STRATEGIC EDGE PAPERS

ISSUE 01

THE MISSING PIECE OF STRATEGY

A 75-YEAR JOURNEY THROUGH THE EVOLUTION OF STRATEGIC THINKING

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Play where comparison breaks.

THE MISSING PIECE OF STRATEGY

A 75-Year Journey through the Evolution of Strategic Thinking

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From the author of

Strategic Edge: The Missing Piece of Strategy

Dedication

To every founder, CEO, business leader and student who has ever wondered...
"If strategy has been studied for decades, why do businesses still struggle to build lasting competitive advantage?"

This journey is for the CEO in you.
"History does not evolve because thinkers become smarter. It evolves because markets ask new questions.
Strategy has simply been our attempt to answer them." → *Mayank N. Gupta*

For most of my career, I believed strategy was something to be learned. The more I read, the more I realised something fascinating. Every generation seemed to redefine strategy.

- *Peter Drucker spoke about purpose.*
- *Igor Ansoff spoke about growth.*
- *Michael Porter spoke about competition.*
- *Henry Mintzberg challenged planning.*
- *Clayton Christensen warned us about disruption.*
- *Rita McGrath questioned whether competitive advantage could even last.*

They couldn't all be defining strategy. So what was really happening?
The answer surprised me.
None of them was replacing strategy.
Each was discovering the next missing piece.

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Foreword

"The greatest mistake we make about strategy is, believing that someone has already defined it."

For a long time, I believed strategy was a discipline that had reached maturity. Like most students of business, I assumed the world's leading thinkers had already given us the answers. Peter Drucker taught us about management. Igor Ansoff explained corporate growth. Michael Porter defined competitive advantage. Henry Mintzberg challenged strategic planning. Clayton Christensen revealed disruption. Rita McGrath questioned sustainable advantage.

Surely, I thought, strategy had already been figured out. Yet something kept bothering me.

The more companies I worked with, the more founders I mentored, and the more leadership teams I advised, the more I found myself asking a simple question:

Why does every generation redefine strategy?
If Porter had already explained competitive advantage, why did Christensen need to explain disruption? If Christensen explained disruption, why did McGrath later argue that competitive advantage itself had become temporary? If strategy had already been defined decades ago, why were new strategy books still being written every year?

The answer slowly began to emerge. None of these thinkers was replacing strategy. Each of them was responding to a world that had changed.

Every generation of business leaders faced a new challenge that previous generations had never experienced. Markets evolved. Competition intensified. Customers became more demanding. Technology accelerated change. Globalisation reshaped industries. As the world changed, strategy had to evolve with it. Each great thinker solved one important problem. But every solution exposed another unanswered question.

Looking back over seventy-five years through the books I read and my own leadership experiences, I began to see strategy differently. It wasn't a collection of frameworks. It wasn't a timeline of famous books.

It was an ongoing search for the next missing piece.

That simple observation changed the way I understood strategy.

It also became the inspiration for this booklet.
This is not a history lesson.

It is an intellectual journey through seventy-five years of strategic thinking by great thinkers.

My hope is that by the end of this journey, you will not simply remember who developed which framework. Instead, you will understand something far more valuable:
Why strategy has never stopped evolving.

And perhaps more importantly……
…Why it never will.

Introduction
Strategy Never Stood Still

Whenever I ask management students and even leaders a simple question:
"Who invented strategy?"……
…I always receive fascinating answers.

Some immediately say Michael Porter. Others mention Peter Drucker. A few refer to Sun Tzu. Occasionally, someone recalls Alfred Chandler or Igor Ansoff.

The diversity of answers reveals something important. 'There is no single inventor of business strategy and nor is there a universally accepted definition.'

This surprises many business leaders too.

In most disciplines, foundational concepts remain relatively stable. Newton's laws did not stop being relevant because Einstein came along. The principles of accounting have evolved, but they have not been fundamentally reinvented every decade.

Strategy, however, is different.

Every few decades, someone arrives with a new perspective that changes the conversation. The interesting question is not *who was right*. The interesting question is *why each new perspective became necessary.* That question became my obsession as I tasted failures and successes in my leadership roles.

During my leadership years I would read the books on strategic thought, not chronologically, but contextually, I noticed a fascinating pattern.

Every major strategy thinker emerged during a period of profound change. Peter Drucker appeared when corporations became too large to manage. Igor Ansoff emerged when businesses struggled to choose where to grow. Michael Porter entered the conversation as global competition intensified. Henry Mintzberg challenged traditional planning when markets became increasingly unpredictable. Clayton Christensen explained why successful companies kept failing despite doing everything "right." Rita McGrath questioned whether competitive advantage itself could survive in an era of relentless disruption.

Each thinker addressed a genuine business problem.
Each solved an important missing piece.

And every solution eventually became insufficient because the world had changed once again.

I realised that the history of strategy looked less like a series of competing theories and more like an evolving conversation. That conversation forms the backbone of this booklet.

As we travel through each phase, I invite you to look beyond the frameworks themselves. Instead, ask five questions repeatedly.

1. **What changed in the business world?**
2. **What new problem did leaders face?**
3. **Why did previous thinking no longer provide adequate answers?**
4. **What new idea did this thinker contribute?**

5. **What important question still remained unanswered?**

Those five questions reveal something remarkable.
Strategy has never evolved because earlier thinkers were wrong. It evolved because every generation encountered a different reality. And different realities demanded different answers.

Every generation solved one missing piece. Every solution revealed another.

That journey begins long before business schools taught strategy. It begins at a time when companies didn't think they needed strategy at all.

Phase 1: When Strategy Didn't Exist (1900–1945)

The Strategy Had Not Yet Been Discovered

This may sound surprising today, but there was a time when successful businesses hardly spoke about strategy. Not because they lacked intelligence. Not because they lacked ambition, but simply because they did not need it.

To understand why, we must step back to the early decades of the twentieth century.

Imagine yourself as the CEO of a manufacturing company in 1920. The situation youu face is:
- ✓ Demand is booming.
- ✓ Industrialisation is transforming economies.
- ✓ Cities are expanding.
- ✓ Consumers are buying products that previous generations could scarcely imagine.
- ✓ Competition certainly exists, but in many industries the real challenge is not about finding more customers.
- ✓ It is about producing enough to satisfy them.

The dominant business question is therefore straightforward:
How can we make more?
Result?
- ✓ Factories become larger.
- ✓ Assembly lines become faster.
- ✓ Standardisation improves productivity.

Scientific management, pioneered by Frederick Taylor, transforms work into measurable processes.
Henry Ford revolutionises automobile manufacturing through mass production.
General Motors introduces professional management structures to coordinate increasingly complex operations.

The heroes of this era are engineers, manufacturers and operational managers. You as a CEO in 1920 thinks:
“Success belongs to those who can build efficiently, produce consistently and distribute widely.”

Do you notice what is missing?

No Leader asked that time:
- *How do we differentiate ourselves?*
- *How do we position our company?*

- *How do we build sustainable competitive advantage?*

These questions seem almost unnecessary.
Why?

