

Clear Language as a Basis for Effective Strategy

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Who's ever thought ...



Why are we doing this project?



I don't understand this technical stuff they're talking about in the meeting!



I'll just change it from 'meeting' to 'client facing workshop with cross-departmental stakeholder representation and express buy-in from ...'



Intentions

- **learn** about the relationship between language and strategy
- **understand** the importance of clear language for strategy
- **reconsider!** Catch yourself with your own use of language in a business or strategic context (or others)
- **apply** some heuristics to help you

Requests

- **share** something you found enlightening today or suggest your own tips at the end
- **continue** this conversation

Coming up ...

- fighting primates
- psycho technologies
- fluff & jargon
- friction
- 1920s language

About me

Why language and strategy?



Lived in different countries keen interest in languages

Studied in the School of Management at Bath University
& WHU School of Business and Economics in Germany

Trained as a teacher and a coach

Strategy: interest sparked through trying to understand
my own failures but also working on a project without a
clear vision.



Agenda

- 1 | **Language and strategy**
- 2 | How we use language
- 3 | How we misuse language
- 4 | Tools and heuristics

How it all **began**

One theory* suggests language enables us to 'evolve' to become the species we are today.

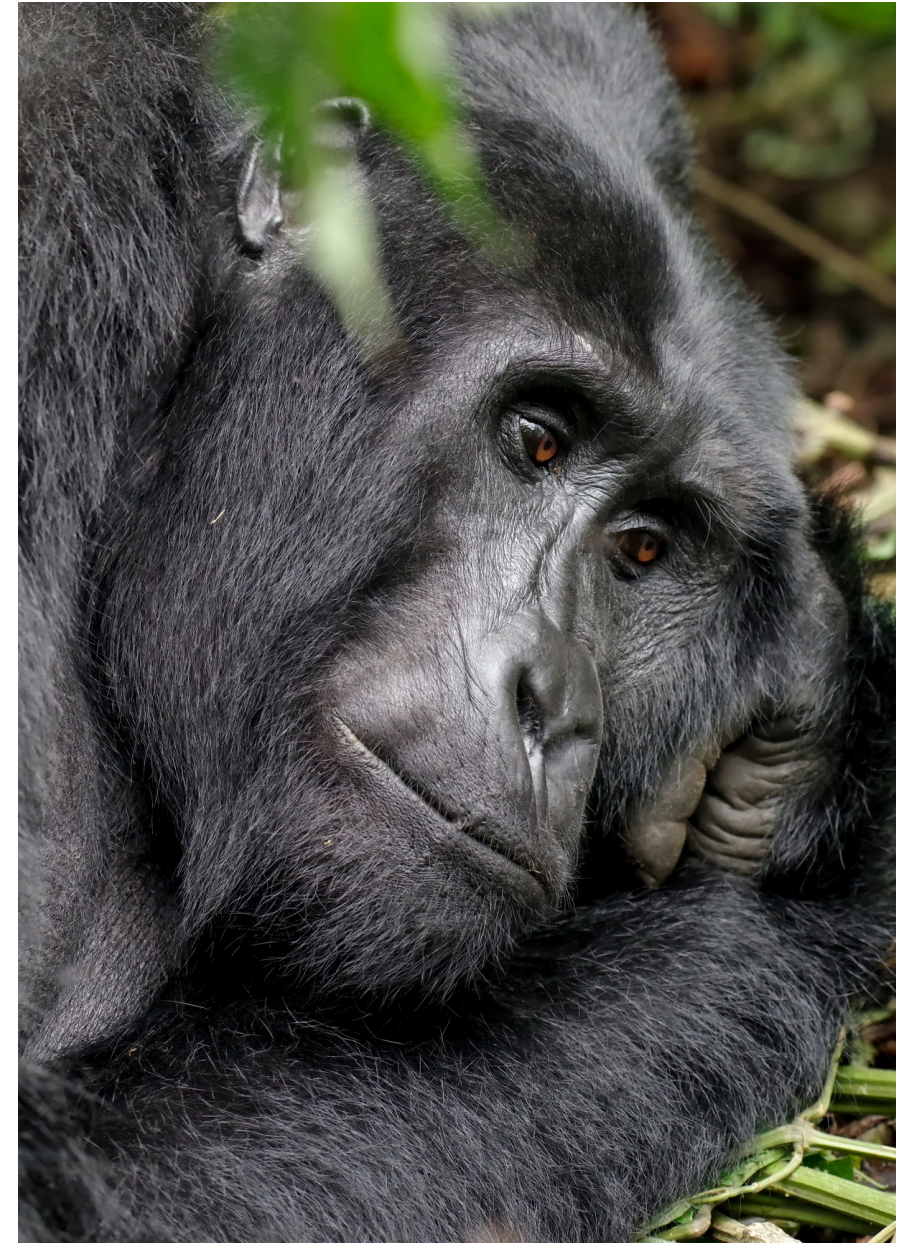
A story about an event that possibly happened 300,000 years ago when a group of primate males decided to overthrow the alpha male in the group ...

