

THIS IS STRATEGY

creating the conditions for change

SETH
GODIN



Most books on strategy are for corporate MBAs or West Point generals.

This is for you. For someone who wants to make things better.

My narrative is recursive and elliptical, circling back on itself as it seeks to help you see how time, games, systems and empathy dance together to make our world. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

Strategy is a philosophy of becoming

Who will we become,
who will we be of service to,
and who will we help others to become...

A strategy isn't a map, it's a compass.

Strategy is the hard work of choosing what to do today to make tomorrow better.

The world is much better.
The world is awful.
The world can be much better.

Max Roser reminds us that it feels as though these all can't be true. And yet, they are. And they continue to be.

This is the point. This is at the heart of our work and the challenge of our days.

Toward better.

Four threads, woven together

Time, games, empathy and systems. They're everywhere we look, and easy to ignore.

Each supports and is supported by the other three. Throughout this project, we'll be shifting from one to the other, building up to a fuller, actionable understanding of how strategy works.

Time, because strategy plays out over time, the way a garden grows.

Games, because there are multiple players and different possible outcomes. Trees compete for light and only one grows to be the tallest, but all of them are part of the forest.

Empathy, because people don't see what you see or even want what you want. Plant your seeds in places where the conditions are right.

And **Systems**, because whenever we work together, a system is created. And that system often lasts far longer than we expect. The swamp isn't the same as the plains, but each is a complex web of interactions.

Each builds on the next, in a never-ending braid.

What do people want?

Once our basic needs for food, shelter and health are met, most people dance with three conflicting desires:

- Affiliation
- Status
- Freedom from fear

(We can probably add joy, wonder, thrills, satisfaction and other internal narratives, but for now, let's focus on these three).

Affiliation is community. Fitting in. Being liked. Affiliation is wearing the right fashion, using the correct salad fork and knowing the words to the song around the campfire.

Status is always relative. Who eats lunch first? Who's up and who's down?

And the freedom from fear is an internal construct. Fear can be used as fuel, but it's more likely to be avoided.

Marketing works on these three principles. And systems all use them to maintain their structure.

If you want to understand why someone makes a choice, look for what people want.

We have a chance to change the way they get what they want, but their innate drives usually stay the same.

You might need a strategy to

- Get into the college of your choice
- Find a new job
- Increase sales of your new product
- Decide where to live
- Get your neighbors to come to the local block party
- Pass the school board budget
- Get married without spending more than you should
- Change the bullying culture at work
- Help a new kid feel welcome
- Have enough savings to retire with

Systems deliver value

How did our culture evolve to have systems at the center of so much of what we do? There are three reasons:

1. Coordinated human effort creates productivity and value. When we work together, we get far more done. A doctor without drugs, hospitals or a team isn't very effective. And a farmer can't feed anyone without tools, markets and seeds.
2. People are rarely rational. Even when we want the same things, we don't always agree about how to get them. Systems adjudicate these disagreements and allow us to move forward even if we're not in sync.

3. Consistency is worthwhile, and slack and persistence of information permit this. If someone doesn't show up for their shift, or isn't operating at full speed, the system acts as a bridge.

The power and leverage that systems create can also cause them to create undesirable side effects and to impede useful innovation.

The unseen assistant (and the mysterious vandal)

Better waves make better surfers.

A useful skill in surfing is picking the right place and time to go surfing. The systems in our lives are like waves, making our work easier or more difficult.

Working *with* a system is like having an assistant, eager and skilled, always making your work better.

And working *against* a system can feel like someone is intentionally harming your project.

When Michelin rolled out the puncture-proof tire, they were sure they had a billion dollar innovation. It was better for drivers, for car manufacturers and the industry.

A few years later, the project was dead. Ron Adner explains that because the local tire shops, garages and repair depots would need arduous training and new equipment, they hadn't eagerly participated in the early days of the project, and Michelin had largely ignored them.

As a result of this missing link, customers discovered that they had a great deal of trouble getting their tires serviced, and were often pushed to buy normal tires to replace their worn or damaged no-flat tires.

Frustrated customers complained, and some even sued the car companies.

The project failed, and while it's easy to point the finger at the selfish car mechanics, the truth is that the vandal was the system, the resilient automobile industrial complex that would rather not change quickly.

Can you see the river?

It's more than the water. There's water in a lake, too.