It is because the markets remain relatively under-served. Demand frequently exceeds supply. Growth is driven less by competitive positioning and more by production capacity. In such an environment, management (of higher production output), not strategy, is the primary source of advantage.

The battlefield had not yet become crowded.

There is another reason why strategy remained underdeveloped in early 1900s. Most companies operated within relatively stable industries. Customer expectations evolved very slowly. The technological change, while significant, unfolded over decades, rather than in months. Global competition remained limited.

Business planning therefore focused on forecasting production, expanding facilities and improving operational efficiency. The future appeared reasonably predictable. The managers believed they could plan with confidence.

It is easy, looking back with the benefit of hindsight, to underestimate how different this world was from our own.

Today, 100 years later, executives worry about digital disruption, artificial intelligence, shifting customer expectations and global competitors appearing overnight. In 1920, most business leaders worried about obtaining enough raw materials and building larger factories.

Strategy itself was the missing piece. Business strategy had not emerged.

But history has a habit of changing the questions businesses must answer. And one event would change those questions forever. The Second World War did far more than reshape geopolitics. It transformed the nature of business itself. Industrial capability expanded dramatically. Technological innovation accelerated. Large corporations became even larger.
International markets opened. Competition intensified.

For the first time, leaders began confronting a challenge that production alone could no longer solve. Managing increasingly complex organisations became a strategic problem.

The age of management had arrived.

And with it emerged one of the most influential thinkers in modern business history.
Peter Drucker.

Phase 2: The ‘Purpose’ before Planning (1945–1960)
Peter Drucker and the Birth of Modern Management

"The purpose of business is to create and keep a customer." → Peter Drucker

Factories that had been built to produce military equipment were now producing consumer goods. Technology developed during the war found commercial applications. International trade began expanding. Companies that had once operated regionally suddenly found themselves serving national and even global markets.

Most importantly, organisations became dramatically larger.

A manufacturing company employing a few hundred people before the war could now employ several thousand. Functional departments multiplied. Layers of management increased. Decisions that once rested with a single entrepreneur were now spread across teams of executives.

Business had entered the age of complexity.

For the first time, the challenge was no longer simply producing goods efficiently. It was coordinating large organisations without losing direction.

Management itself had become the bottleneck. The business world needed someone who could make sense of this new reality.

That person was Peter Drucker.
Unlike many management thinkers who followed him, Drucker did not begin by asking how companies should compete. He asked a far more fundamental question of that time.
"Why does a business exist in the first place?"

It seems like an obvious question today.
In the late 1940s, it was revolutionary. The prevailing belief at the time was straightforward. Businesses existed to manufacture products, maximise production and generate profits. Customers were important, but they were often viewed as the end recipients of efficient production rather than the reason the organisation existed.

Drucker challenged this thinking completely. He argued that a business has only one valid purpose:
"To create and keep a customer."

Those six words quietly changed management forever.

Suddenly, strategy could no longer begin inside the factory. It had to begin outside with the customer. This shift may appear subtle, but it fundamentally altered how leaders viewed their organisations.

Factories no longer produced products simply because they could. They produced products because customers valued them. Management was no longer about supervising employees. It became about aligning an organisation around delivering value.

As corporations continued growing, Drucker recognised another emerging problem. People throughout the organisation were working hard. But they were not necessarily working towards the same objectives.
- ✓ Marketing pursued market share.
- ✓ Production focused on efficiency.
- ✓ Finance emphasised cost control.
- ✓ Sales chased revenue.

Each department optimised its own performance, often at the expense of the organisation as a whole. Large organisations were becoming collections of highly efficient silos.

Drucker's response was Management by Objectives (MBO). Although often remembered as a performance management tool, its deeper contribution lay elsewhere. It created alignment. It encouraged every manager to understand how their objectives contributed to broader organisational goals. In other words, Drucker transformed management from supervision into coordination.

Today, this seems almost obvious.

Yet in the 1950s, it represented a profound change.
The modern professional manager had arrived.

What Changed Forever

Looking back, it is difficult to overstate Drucker's influence. He professionalised management. He placed customers at the centre of business thinking. He established management as a discipline worthy of serious study. Almost every leadership programme taught today carries traces of his work.

Yet something important remained unanswered.

Drucker helped organisations become better managed. He did not fully explain how organisations should choose where to grow.

The business environment was changing once again. As economies expanded during the 1950s and 1960s, companies accumulated cash, confidence and ambition.

- Growth opportunities appeared everywhere.
- Should companies expand geographically?
- Launch new products?
- Acquire competitors?
- Diversify into entirely new industries?

The challenge was no longer limited to managing large organisations.

It was choosing their future direction.
Business needed another missing piece.

Phase 3: Growth Becomes a Choice (1960–1970)

Igor Ansoff and the Birth of Corporate Strategy

If Peter Drucker taught managers how to run organisations, Igor Ansoff taught executives how to make strategic choices.

By the early 1960s, the post-war economic boom had created an entirely new business environment. Many companies had become exceptionally successful within their existing markets. Growth was no longer a matter of survival. It had become an expectation. Boards of directors demanded expansion. Shareholders expected increasing returns. The CEOs were judged not simply by operational excellence, but by their ability to grow the business.

Growth, however, created its own dilemma. Every leader faced a deceptively simple question.
“**Where should we grow next?”**

At first glance, the answer seemed obvious.

- ✓ Find another opportunity.
- ✓ Expand.

- ✓ Acquire.
- ✓ Launch something new.

But as organisations became larger and more diversified, these decisions became increasingly risky. Some companies entered unrelated industries they barely understood. Others expanded internationally without appreciating local market dynamics. Still others invested heavily in new products that customers never wanted. Growth was becoming expensive. And expensive mistakes could threaten even successful companies.

Unlike Drucker, who focused on management philosophy, Ansoff approached the problem analytically.

He believed strategic decisions should not rely solely on intuition. They should follow a disciplined framework. This belief culminated in one of the most enduring models in business education:
The Ansoff Matrix

The matrix itself is elegantly simple.
- ✓ Existing products.
- ✓ New products.
- ✓ Existing markets.
- ✓ New markets.

Four combinations with four strategic choices:
- ✓ Market penetration.
- ✓ Market development.
- ✓ Product development.
- ✓ Diversification.

Today, the model appears almost elementary. But its significance lies not in the concept.
Its significance lies in the question it forced executives to ask.
"Growth is not one decision. Growth is a portfolio of strategic choices."

That insight fundamentally changed corporate thinking. For the first time, CEOs possessed a structured language for discussing growth.

Instead of saying, "Let's expand," they could ask:
"Which type of growth best fits our capabilities and our appetite for risk?"

Strategy was slowly becoming a discipline of deliberate choice.

What Changed Forever

Ansoff's contribution extended far beyond a four-box matrix. He introduced the concept of **Corporate Strategy** itself.

Until then, many leaders viewed strategy as little more than long-term planning. Ansoff argued that strategy required making explicit choices about the future direction of the enterprise. This meant:
"Growth was no longer accidental. It became intentional."

This marked an important evolution.
Drucker had taught organisations how to manage themselves. Ansoff taught them how to choose their future.