The development of language allowed us to:

Formulate an intent

Communicate it to others

Co-ordinate ourselves and others towards it





Language as a Psycho-technology

- Technology is about extending the power of human capacity (often physical)
- Language extends our psychological capacity
- language is efficient because it is based on patterns and is generative (by recombining established patterns we can create unlimited possible thoughts)

And perhaps even ...

An organisational technology: 'Language holds people together'

- Jakob Grimm

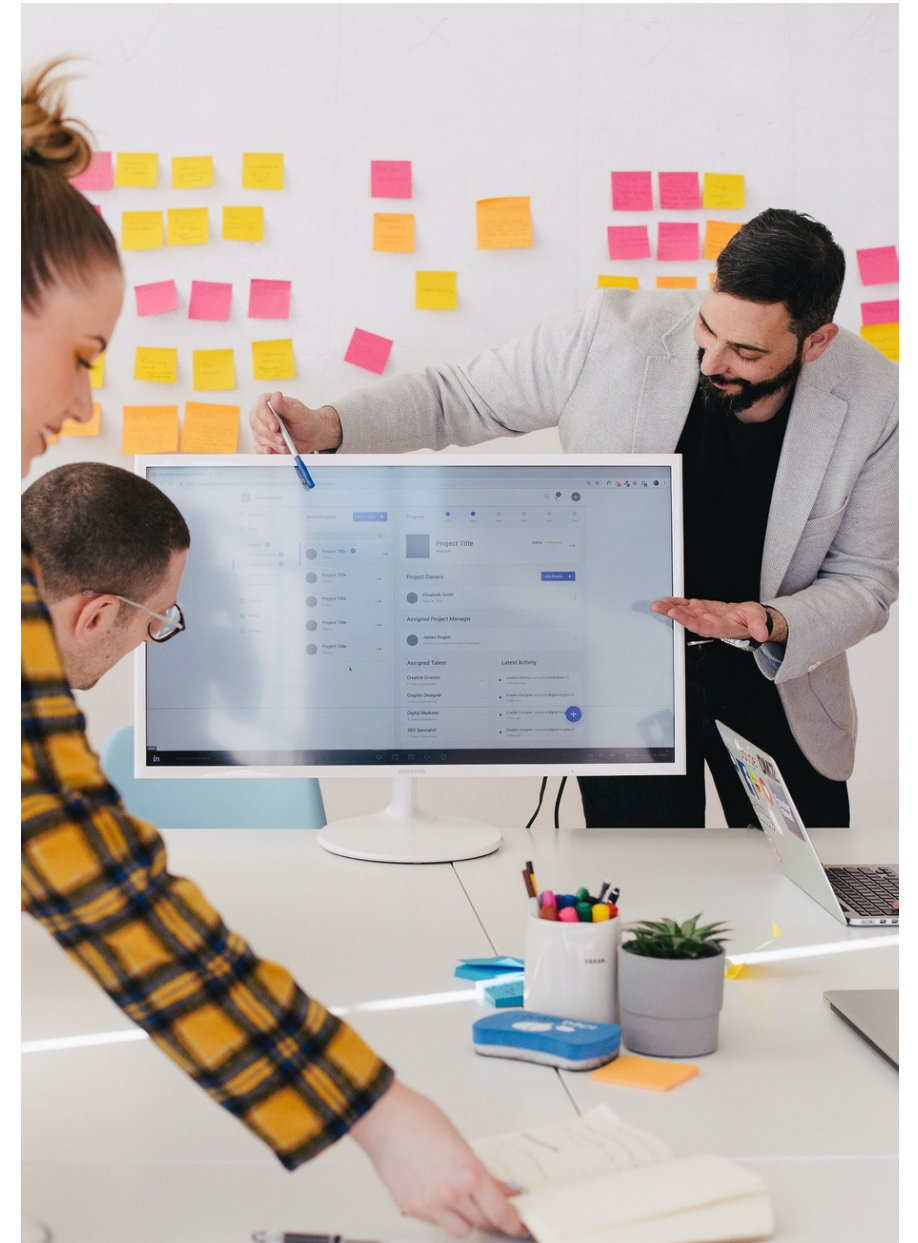
What is **strategy**?