The essence of the river is the current. Paddling upstream is more difficult than going downstream. The river flows. A snapshot shows you the water, but not its motion, not the relentless force as the water moves from here to there.

If you want to change the course of a river, you can try to build a dam, but those are expensive and can fail.

The alternative is to dig a small channel, a channel that helps that river to go where it was going anyway. When you make it easier for the current to flow, the current will respond.

A small channel quickly becomes a torrent, and then, the river itself.

There are games in every strategy

A game has the following elements:

Players, rules, scarcity, choices, feedback loops and outcomes.

And calling it a game gives us a chance to depersonalize our work, to be more flexible in our strategy and to talk about it. Smart people have studied games—from nuclear proliferation to public health to poker—and we can learn from them.

Here are a few things about games that are generally true:

1. You don't have to enjoy the game for it to be a game.
2. You're playing a game whether you realize it or not, and seeing the game helps you play it better..
3. The outcome of a game often has little to do with how much you want to win.
4. Everyone playing the game sees it differently.
5. Some games are easy to quit, other games are forever.
6. Not all players follow the same rules or have the same goals, even when playing the same game.
7. No game stays the same for long, because playing the game changes the game.

8. Short-term gains can lead to long-term losses, and vice versa.
9. Sometimes, the best way to win is to help others succeed.
10. Large games are made of smaller games, all the way down.
11. Most games are not fair, and some games cannot be won.
12. The most valuable skills in one game may be useless in another.
13. Some games become easier as you win, others more difficult.
14. You don't always have to play the game you're offered.
15. Multiplayer games sometimes conceal themselves as two-player games.
16. **We mistakenly spend more time figuring out how to win the game we're in instead of choosing which game to play in the first place.**

There is a method

"Simplify, then add lightness" said Colin Chapman, the founder of Lotus Cars.

Simplify, because the needless complexity we're stuck with was only created to insulate us from fear. And lightness, because our agility increases resilience.

Either we make the system or the system makes us.

Constructing a blueprint connects our goals to our insight, amplified by our resources, and allows us to make a difference. Our blueprint is the actionable strategy we're committing to.

A series of 17 questions shines a light on the work to be done. It brings tomorrow forward to today, right here and right now, allowing us to articulate a strategy.

1. Who are we here to serve?
2. What is the change we seek to make?
3. What are our resources?

4. What is the genre we're working in?
5. Who has done something like this before me?
6. What systems are in play?
7. Am I changing someone's status?
8. Why would anyone voluntarily choose to be part of this work?
9. What will they tell their colleagues?
10. Who gains in status, affiliation and power by supporting this work?
11. Will early support translate into more support later?
12. Where is the network effect?
13. What do I need to learn to make this work?
14. Who do I need to work with?
15. Where is the dip and when should I quit?
16. What will I do if it doesn't work out?
17. How much is enough?

These questions will make someone who wants to be a milkman, a movie star or even a US Senator impatient. We've been seduced into seeking out jobs, but these questions challenge us to find a strategy, a way to prepare for the stepwise path to get from here to there. Too often, we pick a job we want to do and work backwards to answer the questions, but that's arrogant and insulates us from the reality of the systems we need to dance with in order to reach the people we'd like to serve.

Get the strategy right and the jobs we do will be more fulfilling and easier to accomplish.

The elegant path is the most useful way forward

My neighbor is a barefoot runner. He doesn't actually run, he glides. He's certainly not trying harder than anyone else out there on the track, but he's going faster, with less effort and discomfort. Ten miles later and he's still fresh.

Elegance is simplicity, efficiency and effectiveness. It's not only a solution that gets a result—it's arguably a *better* solution. The least complex and clearest way forward. An elegant strategy offers leverage in service of the change we seek. While it might seem effortless in execution, creating the method requires insight and care.

Elegant paths often seem roundabout at first, but they put systems to work for us, instead of against us. They require intent and discipline, and reward us with resilience and efficiency.

Our strategy reduces waste. We avoid dead ends and save energy, time and materials as well. And an elegant strategy is beautiful. We know, in our bones, that we're aligned with the systems and resources around us, doing the right thing in the right way.

Pretending we don't need a strategy isn't nearly as useful as digging deep to find an elegant one.

Effective marketing isn't about hype or hustle or even about getting the word out. Instead, it focuses on engaging with people who seek to engage with us. Our job is to find a resilient path forward by helping people get to where they hope to go.

Elegant strategies *use* systems. Even when they set out to change the system, they don't fight it directly but use the system as a tool to change the system.