Yet as companies pursued multiple growth initiatives, another challenge quietly emerged. Organisations became increasingly complex. Large corporations operated dozens of product lines. Business units expanded across multiple countries. Reporting relationships became confusing. Decision-making slowed.

Growth had succeeded.
But it had also created organisational complexity on a scale few had imagined. Business once again searched for another missing piece.

This time, the question was not where to grow.
It was how to organise for growth.

And that question would be answered by a business historian rather than a strategist.

Phase 4: Strategy Needs Structure (1960–1975)
Alfred Chandler and Organising for Growth

"Structure follows strategy." → Alfred D. Chandler Jr.

History often remembers those who invent new ideas. Yet some of the greatest breakthroughs come from those who simply observe what successful organisations are already doing. Alfred Chandler was one such observer.

Unlike Peter Drucker, who challenged how organisations should be managed, or Igor Ansoff, who proposed new ways to think about growth, Chandler approached strategy as a business historian. He spent years studying some of America's largest corporations, not to prescribe solutions, but to understand why certain companies consistently outperformed others over long periods.

His observations led him to one of the simplest, yet most profound statements ever made about strategy:
"Structure follows strategy"

Today, the phrase appears in almost every MBA programme, but its significance is often underestimated. To appreciate Chandler's contribution, we must once again step into the shoes of a CEO in the late 1960s.

Imagine yourself as a CEO leading a company that has successfully followed Ansoff's advice.

You have expanded into new products. You have entered new markets. You have acquired several businesses. You now operate across multiple regions. From the outside, your company appears remarkably successful.

Inside, however, a different story is unfolding.
- Marketing teams compete for budgets.
- Factories operate independently.
- Regional offices make conflicting decisions.
- Managers report through overlapping hierarchies.
- Information moves slowly.
- Customers receive inconsistent experiences.

Ironically, the very growth that created success has also created organisational complexity.

The organisation has outgrown the structure designed to support it. Chandler recognised that many leaders viewed organisation charts as administrative necessities rather than strategic assets.

He challenged that assumption.

Organisation, he argued, is not merely about reporting relationships. It is about enabling strategy. A company pursuing rapid diversification cannot be organised the same way as one serving a single market. A multinational corporation cannot be managed like a local manufacturer. An innovation-led business requires different structures from a cost-focused enterprise. In other words, strategy and structure are inseparable. One shapes the other.

This insight fundamentally changed leadership thinking.

Boards no longer viewed restructuring as a purely operational exercise. It became a strategic decision. The rise of divisional structures, strategic business units and decentralised decision-making throughout the 1970s owes much to Chandler's work.

His contribution also quietly shifted the role of the CEO. Leadership was no longer simply about making strategic decisions. It became about designing organisations capable of executing those decisions.

For perhaps the first time, strategy extended beyond choosing what to do. It now included creating the organisational conditions required to make those choices succeed.

How did Strategy Evolve?

The World Had Changed

- Companies had diversified rapidly.
- Multinational corporations were emerging.
- Organisations had become larger than ever before.
- Growth created unprecedented complexity.

The Strategic Problem

"How do we organise increasingly complex businesses so strategy can actually be executed?"

The Missing Piece Added by Alfred Chandler

Organisational Design:
Strategy could no longer exist independently of organisational design. Structure became a strategic capability.

What This Changed Forever

Executives began redesigning organisations around strategic priorities instead of historical reporting lines.
The concept of Strategic Business Units (SBUs), divisional structures and decentralised management became mainstream.

Execution finally had an organisational foundation.

The Next Question That Emerged

If companies now knew how to manage...
How to grow...
And how to organise...

Why did some businesses consistently outperform others while operating in exactly the same industry?

That question would redefine strategy forever.

Phase 5: Competition Changes Everything (1975–1985)

Michael Porter and the Search for Competitive Advantage

"Operational effectiveness is not strategy." → Michael Porter

There are moments in history when an entire discipline changes direction. For strategy, that moment arrived in the late 1970s. Until then, strategic thinking had largely focused on the company itself.

- ✓ How should we manage?
- ✓ How should we grow?
- ✓ How should we organise?

The assumption underlying these questions was simple.
If companies became better managed, better organised and better planned, superior performance would naturally follow.

Reality proved otherwise. The global economy had changed dramatically.

Japanese manufacturers began outperforming many established Western companies. Oil crises disrupted entire industries. Trade barriers gradually weakened. Competition intensified across almost every sector. Customers gained more choice. Margins began shrinking.

- Being efficient was no longer enough.
- Being large was no longer enough.
- Even being well managed was no longer enough.

Business leaders faced an uncomfortable question.
“Why do two companies, operating in the same industry, with similar resources, produce dramatically different results?”

The answers they had relied upon no longer seemed adequate. It was at precisely this moment that a young Harvard professor named Michael Porter entered the conversation.

Unlike his predecessors, Porter looked away from the organisation.
He looked at the industry.
This shift was revolutionary.

Porter argued that before asking how good your company is, you must first ask a different question.
How attractive is the industry in which you compete?

It seems obvious today.
At the time, it challenged decades of conventional thinking.

Imagine two businesses.
One operates in an industry where customers have unlimited alternatives, suppliers possess enormous bargaining power, substitutes are everywhere and price wars are constant. The other operates in an industry protected by high barriers to entry, limited substitutes and relatively stable customer

relationships. Even if both companies are equally competent, their chances of long-term profitability are fundamentally different.

Porter shifted strategy from introspection to competitive economics. He reminded leaders that performance is influenced not only by internal capabilities but also by the structural forces shaping the market itself.

This insight became the foundation of his now-famous **Five Forces Framework**. For perhaps the first time, strategy acquired an analytical discipline.

The leaders stopped asking merely,
"How can we improve?"

Instead they began asking,
"What is the competitive structure of our industry?"

The difference was profound.
Companies started analysing:
Buyers. Suppliers. Potential entrants. Substitutes. Competitive rivalry.

Boardrooms around the world adopted a new language. Industries were no longer viewed simply as markets. They became competitive systems.

Yet Porter did not stop there. He recognised that understanding industry attractiveness alone could not explain why certain companies consistently outperformed their rivals. Within the same industry, some firms still achieved exceptional results.

Why?
His answer introduced another enduring concept.
"Competitive Advantage"
Porter argued that sustainable success required making deliberate choices about how a company would compete.

Broadly speaking, organisations could pursue one of three generic approaches.
1. They could become the industry's lowest-cost producer.
2. They could differentiate themselves in ways customers genuinely valued.
3. Or they could focus narrowly on serving a specific segment better than anyone else.

This was another major shift.
Strategy was no longer a collection of ambitious goals. It became a series of deliberate choices.

Equally influential was Porter's introduction of the **Value Chain**.
Until then, businesses often viewed themselves as single entities. Porter encouraged leaders to examine every activity inside the organisation, from procurement and manufacturing to logistics, marketing and service, in order to understand precisely where value was created and where competitive advantage emerged.

This transformed strategy from abstract planning into operational diagnosis.