Henry Mintzberg: “strategy is a pattern in a stream of decisions”

“The term strategy has been defined in a variety of ways, but almost always with a common theme, that of a deliberate conscious set of guidelines that determines decisions into the future.

All these definitions treat strategy as (a) explicit, (b) developed consciously and purposefully, and (c) made in advance of the specific decisions to which it applies.”

What's the basis for all of this?



But there's also the environment and context

- Uncertainty
- Risk (potential for ruin of some sort)

And so we see that "strategy formation is the interplay between a dynamic environment and bureaucratic momentum (i.e. the system / organisation) with *leadership mediating* between the two"



Summary so far

- Language defines us as humans compared to other species.
- Language extends the human mind's capability
- Strategy can be described as a 'pattern in a stream of decisions' (with decisions based on and generated by language)
- Leadership operates in the interplay between a dynamic environment and the organisation
- At every stage of thinking, describing and communicating we are using language



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Describing a vision

A vision in the mind's eye, or a visceral feeling within us, can be translated into words:

- a better future
- a change
- the creation of something new

And described and communicated to others.

Needs of language:

understandable, meaningful, visceral, plastic

Communicating across space and time

We can communicate

- To others by sound (voice)
- Or by written form (text)
- But also across time into the future ('project' - Latin: to throw forth)
- In fact, a strategy is communicating with our future selves

Needs of language:

clear, unambiguous

Co-ordination

We need to coordinate ourselves in real time to bring ourselves closer to our objective even in the face of

- a volatile environment
- unexpected events (we can share news - what's happened!)

So that we react and agree who does what and when.

Needs of language:

informative and precise

Summary so far

- We can use language to communicate an intention, communicate across space and time and organise ourselves
- We need clear, meaningful and precise language
- None of this is new or revolutionary
- And yet ...
- So, what happens in organisations? Where does it all go haywire?



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Fluff

What is it?

Richard Rummelt (author of 'Good Strategy, Bad Strategy') defines this as a "restatement of the obvious, combined with generous sprinkling of buzzwords that masquerade as expertise designed to mask the absence of thought."

Where do we see it?

- Vision statements
 - Mission statements
 - Objectives / OKRs
- Corporate sites and reports

What do we need?

- Clear language and based on clear thinking to know why we're doing this stuff

Verbalism

What is it?

Nassim Nicholas Taleb (author of 'Black Swan') describes verbalism as 'using language both central to one's discourse and devoid of meaning; their meaning can change with context or circumstance'.