This approach only gets better over time. The word spreads horizontally. Trust grows. Engagements lead to more engagements.

Each node in the system we engage with will make a choice about how to allocate attention and effort. Our project needs to be accepted by each person who has the power to choose—and our job is to create the conditions for that to happen.

Not all elegant strategies are the same

But many of them fall into similar buckets. Systems respond to strategies, and the elegant strategies give us leverage.

Three things to focus on:

1. **The strategy gets better as you grow.** Anyone can sprint, but this sort of strategy is something that you can maintain.
2. **Systemic advantage defeats heroic effort.** Heroic effort is thrilling, but long-term elegant strategies rarely require miracles on a daily basis.

3. **They're simple to explain and difficult to stick to.** Over time, the pressures to vary from the strategy that's working increase, a thousand little compromises that eventually lead to a stall.

The circle of us and the circle of now

A toddler wants what he wants. Right now. Or a tantrum ensues.

As we mature, we expand our circles. Instead of focusing on just ourselves, we consider our family or our neighbors. Over time, we realize that traditional boundaries of caste or class or geography are imaginary, not real, and so we productively include more and more people in our 'we.'

The expanding isn't merely a good feeling. It's also a practical and effective way to create culture and possibility.

Strategy helps us see that *now* is also easily extended. We can include yesterday and tomorrow in our experience of what's right in front of us. As we grow up, we learn that investing in tomorrow is smarter than always insisting that we get something today.

The Iroquois Confederacy lived by a simple principle: "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."

Strategy challenges us to make each circle bigger.

The circle of us can grow and include the people we interact with and the community we hope to lead.

And the **circle of now** embraces our relationship with time. Effort in the short run creates the conditions for the long run we'd like to live with.

Who do we want as leaders, neighbors or co-workers? Selfish tantrums are for toddlers.

When we expand our circles, we are able to step into the possibility of better.

While the smallest circle of now is THIS INSTANT, some people plan a week ahead and some imagine their life, or the life of their kids. The difficult part around long-term change is simple: that sort of effort is not *now* enough for most people.

To kill all the whales

Organizing millions of humans in a conspiracy to kill as many whales as possible wasn't very difficult.

In 1846, the American whaling fleet reached its all-time peak, with 735 ships and approximately 70,000 people employed in the industry. The majority of these ships were hunting sperm whales, as their oil was considered the best quality for lighting.

Tens of thousands of men left their families and risked their lives to hunt whales.

Easy? Yes. All someone had to do was explain the value of whale oil. This led to industries that made lanterns, distributed oil, refined it and brought the blubber to shore. It created demand for boats, for sails, for docks and for sailors as well.

The sperm whale wasn't saved by a publicity campaign or people voluntarily cutting back on light. No, it was saved by the development of kerosene lanterns and then the discovery of oil in Pennsylvania.

The system didn't want to kill all the whales. All the system wanted was to make a profit solving the problem of darkness. When it found a cheaper and more efficient way to do that, it did.

There are countless conspiracies. They're not a secret, we simply need to see the systems.

Seeing the windmill

If you've ever played putt putt miniature golf, you know that the best obstacle is the windmill hole. It turns, inexorably, and you need to get your ball through the windmill to the hole.

The strategy here is obvious and simple. Time it right and take your shot.

It gets a bit more complex when we're playing chess. Now there's another human involved. If you move your queen over there, she will castle and put you in check, so you better not.

You do this, they do that.

But when we're playing rugby or ultimate frisbee, now we have to keep track of many humans, on our team and theirs. What worked last play might not work this time.

Players in these free-flowing competitions don't repeat plays by rote, they flow, in sync, with a mixture of practiced movements and improvisation.

Most of the time, rugby is simple compared to our real life. There are hundreds of competitors, government agencies, new technologies, seemingly unrelated options, all entwined in a system over time.

Facing this, we often revert to playing putt putt with a windmill. But we can do better than that. Windmills are predictably boring. The regular nature of the windmill is the point. The rest of the world is a lot more complex. This is the purpose of the expanding circle of us.

A framework for a strategy

AWARENESS of the system and the rules. Any change we seek to make involves scarcity, the status quo, networks and what came before. Most of all, awareness of time and the distance from today until tomorrow.

EMPATHY for the individuals who must engage with your project. We don't need to have sympathy or agreement to realize that other people have the independence and power to make choices, and those choices will always be based on their experience, worldview, and self-interest.