Perhaps Porter's greatest contribution, however, is captured in a sentence that continues to challenge leaders decades later:

“Operational effectiveness is not strategy.”

Companies can become more efficient. They can reduce waste. They can improve quality. They can automate processes. They can benchmark competitors. These improvements matter. But if every competitor can make the same improvements, no lasting advantage exists.

True strategy requires making different choices. Not merely performing the same activities better. This distinction remains one of the most misunderstood ideas in modern management. Even today, countless organisations proudly announce strategic initiatives that are, in reality, operational improvements.

Porter's work reminds us that strategy is fundamentally about differentiation.
Not optimisation.

The World Had Changed

- Global competition intensified.
- Customers gained more choices.
- Japanese manufacturers challenged established Western firms.
- Margins declined.
- Deregulation increased competitive pressure.

The Strategic Problem

"Why do some companies consistently outperform others even within the same industry?"

The Thinker Who Changed the Conversation: **Michael Porter** shifted attention from managing companies to understanding competition itself.

The Missing Piece Added by Micheal Porter

- Industry Analysis
- Five Forces
- Competitive Advantage
- Generic Strategies
- Value Chain

For the first time, strategy became a disciplined way of analysing competition.

What This Changed Forever

Virtually every MBA programme, consulting firm and corporate strategy function adopted Porter's frameworks.
The leaders learned to distinguish operational effectiveness from strategic positioning.
Strategy became synonymous with making deliberate choices about where and how to compete.

The Next Question That Emerged

Porter assumed that strategy could be carefully analysed, deliberately designed and systematically implemented.

But what happens when markets move faster than plans?
What happens when competitors behave unpredictably?
What happens when successful strategies emerge without anyone planning them?

Those questions would soon be asked by a man who fundamentally challenged one of strategy's deepest assumptions.

His name was **Henry Mintzberg**.

Phase 6: When Reality Refused to Follow the Plan (1980–1990)

Henry Mintzberg and the Rise of Emergent Strategy

"Strategy is not always the result of planning. Sometimes it is the result of learning."
— Henry Mintzberg

Every discipline needs someone who asks uncomfortable questions.
For business strategy, that person was Henry Mintzberg.
By the early 1980s, Michael Porter's ideas had become enormously influential. Companies around the world were analysing industries, evaluating competitive forces and investing heavily in long-term strategic planning. Boardrooms became filled with planning documents. Strategic planning departments grew larger. Consultants produced detailed forecasts stretching five and even ten years into the future.

There was only one problem.
Reality refused to cooperate.

- Markets were changing faster than the plans.
- Oil prices fluctuated unexpectedly.
- Technologies emerged that no forecasting model had anticipated.
- Consumer behaviour shifted.
- Competitors behaved irrationally.
- Economic recessions disrupted carefully prepared strategies.

Leaders who had spent months developing strategic plans often discovered that those plans became outdated before they were fully implemented.

Mintzberg began asking a question that few others dared to ask.
What if strategy isn't something we create only in meeting rooms.
"What if strategy also emerges from what organisations actually do?"

This question challenged one of the central assumptions of strategic management. Until then, strategy was largely viewed as a deliberate process.

- Senior executives analysed the environment.
- They formulated a strategy.
- They communicated it.
- The organisation implemented it.
- Success depended on disciplined execution.

Mintzberg believed the real world was far messier.

Through years of observing organisations, he noticed something fascinating.
Many of the most successful strategic moves had never appeared in formal plans. They emerged gradually.

- ✓ A salesperson discovered an unexpected customer need.
- ✓ An engineer solved a technical problem in an innovative way.
- ✓ A regional office experimented with a new service model.

Initially, these appeared to be isolated decisions.

Over time, however, they formed a consistent pattern. Only later did senior management recognise them as strategy. Mintzberg called this **Emergent Strategy**.

The idea was revolutionary. He argued that strategy does not always begin with intention. Sometimes it begins with action. In other words, companies often understand their strategy only after observing what consistently works. This insight transformed how leaders viewed planning. Planning remained important. But planning alone was no longer sufficient.
The role of leadership changed.
Leaders no longer needed ONLY to formulate strategy. They also needed to recognise **emerging opportunities** and **allow successful patterns to develop**.

This required the leaders to admit that they could not predict everything. That markets often knew more than forecasting models. And that organisations learned by doing.

Porter and Mintzberg:

A Conversation That Changed Strategy Forever

One of the greatest mistakes students and leaders make is assuming Porter and Mintzberg disagreed completely. They did not.

In fact, I believe they were answering different questions.

Porter asked,
"How should companies choose where and how to compete?"
Mintzberg asked,
"How does strategy actually develop inside real organisations?"

Porter gave leaders discipline.
Mintzberg gave them adaptability.

Porter brought analytical rigour.
Mintzberg brought organisational learning.

Porter focused on deliberate choice.
Mintzberg recognised emerging opportunity.

Neither replaced the other. Together, they made strategy richer. This, perhaps, is one of the most important lessons in the history of strategy. Great thinkers rarely destroy previous ideas. They reveal their limitations or the missing pieces.

The World Had Changed

- Markets became increasingly unpredictable.
- Economic shocks became more frequent.
- Technology accelerated change.
- Long-term forecasting became less reliable.
- Organisations faced growing uncertainty.

The Strategic Problem

"What happens when reality changes faster than our strategic plans?"

The Missing Piece Added by **Henry Mintzberg**

Emergent Strategy

Learning.
Experimentation.
Adaptation.
Strategy as a pattern of successful actions and not merely a written plan.

What This Changed Forever

Leaders stopped viewing strategy as a once-a-year planning exercise. They began recognising that competitive advantage often emerges through experimentation, learning and continuous adjustment.

Strategy became a living process.

The Next Question That Emerged

If companies could adapt faster what exactly should they build?
Products? Technologies? Or something much deeper?

The answer would come from two professors who shifted attention from products to capabilities.

Phase 7: Competing Through Capabilities (1990–1995)

C.K. Prahalad & Gary Hamel and the Discovery of Core Competence

"The real source of competitive advantage lies not in products, but in the capabilities that create them."

By the early 1990s, another subtle but important shift had occurred. Companies had become exceptionally good at launching products. Many had mastered Porter's competitive positioning. Others had embraced Mintzberg's emphasis on learning. Yet despite these advances, a puzzling pattern kept appearing.

- ✓ Successful products came and went.
- ✓ Market leadership changed hands.
- ✓ Technologies became obsolete.
- ✓ Entire product categories disappeared.

The obvious conclusion was that products themselves could not be the foundation of long-term success.

If not products then what?

Prahalad and Hamel believed the answer lay much deeper. They argued that companies should stop asking,
"What products do we sell?"
and begin asking,
"What are we uniquely capable of doing?"

This was a profound shift in perspective.

Consider a company like Honda. Was Honda fundamentally a motorcycle company? An automobile company? A generator manufacturer? Or was it something else?

Prahalad and Hamel argued that Honda's real strength was not any individual product. It was its extraordinary expertise in designing and manufacturing compact, reliable engines. That capability allowed Honda to enter multiple industries successfully. The products changed. The capability remained.

