wars are fought, which is supposed to be the responsibility of the politicians. In other words, the politicians make policy, the generals, strategy. But modern warfare has confused this usage (see Summers), so that today strategy in the military context has somehow come to be associated with the acquisition of nuclear weapons and their use against non-military targets. In business, while "policy" has been the label for the entire field of study of general management (at least until "strategic management" gained currency in the 1970s), its technical use was as a general rule to dictate decisions in a specific case, usually a standard and recurring situation, as in "Our policy is to require long-range forecasts every four months." Accordingly, management planning theorists, such as George Steiner, describe policies as deriving from strategies although some textbook

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writers (such as Leontiades, Chang and Campo-Flores, and Peter Drucker) have used the two words in exactly the opposite way, as in the military. This reflects the fact that "policy" was the common word in the management literature before "strategy" replaced it in the 1960s (see, for example, Jamison, and Gross and Gross). But in the public sector today, the words "policy" and "policymaking" correspond roughly to "strategy" and "strategy making." H. G. Summers, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1981); G. A. Steiner, *Top Management Planning* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1969), p. 264 ff; M. Leontiades, *Management Policy, Strategy and Plans* (Boston, MA: Little Brown, 1982), p. 4; Y.N.A. Chang and F. Compo-Flores, *Business Policy and Strategy* (Goodyear, 1980), p. 7; Drucker, op. cit., p. 104; C.L. Jamison, *Business Policy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953); A. Gross and W. Gross, eds., *Business Policy: Selected Readings and Editorial Commentaries* (New York, NY: Ronald Press, 1967).

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