For example: customer centric / sustainable / democratic - often words no-one can really disagree with.

Where do we see it?

- Strategic 'priorities'
 - Themes
 - Innovative ideas
- Posters on walls

What do we need?

- Precision / precise terminology to know what we're talking about

Jargon

What is it?

'Special words or expressions used by a profession or group that are difficult for others to understand' particularly outside of the domain.

It can obfuscate the information but also intimidate others to enquire more.

Where do we see it?

- Documentation
- Technical work
- Jira tickets
- Powerpoint slides
- End of year reflections

What do we need?

- Understandable and shared language to know what we (and others) are doing.

Rhetoric

What is it?

Persuasive language to convince others of supporting their agenda or cause, which may be unaligned (or even counter) to the organisation's actual purpose or strategy.

Where do we see it?

- Meetings
- After meetings and behind people's backs!
Emails
Events

What do we need?

- The actual information to know what's going on

Summary so far

- When misused, language can obfuscate, becloud, persuade, intimidate
- This could be unintentional
- Or just through sloppiness
- We want clear and precise language to help us understand and make decisions
- So, what can we do?



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Write!

Clear writing means clear thinking ('sentence' comes from the Latin sentire - to think). You can inspect the clarity of your thoughts. Writing rewards structure and logic (from ethos to logos).

Keep summarizing till it's just the essence. Write and then halve it.

Helps to counter

- fluff
- rhetoric
- HIPPOs / deference

Examples

Amazon's memos

How does it help strategy?

- presenting an idea, concept or information
- making a case for a decision an organisation will take



Use templates

Templates can be used to scaffold thinking. Templates have been usually developed by experts based on their experience, and can help to you until you no longer need the templates (internalised the thinking).

Helps to counter

- fluff
- rhetoric
- sloppiness

Examples

OKRs, JTBD, User Stories,
Epic Canvases

How does it help strategy?

- Writing objectives for direction of an organisation
- De-risking complex ideas and concepts



Clean up the language

Remove all technical jargon, base-ball expressions, management speak, Latin, buzzwords.

Helps to counter

- fluff
- jargon
- misunderstandings

Examples

1920s language

Non-violent Communication

How does it help strategy?

- Communicating objectives
- Co-ordination between people & communicating instructions
- Relaying information and giving feedback



Co-create

Co-creation has the advantage of quick feedback but by working together we are already using the language of the people who will be working on the problems to be solved.

Helps to counter

- rhetoric
- jargon
- misunderstandings

Examples

Brainstorming with post-its
Writing on collaborative docs /
wikis

How does it help strategy?

- Creating a shared vocabulary
- Shared sense-making
- Increases the potential for
autonomy later



Aim for clarity

It's clarity that is needed, not detail. Even if it's short and sounds remarkably basic or easy to accomplish. Remember it's about decision-making!
It's important to ensure that something cannot be misunderstood as much as it is important to ensure it is understood.

Helps to counter

- ambiguity
- rework

How does it help strategy?

- Promotes autonomy for decision-making

Worth remembering ...

GEFN - 'good enough for now'. We don't need to be pedantic nor do we have unlimited time to ...



Check / back-briefing

Never ask 'does that make sense?'. Ask someone to repeat back what they've understood. If they've really understood it, you'll probably hear a more succinct improvement.

Helps to counter

- misunderstandings
- disengagement
- knowledge gaps

Examples

Say, show, check

How does it help strategy?