This insight gave birth to one of the most influential concepts in strategic thinking:
“Core Competence”

Core competencies are not products. They are organisational capabilities that are difficult for competitors to imitate, provide value across multiple markets and create the foundation for future growth. Suddenly, executives began viewing their organisations differently. Instead of managing portfolios of products, they began nurturing portfolios of capabilities.

The question shifted from,
"What business are we in?"
to,
"What capabilities allow us to enter businesses that others cannot?"

This fundamentally expanded strategic thinking.

Competitive advantage no longer depended solely on industry position or deliberate planning. It also depended on developing capabilities that competitors would struggle to replicate.

For the first time, strategy looked inward again, but with a deeper purpose.
- Not to improve operations.
- Not to reorganise structure.

But to discover the hidden strengths that could shape the future.

The World Had Changed
- Product life cycles became shorter.
- Technologies evolved rapidly.
- Companies diversified across industries.
- Innovation accelerated.

The Strategic Problem
"If products eventually become obsolete, what creates lasting competitive advantage?"

The Missing Piece Added by C.K. Prahalad & Gary Hamel

Core Competence (Organisational Capability)
Competitive advantage comes from unique capabilities and not merely through successful products. Capabilities create multiple future opportunities.

What This Changed Forever
Boards and CEOs began investing in knowledge, skills, organisational learning and technological capabilities as strategic assets. Companies started seeing themselves not as collections of businesses, but as collections of distinctive capabilities.

The Next Question That Emerged
If unique capabilities create advantage, must companies always compete in existing markets? Or could they create entirely new markets where competition becomes irrelevant?

That question would inspire one of the most optimistic and controversial ideas in the history of strategy.

Transition to Phase Eight

For almost four decades, strategy had largely focused on competing better in three ways

1. Compete more efficiently.
2. Compete through differentiation.
3. Compete through capabilities.

But two professors would soon ask a wonderfully simple question:
"What if the best strategy is to stop competing altogether?"

Their answer would become known around the world as **Blue Ocean Strategy**.
And with it, the very purpose of strategy would once again begin to evolve.

Phase 8: Escaping Competition (1995–2005)

W. Chan Kim & Renée Mauborgne and the Birth of Blue Ocean Strategy

"The only way to beat the competition is to stop trying to beat the competition."
At first glance, this sounds absurd.

For nearly half a century, strategy had been built around one central idea.
Compete better.

- ✓ Peter Drucker taught organisations to become customer-centric.
- ✓ Ansoff taught them to choose growth wisely.
- ✓ Porter taught them to analyse competition.
- ✓ Prahalad and Hamel taught them to build unique capabilities.

Every major contribution assumed one thing. **Competition was inevitable.**

Then, in the late 1990s, two professors asked an entirely different question.
What if competition itself is the wrong place to start?
That question would fundamentally reshape strategic thinking.

Imagine You Are the CEO in 1998...

Your company has survived decades of intense competition. You have embraced quality management. You have benchmarked competitors. Your strategy consultants have analysed Porter's Five Forces. Your organisation has invested in Core Competencies. Yet every year feels harder than the last.

- Margins continue shrinking.
- Competitors copy your innovations within months.
- Customers compare prices online.
- Retailers demand greater discounts.
- Every improvement is quickly matched.
- Your leadership team proudly announces another efficiency initiative.
- Your competitors announce exactly the same initiative six months later.
- You are running faster than ever.

- Yet you are not pulling away.

Late one evening, after another strategy review, you ask yourself a question that no consultant seems able to answer.
"Are we trying too hard to win the wrong game?"
That question is precisely where Kim and Mauborgne begin.

The World Had Changed

By the late 1990s, globalization had accelerated dramatically.

- Trade barriers had fallen.
- Manufacturing capabilities had spread around the world.
- Technology allowed competitors to imitate products faster than ever before.
- Customers enjoyed unprecedented choice.
- Entire industries became crowded with companies offering nearly identical products.
- Strategy increasingly resembled a battle for market share.
- Companies fought over the same customers.
- The same distributors.
- The same suppliers.
- The same price points.

Every strategic improvement produced only temporary gains before competitors copied it.

The language of strategy itself reflected this reality.

- ✓ Winning.
- ✓ Defending.
- ✓ Attacking.
- ✓ Protecting market share.
- ✓ Outperforming rivals.

Everything sounded like warfare.
Kim and Mauborgne believed the battlefield itself was the problem.

The Strategic Problem

Previous thinkers had taught companies **how to compete better.**
Very few had questioned whether relentless competition created lasting prosperity.

“What if businesses devoted their creativity to making competitors irrelevant rather than defeating them?”

Could entirely new demand be created? Could companies stop fighting over existing customers and instead attract people who had never been customers before?

These questions marked a profound shift. For the first time, strategy moved beyond competition.
It moved toward creation.

The Thinkers Who Changed the Conversation

Professors **W. Chan Kim** and **Renée Mauborgne** spent years studying companies that achieved extraordinary growth without engaging in direct competitive battles. Their research led them to a remarkably simple observation.
“Successful companies often did not outperform competitors”

They changed the rules of the game.
Instead of entering existing markets and fighting for incremental advantage, they created entirely new spaces where competition became temporarily irrelevant.
They called these spaces **Blue Oceans**.
Existing markets, crowded with competitors, became **Red Oceans,** red from the metaphorical blood of constant competitive battles. The metaphor captured leaders' imagination immediately.

But the true contribution went much deeper than clever terminology. Kim and Mauborgne reframed the purpose of strategy itself. Strategy was no longer merely about defending position.

It became about creating new value.

The Missing Piece Added

Perhaps the most important concept introduced by Blue Ocean Strategy was **Value Innovation**.
Traditional thinking forced companies to choose.

- Differentiate.
- Or reduce costs.

Kim and Mauborgne argued that this was often a false choice. The most successful companies redesigned customer value in ways that simultaneously increased differentiation while reducing unnecessary costs.

What Changed Forever

Blue Ocean Strategy gave executives permission to stop obsessing over competitors.
"Innovation became strategic rather than merely a technological tool."

The companies began asking questions they had rarely considered before.
✓ Which industry assumptions can we eliminate?
✓ Which customer frustrations have everyone accepted as inevitable?
✓ Which non-customers could become customers?
✓ How can we redefine value itself?
The conversation shifted from **market share** to **market creation**.

Perhaps no strategy book since Porter had influenced boardrooms quite so dramatically.

Yet Blue Oceans carried an implicit assumption.
Once a company created a new market space, competitors would eventually arrive.

History repeatedly confirmed this.
✓ Southwest Airlines inspired imitators.
✓ Apple transformed smartphones.
✓ Netflix reshaped entertainment.
Each created its own Blue Ocean. Eventually, every Blue Ocean attracted sharks.
The ocean slowly turned red again.

Once again, history presented strategy with another unanswered question.

The World Had Changed

- Global competition intensified.
- Product imitation accelerated.
- Customers enjoyed greater choice.

- Price competition increased relentlessly.