CHOICES are available to each of us. We have more agency than we'd like to admit, and our decisions can be better aligned with the goals of the project.

UNCERTAINTY is a feature of every strategy. Not the delineated steps of a proven process, but the exploration and probabilities of creating a better version of the future.

RESILIENCE comes from acknowledging that the x axis is time, and that today is not the same as tomorrow. Few projects work as we intend, and our strategy embraces the truth that our plans will change.

RESOURCES: A clear understanding of the resources available to execute the strategy. This includes financial resources, human capital, technology, and other assets that can be leveraged to achieve the desired outcomes..

Twelve slogans

This manifesto connects a series of ideas, new ways to think about our work and how a strategy can transform the impact we make.

The goal is to give you a framework for what a strategy looks and feels like, and how to work with your team to build one worth investing in.

Throughout this book, we can keep coming back to these principles, adding nuance and building an approach to make change happen.

1. The future is an unvisited city, but we can see it from a distance
2. The audience can be chosen
3. Don't play games you can't win
4. Projects can be managed
5. We make decisions
6. A difference can be made

7. Assets can be built
8. Networks can be created
9. Traction is the way forward
10. Sunk costs can be ignored
11. Organizations change, in fact, they always do
12. You're not sitting in traffic, you are traffic

When did Netflix become Netflix?

Netflix began as a DVD rental company. Ubiquitous red envelopes and a huge selection were the hallmarks of their early success.

After they defeated Blockbuster and had the market to themselves, Reed Hastings and Ted Sarandos made a strategic decision to shift the future of the company to streaming movies and original programming. And they communicated this commitment in a very simple way:

They stopped inviting the DVD leadership team to meetings.

Even though DVD rentals were all of their profit and most of their revenue, they knew that having these powerful voices in the room would ultimately lead to compromises designed to defend that line of business.

Our next move is often something that decreases the value of our previously hard-won assets.

Some reasons we avoid having a strategy

- We're not able to see the system
- We see the system but we can't choose between working with it or on it
- We'd prefer to get the benefits of our actions sooner rather than later
- It's often more satisfying to be picked by a powerful system than to alter it
- We're concerned that our strategy won't work and we don't want to fail
- We're concerned that our strategy will work and we hesitate to embrace the responsibility that would come with that
- We've been indoctrinated to follow instructions and ask for tactics

- It's easier to go along with the crowd than to persuade them of a more effective but arduous path
- Sunk costs are difficult to ignore
- Projects are intimidating to manage
- It's tempting to daydream about the future, but we're not sure we're ready to live there

Choose your customers, choose your future.

Here are some of the choices that customers and clients dictate:

- The price
- Support and service
- Durability
- The status it brings
- Public persona of the brand
- Sustainability

If you set out to serve very demanding clients that expect custom work, low prices and a plenty of personal service, that is how you'll spend your days.

When you advertise your slippers on late-night TV via a toll-free number, you're probably attracting a less informed and less demanding customer, but you might be pushed by the economic demands of the medium to make bigger claims and cut more corners.

If you're a freelancer listing your work online on Upwork, you've signed up for short-term customers most concerned with price. You could have the same skills and built a very different project working for a few long-term customers in town.

We often get stuck in a customer loop, dancing ever faster for the customers we have instead of spending time and resources replacing these folks with the customers we'd like to have instead.

The only way forward for a freelancer to succeed is to find better customers. Better customers that pay more, demand more and spread the word as well. Better customers aren't always easy to find, which is why the more common and convenient approach is to take what you can get.

You can choose your customers, and train and reward the ones you'd like to keep. By rewarding some behaviors over others, by keeping some promises not others, by having some expectations instead of others, you get the audience you deserve. Some things you can train customers to do:

- Be respectful
- Be patient
- Keep their satisfaction to themselves
- Be selfish
- Be focused on a superstar
- Demand personal service
- Be calm
- Never settle for the current iteration
- Be cheap
- Embrace acceptance
- Spread the word
- Expect pampering
- Demand free
- Be eager to switch brands to save a buck
- Value and honor long-term loyalty
- Be skeptical

The customers you fire and those you pay attention to change the way you spend your days.

That's right, the customers you fire. If you're not firing customers, you're surrendering your future to whoever walks in the door.

It's not easy to persuade someone to want what you want.

It's much more productive to find people who already want to go where you'd like to take them.