- increases alignment
- reduces knowledge gaps between people

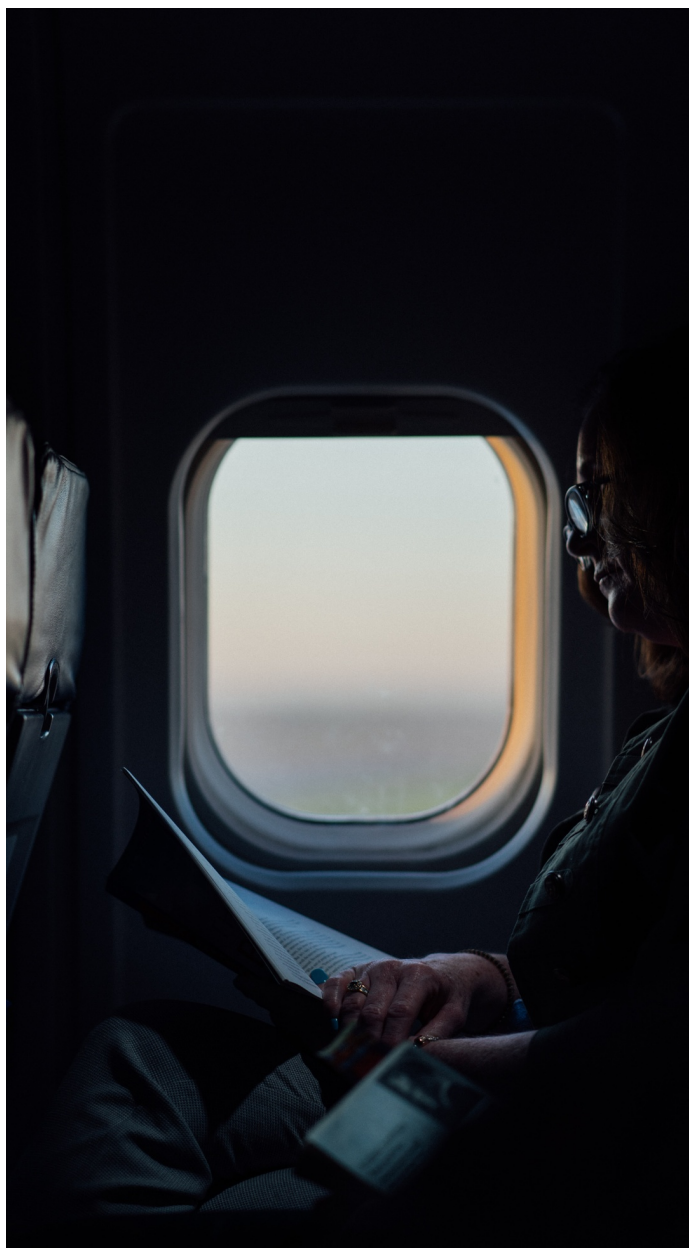


Summary so far

The use of language impacts every aspect of strategy from the original vision through to decisions about the smallest tasks.

It defines our ability as an organisation to make coherent a pattern of decisions in an uncertain environment.

“In the same way that the best way to make a flower is to grow it from a seed, rather than build it cell by cell. The seed carries the DNA and each part builds itself, adapted to the environment. Thus a state of being whole whilst at the same time having autonomous parts. The 'DNA' within an organisation of humans is language” Christopher Alexander



“How do you make strategic thinking more implementation friendly?”

Interviewer

“Language. Strategic thinking can be more implementation friendly when you use words that you understand. It’s amazing to me how often we read strategies that are incomprehensible. And so the more specific a strategy can be, the clearer the language can be, the more implementable it can be.”

Simon Sinek



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Connect

- [neal.taylor](https://www.linkedin.com/in/nealdtaylor)
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Further reading / inspiration

Art of Action - Steven Bungay

Good Strategy / Bad Strategy - Richard Rumelt

Start with Why - Simon Sinek

The Timeless Way of Building - Christopher Alexander

Availagility.co.uk - Karl Scotland

Antifragility - Nassim Taleb

Clean Language - Judy Reed

Nonviolent Communication - Marshall Rosenberg

Awakening from the Meaning Crisis - John Vervaeke

Patterns in Strategy Formation - Henry Mintzberg

Thank you

Reach out to *neal.taylor* to
continue the conversation!