The Missing Piece Added by W. Chan Kim & Renée Mauborgne
"Can companies create growth without fighting competitors?"
- Blue Ocean Strategy
- Value Innovation
- Market Creation
- Make Competition Irrelevant

What This Changed Forever
Strategy expanded beyond competition.
Executives began searching for uncontested market spaces rather than merely larger shares of existing markets.
Innovation became central to strategic thinking.

The Next Question That Emerged
Even companies that created entirely new markets eventually faced competitors. Why did market leaders repeatedly lose to newcomers they initially ignored? The answer would emerge from one of the most influential business books ever written.

Phase 9: When Success Becomes Your Biggest Risk (2000–2010)
Clayton Christensen and the Theory of Disruptive Innovation

"The reason successful companies fail is not because they do the wrong things. It is because they keep doing the right things."

Few ideas in business have been as unsettling as Clayton Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation. Most strategy thinkers had taught executives how to become successful.

Christensen explained why success itself could become dangerous.

Imagine You Are the CEO in 2005...
Your company dominates its industry. Customers trust your brand. Your financial performance is strong. Your engineers continuously improve your products. Your sales team consistently exceeds targets. Analysts praise your leadership. Your shareholders are delighted.

Then, somewhere on the edge of your market, a tiny start-up appears. Its product is inferior.
Its customers seem insignificant. Its margins are unattractive.

Your executive team dismisses it.
- *"Those customers aren't our target market."*
- *"The product isn't good enough."*
- *"Why would anyone buy that?"*

Years later...
That tiny company becomes your biggest competitor.

You realise, too late, that while you were improving your existing business, someone else had quietly created the future.

Christensen wanted to understand why this happened so often. And why it happened most frequently to the best-managed companies.

The World Had Changed

By the beginning of the twenty-first century, business leaders had become remarkably sophisticated.

- They understood industry structure.
- They invested in strategic planning.
- They built core competencies.
- Many had embraced Blue Ocean thinking.

Yet something deeply unsettling continued to happen.

Great companies kept disappearing.
Kodak had invented the digital camera, yet digital photography destroyed Kodak.
Nokia dominated mobile phones, yet smartphones reshaped the industry almost overnight.
Blockbuster laughed at Netflix.
Yahoo underestimated Google.
BlackBerry dismissed the iPhone.

In each case, the established company possessed more resources, stronger brands, larger customer bases and greater technical expertise.

If strategy had become so advanced, why were the best companies repeatedly losing?

That question fascinated Clayton Christensen. Unlike many strategy thinkers, Christensen did not begin by studying successful companies. **He studied failure.** More specifically, he studied why intelligent managers, armed with sound data and disciplined decision-making processes, consistently made decisions that ultimately destroyed their own organisations.

The answer was both surprising and uncomfortable. Most executives were doing exactly what they had been taught to do.

- Listen to customers.
- Invest in profitable markets.
- Improve existing products.
- Allocate resources to opportunities promising the highest returns.

These practices represented excellent management. Yet, paradoxically, they often prevented organisations from recognising disruptive innovation.

Christensen argued that disruptive technologies rarely begin by outperforming existing products.

- Initially, they are inferior.
- They serve customers whom market leaders consider unattractive.
- Their margins appear weak.
- Their quality seems inadequate.

Consequently, established firms ignore them.

Over time, however, these technologies improve. Gradually they become "good enough."
Then, almost overnight, they redefine customer expectations. By the time established firms respond, the disruption is complete.

The tragedy is not poor management. The tragedy is excellent management applied to a changing world.
That insight fundamentally altered how executives viewed competition.

- ✓ The greatest threat no longer came from familiar competitors.
- ✓ It came from unfamiliar business models.
- ✓ It came from organisations serving customers that incumbents considered unimportant.

In Christensen's world, danger rarely announced itself.
It quietly entered through the edges of the market.

The CEO's Dilemma

As I reflect on Christensen's work, I believe his greatest contribution was not the word "disruption."
It was a new question every CEO had to ask.
"What am I ignoring today because it seems too small to matter?"

That is an uncomfortable question.
It requires leaders to challenge their own success.
It asks them to invest in opportunities that appear unattractive.
It forces them to accept that yesterday's strengths can become tomorrow's blind spots.
Few strategic questions demand greater humility.

The Thinker Who Changed the Conversation

Clayton Christensen fundamentally changed the role of strategic leadership.

Leaders could no longer focus exclusively on protecting their current competitive position. **They also had to create mechanisms for discovering tomorrow's opportunities before someone else did.**

Innovation was no longer merely a product function. It became a strategic capability. This distinction remains profoundly important. Many organisations claim to innovate. Far fewer deliberately create environments capable of nurturing disruptive innovation that initially appears commercially unattractive.

Christensen reminded us that disruption rarely begins where market leaders are looking.

The Missing Piece Added by Clayton Christensen

Disruptive Innovation.

Not every innovation is disruptive.
Most innovations improve existing products.

Disruptive innovations create entirely new trajectories. They redefine what customers eventually expect. More importantly, Christensen shifted attention away from competitors.
He focused our attention on trajectories which show:

- ✓ Markets evolve.
- ✓ Customer expectations evolve.
- ✓ Technology evolves.

Strategy therefore must evolve continuously.

What Changed Forever

Following Christensen's work, boardrooms began discussing innovation differently.

- ✓ Innovation labs appeared.
- ✓ Corporate venture funds expanded.
- ✓ Large companies attempted to behave more like start-ups.

- ✓ Executives became less concerned with protecting the present and more interested in discovering the future.

Some succeeded. Many did not. For disruption cannot be managed through slogans.

It requires organisations willing to challenge their own assumptions before competitors do.

The World Had Changed

- Digital technologies accelerated rapidly.
- New entrants emerged with radically different business models.
- Customers adopted new technologies faster than ever before.
- Industry boundaries became increasingly blurred.

The CEO's Dilemma

"Our business has never been stronger.
So why am I worried about a company that is barely profitable?"

The Missing Piece Added by Clayton Christensen

- Disruptive Innovation
- Jobs to Be Done
- Innovation Trajectories
- The Innovator's Dilemma

What This Changed Forever

Strategy expanded beyond defending today's position.
It became equally concerned with discovering tomorrow's business before someone else did.

The Next Question

If industries continually change...
If disruption is inevitable...
If competitive advantage constantly erodes...
Can any competitive advantage truly last?
That question would challenge one of the oldest assumptions in strategic thinking.

“Every strategic breakthrough solved yesterday's problem. None could solve tomorrow's.”

Phase 10: Strategy Becomes Simpler (2005–2015)

Richard Rumelt, Jim Collins and Roger Martin: Returning Strategy to Its Essence

"Bad strategy is not the absence of ambition. It is the absence of coherent choices."
→ Inspired by Richard Rumelt

Imagine You Are the CEO in 2012...

Your executive retreat has just concluded. The walls are covered with colourful Post-it notes. You have identified seven strategic priorities. Five transformation initiatives.
Three innovation programmes. Four digital projects. A customer-centricity roadmap.
An ESG roadmap. A people strategy. A technology strategy. A growth strategy. An AI strategy.
Everyone leaves the meeting inspired.

Three months later...