Choose your competition and choose your future

It's not surprising that Lance Armstrong cheated. During his career, at the highest levels of bike racing, it was impossible to win without doping.

Everyone else is doing it.

When there's scarcity, competition ensues.

And if you choose a competition where the most successful path is short-term thinking and a race to the bottom, you've decided how you will spend your time.

Choose the source of validation and you choose your future

Who are you seeking to please?

Is that validation directly in alignment with how you are rewarded and how you're organized?

Cracker Barrel isn't trying to please the food critic at the *New York Times*.

They're consistent and coherent about who it's for, and how pleasing that community advances their goals and rewards them.

Billy Joel, Sting and Paul McCartney all recorded classical records. If it's internally driven, they're bound to succeed—simply making the album is enough. But if the goal was to find the same sort of easily measured success they received from pop music, then their label, managers and partners were sorely disappointed.

Shun the non-believers. Small and growing organizations frequently encounter stress due to a mismatch. When we match where we seek validation to the work we hope to do and the rewards we hope to receive, the process works far better.

Choose your distribution and you're also choosing your future.

Distribution is harder to visualize, but ultimately as important.

Should you put your audio interview show on the radio, on a podcast or on a CD? Or should you only perform it live, at the local community center? The conversations might be the

same, but the distribution choices will put you in different systems and create different pressures and different rewards.

Venture capitalist Mitch Lasky has highlighted how important this is for video game companies, but it actually effects every organization seeking to make an impact.

Distribution is the act of bringing the thing you make to the people who want it.

FTD changed the flower business by changing how the flowers were distributed—the growing didn't change, the flowers didn't change, the florist industry changed.

Steam transformed the video game business by helping game developers leave CDs and floppy disks behind. And Apple determines not only the marketing but the actual design of apps that are built to be distributed in the their app store.

An app isn't different from a website just for technical reasons. It's also constrained and enabled by the way it is distributed and how that distribution changes the posture of the user.

Taskrabbit changed how the hard-working folks who lift furniture and assemble it spend their days.

It's not simply trading one middleman for another. When the system of distribution changes, what gets built changes as well.

Things that scale

No matter how much the marketplace economy creates, invents and sells, there remains an insatiable desire for some wants, things we can never get enough of.

The nexus of all of these desires is money. Money in itself is nothing, but the story of money means that it is a proxy for many things.

From the launch of the telegraph to Fedex to DMs, offering **speed** (in travel, but more than that, in communication) creates a tension that some can't resist. And once some parts of a networked system upgrade their speed, others do as well.

While all humans are aware of their **status**, many people who have achieved a form of it want to keep it, expand and it show it off. There is a desire for luxury goods from saddles to yachts to tickets in the front row. “I only want more than my share,” has created an endless feedback loop.

Tim Wu made it crystal clear that once we have enough to survive, we go looking for **convenience**. People will trade almost anything once they’re offered an option that enhances laziness or seems to multiply free time.

And this helps us see that what most people in most systems want is **reassurance**. Freedom from fear. Knowing that they’re going to be okay, and that tomorrow will be okay too.

As people report feelings of alienation and loneliness, it seems as though the shortage of nurturing **community** is getting worse, despite the extraordinary amount of time we spend online, supposedly in connection with others. One reason is that people also crave **celebrity**. The myth of the influencer, the loneliness of the overlooked, the desire for connection and meaning... they all end up pushing people to share their ideas and their lives.

Most of these desires, particularly status, are insatiable. When the system rewards and encourages our desires, we often come back for even more. If you want to make a large impact, harnessing an insatiable desire is the method.

Status, safety, affiliation and curiosity are universal and always interacting, as people around the world seek success and hope for solace.

100 is a fine way to start

Here’s an example of how a system that’s ready for it can embrace a change.

In 1979, Lynn Taylor, a kindergarten teacher in Livermore, CA, brought a puppet and a hundred pennies to class. She introduced her classroom to the 100th day of school and turned it into a celebration.

The next year, she and a few other teachers repeated the celebration and it worked.

In 1981, they published a short article in an international newsletter for teachers called "Mathematics Their Way."

Note the progression here.

- The nucleus.
- The small win.
- An easy way to talk about the work and a way to publish it.
- The small win can be repeated annually. It's safe, you're affiliated with the other teachers, your status goes up by leading the way. If you miss the day, you can't do it later, so tension is created.
- And then there are worksheets, booklets, traditions and sooner or later, it's the thing we've always done.