- Nothing significant has changed.
- Managers are overwhelmed.
- Teams are confused.
- Resources are spread thin.
- Every initiative seems important.
- Which means none truly is.

You begin wondering...

"Have we confused planning with strategy?"

Interestingly, that is exactly the question several influential thinkers began asking.

The World Had Changed

The first decade of the new millennium produced an explosion of management ideas.

- Balanced Scorecards
- Six Sigma
- Lean
- Agile
- Digital Transformation
- Customer Experience
- Innovation Management

Executives found themselves surrounded by an ever-growing collection of frameworks. Ironically, the abundance of strategic tools created a new problem. ***Complexity.***

Strategy itself appeared increasingly complicated. Many organisations produced strategy documents exceeding one hundred pages. Yet employees often struggled to explain the company's strategy in a single sentence.

Somewhere along the way, strategy had become confused with planning.
Again, the discipline needed another correction.

The CEO's Dilemma

"If everything is strategic, is anything truly strategic?"

That question became the defining challenge of this era. Richard Rumelt, Jim Collins and Roger Martin approached the answer from different directions. Yet all three arrived at remarkably similar conclusions.

“Strategy is fundamentally about making difficult choices.”
Not creating longer plans.

The Thinkers Who Changed the Conversation

Richard Rumelt reminded leaders that good strategy begins with diagnosing the real challenge, making guiding choices and aligning coherent actions around those choices. He argued that many organisations substitute ambitious goals and buzzwords for genuine strategy.

Jim Collins, through extensive research, showed that enduring companies were characterised not by dramatic strategic pivots but by disciplined execution, consistency and a relentless focus on what they could become the best in the world at.

Roger Martin reframed strategy as an integrated set of choices. His famous question: ***"Where will you play, and how will you win?"*** returned strategic thinking to its essence.

Strategy was not an annual planning exercise; it was a coherent logic for creating advantage.
Together, these thinkers simplified strategy without making it simplistic.
They stripped away jargon. They brought leaders back to first principles.

Phase 11: The End of Sustainable Advantage (2010–2023)

Rita McGrath and the Era of Continuous Reinvention

"Competitive advantage is no longer something you build once. It is something you repeatedly create." → Inspired by Rita McGrath

Imagine You Are the CEO in 2020...

Your company has done everything strategy textbooks recommended.

You understand your industry. You have built strong capabilities. You have invested in innovation. Your people execute well. Your customers like your products. Your competitors respect your brand.

Ten years ago, that would have been enough.

Today, it feels fragile.

- A start-up launches a digital platform that changes customer expectations.
- A subscription model replaces outright ownership.
- A social media trend shifts buying behaviour in weeks.
- An AI-enabled competitor replicates features you spent years developing.
- Customers compare prices, reviews, ratings and alternatives within seconds.

Your advantage has not disappeared because you became complacent.

It has disappeared because the world has become dramatically faster.

As another strategy review ends, one question refuses to leave your mind.
"If every competitive advantage eventually disappears what exactly am I trying to sustain?"
That question defines the modern era of strategy.

The World Had Changed

The digital economy accelerated everything. Technology cycles shortened. Information became almost free. Customers gained unprecedented transparency. Switching costs collapsed. Business models evolved faster than organisational structures.

In previous decades, companies expected strategic advantages that lasted years, sometimes decades. Today, advantages often last months.

The traditional idea of building a sustainable competitive advantage began to look increasingly unrealistic.

It was time to question one of strategy's oldest assumptions.

The CEO's Dilemma

For more than thirty years, businesses have pursued sustainable competitive advantage.
But what if sustainability itself was the wrong objective? What if strategy should no longer focus on defending a position, but on continually creating the next one?

The Thinker Who Changed the Conversation

Professor **Rita Gunther McGrath** asked precisely that question. She argued that many industries had entered an era where long periods of stable competitive advantage had become the exception rather than the rule.

Instead of imagining strategy as the construction of an unshakeable fortress, she proposed thinking of it as crossing a series of stepping stones. Each advantage creates the opportunity to build the next. Eventually, every advantage weakens. Wise organisations recognise this before competitors force them to. This idea became known as **Transient Advantage**.

The implication was profound.
Competitive advantage had not disappeared. Its lifespan had changed.

The strategic challenge was no longer defending a single position.
It was orchestrating a continuous sequence of new advantages.

The Missing Piece Added by McGrath

McGrath did not reject Porter. She built upon him.
Porter asked,
"How do we create competitive advantage?"
McGrath asked,
"How do we continually renew competitive advantage before it expires?"

That subtle shift reflects one of the most important patterns throughout this booklet.
Every major thinker respected the insights of those who came before. But each recognised that the world had changed.
Therefore, strategy had to change too.

What Changed Forever

Businesses increasingly embraced agility.
Innovation portfolios replaced single innovation projects.
Experimentation became continuous.

Corporate strategy became more dynamic.
Boards began asking not only,
"Where is our competitive advantage?"
but also,
"What comes after it?"

For perhaps the first time, strategy itself became a process of continuous reinvention.

The World Had Changed

- Digital transformation accelerated.
- AI, automation and platforms shortened product life cycles.
- Customers became more informed than ever.

- Competitive advantages eroded rapidly.

The CEO's Dilemma
"If every advantage eventually disappears, how do we stay ahead?

The Missing Piece Added by Rita Gunther McGrath
- Transient Advantage
- Continuous Reinvention
- Strategic Agility
- Innovation Portfolio Thinking

What This Changed Forever
Strategy shifted from protecting a position to continually creating the next one.

The Next Question
If markets change faster than ever...
If advantages are temporary...
If innovation itself is becoming commoditised...
What should businesses build that competitors find hardest to copy?

Every strategic breakthrough solved yesterday's problem. None could solve tomorrow's.

Phase 12 (Current Phase): The Next Missing Piece (2024-The AI Age)

When I began my journey of strategic leadership I supplemented my experiences with reading about strategy, I thought I was reading about ideas. Looking back now, I realise I was actually reading about questions.

Every great strategy thinker appeared because the business world changed.
- Peter Drucker responded to the rise of large corporations.
- Igor Ansoff responded to the challenge of growth.
- Alfred Chandler responded to organisational complexity.
- Michael Porter responded to intensifying competition.
- Henry Mintzberg responded to uncertainty.
- Prahalad and Hamel responded to shortening product life cycles.
- Kim and Mauborgne responded to overcrowded markets.
- Christensen responded to disruption.
- Rumelt reminded us that strategy is choice, not aspiration.
- McGrath responded to accelerating change.

Seen individually, these appear to be independent contributions. Seen together, they tell a remarkable story.
"Strategy has never stood still. And it never will."

Every generation encountered a new business reality. Every thinker discovered a missing piece that solved for the changed reality.

The question, therefore, is no longer,

"What is the best strategy?"
The better question is,
"What has changed in today's markets that yesterday's strategy cannot fully explain?"
That question became my own starting point.

A NEW PATTERN EMERGES

Over more than three decades of working with businesses across industries, I gradually began noticing a pattern. It wasn't immediately obvious. In fact, I first sensed it years ago in my own leadership journey, but only recently has it become impossible to ignore.

Most businesses I worked with did **NOT** fail because they lacked strategy.They did **NOT** fail because they lacked planning, or they lacked innovation, or they lacked capable people.

Many had excellent products, strong brands, clear market positions, competent leadership teams, robust dashboards, disciplined execution. They understood their competitors. They understood their customers.

Yet they continued to struggle.
The problem lay somewhere deeper.
The struggle was subtler.

THE MARKET HAD CHANGED AGAIN

For nearly twenty-five years, markets have steadily moved towards greater transparency.
When the internet first emerged, companies simply published product information.

- ✓ Then came pricing
- ✓ Then reviews
- ✓ Then customer ratings
- ✓ Then expert comparisons
- ✓ Then social proof
- ✓ Then recommendation engines

Today, artificial intelligence is accelerating this process beyond anything we have experienced before.

Information that once belonged to companies now belongs almost entirely to customers.
And that has quietly changed the nature of competition itself. Businesses are no longer merely competing. They are empowering customers to compare.

THE AGE OF DISRUPTIVE COMPARISON

Comparison is not a new human behaviour. It is as old as commerce itself.
In 1982, Lee Iacocca famously declared:
"If you can find a better car, buy it."

It was a brilliant marketing statement. Ironically, it worked because comparison itself was difficult. Customers compared a handful of alternatives. Information was limited. Buying involved lot of effort. Changing suppliers involved risk.

Today's customer lives in a completely different world. Within seconds they can compare:

- Products
- Prices
- Features
- Service levels
- Reviews

- Ease of buying
- Ease of returns
- Delivery speed
- Trustworthiness
- Customer experiences
- Risk of purchase

And increasingly, AI performs much of that comparison on their behalf.

That changes everything, because comparison no longer happens occasionally. It is happening continuously and at scale. The comparison is happening at almost zero cost. And the scope of comparison is only gathering pace.

THE CURRENT TRAP

Businesses are responding exactly as expected.
They are adding more features, bundling more services, reducing prices, increasing promotional spending, launching loyalty programmes, improving customer experience, offering faster delivery, reducing buying risk and making purchasing easier. And finally, geographical boundaries have vanished. E-commerce allows customer to buy from any part of the globe.

Every improvement is now becoming another point of comparison.

Competitors are responding in double quick time. Customers compare again.
The cycle repeats.

Everyone becomes better. But, becoming 'meaningfully different' is ceasing to be relevant as most solutions solve same need.

The Trap: Companies now have competitors of all sizes located across the globe and they can't beat all of them or compete against all of them. Each brand is now being compared against brands not locally present.
"**The 'differences' are now being compared against the unknown"**

That, I believe, is the strategic challenge of our era.

THE QUESTION HISTORY HAS BEEN LEADING US TOWARDS

As I reflected on this changing reality, I found myself asking a question I had never seen explicitly addressed in the strategy literature.
"What if the next evolution of strategy is no longer about competing better, but about becoming strategically incomparable?"

Notice what this question does.
- ✓ It does not reject Porter. Competition still matters.
- ✓ It does not reject Blue Ocean Strategy. Creating new value still matters.
- ✓ It does not reject McGrath. Continuous renewal still matters.

Instead, it builds upon everything that came before.

If strategy has evolved from management of large corporations → To growth → To competition → To capabilities → To innovation → To reinvention, then perhaps the next evolution lies somewhere else.
"Perhaps it lies in reducing the very need for customers to compare you in the first place."

Comparison will not break because you would be able to escape current reality. Comparison will not break because competitors disappear.

Comparison will break when your business creates such a "Edge over Rivals" through a combination of offer value, positioning, customer experience, business design and ecosystem advantage that gives you such a market power where *'comparison becomes increasingly inadequate'*.

THE DEFINING STRATEGIC QUESTION OF OUR TIME

Every era has had one defining strategic question. In 2026, I believe ours is this:
"Why do customers choose you without comparison?"

That single question changes everything, because it forces the leaders to stop asking…
"How do we compete better?"
……and start asking,
"What outcome of our system do we win at, which gives our offer an edge over our rivals?"

THREE QUESTIONS THAT CAN SOLVE FOR DISRUPTIVE COMPARISON

Every leadership team should periodically ask itself three uncomfortable questions.

1. **If every competitor disappeared tomorrow, why would customers still choose us?**
   The answer is not because we are the only option left, but because we are genuinely their preferred option.
2. **If every competitor disappeared tomorrow, how would we reframe the customer problem and solve it differently?**
   The answer lies in whether our business still has a unique point of view or story to tell, or are we merely reacting to customers.
3. **If our brand name disappeared from every product, what would make customers still recognise us?**
   Would they recognise our thinking? Our experience? Our system? Our outcomes? Or only our logo?

These three questions expose whether your edge over competitors is real or are you merely familiar.

PLAY WHERE COMPARISON BREAKS™

The answer, I believe, can be summarised in four words.
"Play Where Comparison Breaks"

That is not simply a strategy tagline. It is the new strategic ambition for late 2020s.

The businesses that shape the future will not necessarily be those that compete hardest. They will be those that make traditional comparison increasingly irrelevant.

History has taught us that there are no final answers in strategy.
"There are only better questions."

The thinkers whose work fills these pages never stopped asking them.
Neither should we.

EPILOGUE

The Conversation Continues

If there is one lesson I hope you carry with you after reading this booklet, it is this:

Strategy is not a collection of frameworks to memorise. ***It is a way of thinking.*** Every framework you have encountered was born because someone looked at a changing world and asked:
"What problem does today's reality create that yesterday's strategy cannot fully solve?"

That is the mindset I encourage every business strategy student, founder, CEO and business leader to cultivate.
Learn the classics. Respect the giants whose shoulders we all stand upon. But never assume the conversation has ended.

Markets will continue to evolve. Technology will continue to reshape industries. Customers will continue to change. And strategy will continue to reveal new missing pieces. The next breakthrough may come from a renowned academic. It may emerge from an entrepreneur. Or it may come from someone who simply notices a pattern that everyone else has overlooked.

After all, every great contribution to strategy began with someone asking a better question.
Perhaps the next question is waiting to be asked.
Perhaps it is waiting to be asked by you.

About the Author

Mayank N Gupta is a business strategist, mentor, author and former corporate leader with over 35 years of leadership experience across multiple industries. Through his consulting practice, he works with founders, CEOs and leadership teams to help them build businesses that are easier to grow and harder to beat.

His work centres on a simple but powerful belief for the current market environment:
"Strategy Must Create Market Power, or It Isn't a complete strategy for today's disruptive comparison times."

His strategic philosophy is centred on:
"The right strategy is a deliberate path to seek dominance, overmatch, market command, and relentless edge over rivals."

This booklet is a companion to his book:
Strategic Edge: The Missing Piece of Strategy
...where he explores this philosophy in greater depth and introduces a practical mechanism for helping businesses move beyond comparison-driven competition toward enduring strategic edge.

The strategy that designs and creates "edge"……
"Out-value Rivals. Out-value for Customers."