At every step along the way, Lynn and the movement gave the system precisely what it needed, but impacted the system along the way. According to the *Chicago Tribune*, "A true grasp of 100 is a gift, a peek behind the curtain of the magic and power of huge numbers, the key to infinity. Understand 100, and you understand 200. Understand 200, and 300 and 400 come into focus, then 1,000 starts to make sense and most of the other numbers you need to decode everyday life."

It wasn't a breakthrough that transformed the system of kindergarten education. But it advanced the goals of everyone involved.

Failing to change the donation dynamic

My story about kidney donation sounds similar to the challenge of improving kindergarten, but it has a different, less positive conclusion.

When a family member needed a kidney, I came face to face with the organ donation shortage. I saw that some were trying to solve the problem by moving to a new location, finding a region where they had a better chance of moving up the wait list. One proposal that hadn't gained traction was turning organ donation from opt in to opt out, as it is in some countries. Other interventions included proposing to pay impoverished families to donate a recently deceased relative's organs—which is a horrific slippery slope.

As steep as the stakes are here, it's still a game. There are scarce resources, allocation problems and strategies to get ahead. The game that is played is wasteful and leads to needless trauma.

My proposed solution made one simple shift to the way the organ donor list was prioritized. The UNOS system (which works the US government to allocate organs) would add a simple variable: **how long have you been on the donor list?**

If someone is ethically open to receiving a kidney, it follows that they should have been willing to donate one if they passed away.

The competitive pressure to get on the donor list early would change the conversations between doctors and patients. One shift in the waitlist rules would significantly increase the number of organs being donated, likely leading to enough supply that we wouldn't even need the waitlist any longer.

Any doctor following her ethical principles would have an urgent incentive to advise every patient to get on the donor list as soon as possible.

My friend and colleague Dr. Jonathan Sackner Bernstein worked with me to turn the idea into a paper. He's a respected medical researcher, and his skills helped us create a short article that was featured in the journal *Transplantation* in 2004. It was cited by the *Yale Journal of Health, Policy and Ethics* a year later. And then progress in changing the rule mostly stopped.

How did this differ from the lighter problem of spreading the 100 days of kindergarten idea?

Kindergarten teachers have a large amount of freedom in how they schedule their day. Many of them are open to new ideas and they don't need to go to a meeting to try them out. The early adopters in this audience were eager and receptive. On the other hand, the top tier of professionals working in transplantation and public policy don't really match this description.

They want proof. They don't want to make a mistake. And most of all, they don't want to go to thousands of meetings with angry folks defending the status quo. So they leave things as they are.

The biggest challenge of our proposal was that there were no small wins available. While it makes logical sense, it's not like this idea could work in a few towns and then spread like a dandelion, popping up here and there. It is either in place across the system or it's not.

And the other challenge is that Jonathan and I didn't spend five or ten years committing to the spread of the idea. We didn't speak at one conference after another, seek out grants for more detailed studies, and most of all, didn't confer status on highly leveraged individuals who would benefit by further spreading the idea.

Good ideas are required, but they're not always sufficient.

What makes a system?

Human-built systems have elements in common. Generally, you'll find:

- Boundaries—they begin and end somewhere
- Benefits—people voluntarily engage with a system because they believe in the promises it makes
- Bystanders—often, people who don't want to be in the system are still involved in it
- Information flows—a shared language and expectations creates trust and efficiency
- Stability—the system offers its participants a reliable expectation of the future
- Protocols—there are shorthands, processes and methods of how things are done
- Roles—participants in the system seek or gain status and affiliation through their actions
- Resilience and feedback loops—when something disrupts the system, it works to push back and regain equilibrium
- Convenience and efficiency—even though systems aren't perfect, they offer participants benefits that encourage them to support it
- Side effects—every system also creates outputs that aren't ideal for non-participants or those that are part of it.

And so we find systems like:

- Big-time college sports
- The military-industrial complex
- Starbucks
- Religious practices

- The chocolate industry
- Your local volunteer fire department
- The community orchestra
- The dating scene in certain parts of Boise, Idaho

Decisions may feel as though they're voluntarily made. But the system exerts influence on each participant, in each decision.

Each decision is the sum total of all the expectations, feedback loops and invisible and visible rules that we adhere to.

All dogs are mixed breed dogs

The only thing that makes a purebred so valuable is that an association labeled it.

The status conferred on breeders and owners of dogs that match the invented profiles of the AKC and other organizations drives them to commit to the system.

The end result is a health crisis due to inbreeding, together with a shelter system that often has trouble keeping up with puppies rejected or unsold by the breeders.

There are almost a hundred million dogs in the United States, and every one of them is effected by a simple rule book of what sort of dog someone said they are.

DNA tests, passports, digital surveillance, rankings, membership lists and SAT scores are all transformative because they surface data and turn it into information.

Information changes systems.

Bringing strategy to marketing

There are three steps:

1. Tell a story, a true story, one that holds up. And tell it only to your smallest viable audience, the tiny group that is actually listening to you, that cares and that is among the early adopters.
2. Give this group a reason to share the story with others. Something that will increase their status, their affiliation with others or increase the utility of supporting your product, service or cause. Give them the scaffolding to do this.
3. Help them, through use or narrative, alter the story to make it theirs

This means that strategic marketing begins by seeing the path, the way the idea spreads over time and through the community.

It requires a specific story, not simply, “you can pick anyone and we’re anyone.” Instead, we seek to be of service to a small group, people who would miss if we didn’t exist.

Once this group finds affiliation and status from engaging with our work, we create the conditions for them to share the story with others—but they won’t tell the story that attracted them in the first place. They’ll tell a different story, also true, one that will attract their friends.

The Moses Manipulations

Robert Moses called himself a master builder. He created the conditions for the construction of an astonishing array of roads, parks, bridges, power plants and more. The entire fabric of New York City was rebuilt during his 50 year reign.

He was also a master of strategy. He understood systems and how to take advantage of system traps and status to accomplish his goals.

But most of all, he is now known as the master manipulator. He used his strategic skills to create outcomes that those involved came to regret. By focusing on the short run with urgency, he failed to take responsibility for the long-term impact of his actions.

He ended up using his power in a way that didn’t benefit the people it was supposed to benefit.

Here are some of the Moses manipulations that take advantage of human nature and system traps. I am listing them here not as a manual on how to manipulate or help you maximize power, but so that we can be aware of them and use them with full knowledge that the ends don't always justify the means.

Stake Driving: Moses would begin actual construction work on a project as quickly as possible, often starting with driving actual stakes into the ground before he had permits or funding. This made the projects seem inevitable and more difficult to oppose or alter. Systems are often optimized to slow things down, not to undo things that are already happening.

Whipsawing: He would create crises where groups with competing interests would focus on earning status against each other, having them compete to gain power by supporting his plans more than their opponents did. Losing an auction is more difficult for some than not entering it in the first place.

Wedge Driving: Along similar lines, wedge driving involved Moses exacerbating existing divisions among opposition groups or creating new divisions, thereby breaking down unified fronts against his initiatives.

Control of Information: Systems respond to information. By relentlessly limiting information, lying or sharing different information with different nodes seeking power, he created the conditions where he was the only one who actually knew what was happening.

Start out of town: He built his power base in Long Island, where there was little competition for public space, and where the fight for power was much less fraught. Once he acquired his power, he moved into higher stakes arenas. (This is his most benign tactic.)

Bullying: Bullies always punch down. Moses would find someone who had less power than he did and demand loyalty and support. If it wasn't forthcoming, he would actively work to destroy the person's career and reputation.

Trading for power: Short-term thinking is a common systems trap, which means that someone who is playing a longer game than anyone else has a significant advantage. They can make tactical or financial transactions that benefit others in the short run to obtain long-term status and control.

Assets are tools

What do you own?

The value of an asset might be what you can sell it for, but it's more useful to see it as a tool that we can use to make something happen.

Some of the assets you may own or have access to:

- Real estate
- Permission to contact customers or prospects
- Data
- A reputation that earns you the benefit of the doubt
- Cash
- Leases with good terms
- Standing (part of the status quo)
- Trained and committed workforce
- Access to capital
- Intellectual property and trade secrets
- Retail or web traffic
- Hard-earned skills
- Organizational culture
- Licenses and certifications
- Partnerships and alliances
- Customer insights

If they disappear when you leave the building, they're less leveragable than the tools you can offer to others.

While some of these things can easily be acquired for cash, others take time and effort to earn.

And every day, we expend time and we expend effort. Do you end up with more valuable tools at the end of the day, or have you simply performed tasks for someone else?

Refocusing on scarcity and abundance, status and affiliation

These are the four elements that move most strategies forward over time. As we've seen, "over time" is the key. Time is the axis they all share. They work in interstellar space as well as in our family dynamics, and everything in between.

Consider the dynamics in the novel (particularly the first, classic volume) *Dune*:

Affiliation vs. status: The Fremen and Bene Gesserit are focused on shared identity and purpose (affiliation) while the scarcity mindset of status drives the Imperial Houses and the Guild. The Fremen's strong connection to each other and their environment, and the Bene Gesserit's pursuit of genealogy and spiritual goals have little to do with short-term, zero-sum gains.

Long-term thinking: The Fremen and Bene Gesserit are patient. The Fremen are quietly terraforming Arrakis while the Bene Gesserit's carefully planned dynasty building spanning centuries regularly involve short-term sacrifices.

Using scarcity to create abundance: The Fremen and Bene Gesserit have developed strategies to survive and thrive in challenging circumstances. The Fremen's adaptation to the harsh desert environment and the Bene Gesserit's mental and physical training demonstrate a focus on building resilience.

On the other hand, the Harkonnen and the Guild waste resources as fast as they can simply to avoid any short-term feeling of scarcity. The guildsmen are trapped, literally and figuratively, in a bubble, fighting to keep the world as it is.

Driven by status-seeking and a scarcity mindset, they are obsessed with short-term gains and zero-sum competition. They are more vulnerable to disruption and less able to adapt to changing circumstances in the long run.

Questions that lead to strategies

Here are forty questions worth asking about your project and your strategy:

1. Who is this project for? Who is my smallest viable audience?
2. What change do I seek to make with this project?
3. What is my strategy to make this change happen? Can I articulate it clearly?
4. What resources and assets do I have to dedicate to this project? Do I have what I need to see it through?
5. What is my timeline for this project? When does it ship and what is my deadline for calling it quits?
6. What systems am I currently working within? How do they impact my project?
7. What systems would need to change for my project to succeed? How can I influence that change?
8. Where will I cause tension? What resistance should I anticipate from others (and myself)?
9. What are the key status roles and affiliations at play in my project's domain? How do I navigate those dynamics?
10. Why would someone talk about or recommend my project to others? Have I given them a compelling story to share?
11. How can I create the conditions for a network effect to develop around my project?
12. Where are the system's feedback loops, and which ones move my work forward?
13. Am I playing the game I need to play, or have I invented rules that no one else uses?

14. What don't I know that I need to learn to increase my odds of success? Where can I gain that knowledge?

15. Where is the smallest viable audience? Whose endorsement would plant the seeds for forward motion?

16. Which false proxies are likely to distract me? What actually matters?

17. What asset would transform my project? How do I acquire it?

18. What would make my project more remarkable and worthy of discussion and sharing?

19. Where is the empathy? Does my work align with the actual motivations and interests of the audience?

20. What is the fear that I'm eagerly creating by showing up with my change?

21. Am I building the scaffolding people will need to adopt and move forward?

22. Does this help the dominant forces in the system continue to achieve their goals or does it challenge their status quo?

23. Am I positioning as a service? Can I happily send others to people who might be seen as competitors?

24. What can I learn from comparable projects that have succeeded or failed in a similar space? What lessons apply?

25. How will my project evolve or expand if it succeeds initially? Is it simple to describe and hard to stick to?

26. What partnerships, alliances or collaborations could increase the scaffolding around this project?

27. How am I coordinating and communicating with stakeholders? What cadence and channels work best?

28. How big is my circle of us and circle of now? What can I do to expand them?

29. If my initial strategy proves flawed, how will I regroup and adapt? What's my fallback plan?
30. How can I design my project to be more resilient in response to shocks, setbacks and the unexpected?
31. Is the network effect sufficient to insulate me from a race to the bottom? Can I create a network that is built on abundance, not scarcity?
32. How do I continually recenter the strategy around time, culture and games?
33. tk?
34. Is the change we're making contagious? How can we alter the culture we're creating to make it more so?
35. How will early successes of my project make later successes more likely?
36. What are the tropes and keystones of the genre I've chosen?
37. What am I unwilling to compromise on when it comes to my vision and values for this project?
38. How do I develop empathy for the dreams, tastes and priorities of those I seek to serve?
39. Will they miss this project if I don't launch it?
40. What symptoms of Resistance do I need to overcome to show up fully for this project? What baggage do I need to shed?