Making strategy stick: The surprising power of a one-page strategy

FEBRUARY 2026

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Introduction

Thomas Jefferson once wrote, *"the most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do".*

Wise words, applicable to communication in general and a sentiment that every strategist should hold dear. Yet in many organisations slide decks become an endless run of 'next slide, please', strategy documents become thicker and clarity is consequently lost.

Even a strong strategy will fall flat if it's poorly communicated. If a strategy can't be explained simply, it's unlikely to be executed well. Clarity strengthens the links: commitment → decisions → longer-term ambitions → actions to achieve them.

Thinking back to some recent strategies you may have seen, how many felt unduly lengthy? If you had to summarise it to one page, what would remain? Simplicity is not less thinking – it's clearer thinking.

One-page strategies have been around for several years and have some strong features that set them apart from the norm. Yet they are not what many organisations opt for, for a variety of reasons, including:

- Comfort in capturing everything rather than deciding what matters
- A belief that a lengthy strategy = quality
- An undue focus on analysis, projections and data rather than insight.

Together, these tendencies make strategies longer – yet not necessarily better.

This briefing explores what good strategies require, why one page often works better than thirty and how to capture strategic intent with greater clarity and discipline.

Words, their meaning and terminology

The word 'strategy' traces its roots to the Greek word 'stratos' (army) + 'agein' (to lead). In this context, the commander considers various scenarios, considers their own strengths, works out what they need to do next and does it, all with the intention of winning. In organisational terms, today, to have a strategy is to have an approach for overcoming obstacles and creating a plan of action that strengthens the organisation[1].

[1] https://hbr.org/1989/11/the-origin-of-strategy by Bruce D Henderson (HBR review Nov-Dec 1989)

Strategy and business plans are often used interchangeably, yet they serve very different purposes. When the two are muddled, documents become unwieldy, teams lose focus and leaders end up debating detail instead of direction.

Terminology	What is covered
Strategy	Strategy = 'what' and 'why' of our intended future. *What matters most and what will we prioritise and deliberately not do?*
Business plan	Business plan = how. Shaped by the strategy itself, it covers activities such as operations, people, money, systems and processes. Good business planning asks: *what does this require? What do we already have? What must we prioritise or stop? Where are the gaps in our resources that need to be closed?*

A quick self-check test. If it explains *why the organisation is making certain choices*, it's a strategy. If it explains how those choices will be delivered, it's a business plan.

The strategy 'satnav' questions

In simplifying and demystifying strategy, I've always thought that it can be distilled into these three questions (I call them the 'satnav' questions).

- **Where are we today (what's known)?** What's pulling us (stopping) and pushing us to change? Is there a shared understanding of where we are? Does our reflection paint an accurate and honest picture of our starting point, or are we seeing what we want to see?
- **'Where do we want to go?** What do our 'what if' and 'so what' questions reveal about our options ahead? What have we 'ruled in and ruled out' – and how can we make the rejected alternatives are visible? Are we being bold or safe?
- **What is a credible path to get there?** (Execution) Translating ambitions into something that feels real, doable and intentional. What capabilities do we have now and what's needed to change?

The characteristics of a good strategy

Whatever the purpose of the strategy, whether it covers your whole organisation or a specific activity (for example, homeless reduction, increasing the use and impact of customer insight, IT modernisation or carbon reduction), there are some crucial characteristics that should always be present. These are:

Clear problem with clear choices

- **Solves a real issue** – clearly defines and addresses the core challenges
- **Looks to the future** – sets a time horizon for the changes to happen (typically three to five years) and articulates what you would expect to be true at the end of the strategy. By x date we will have...
- **Makes clear choices** – states what you will prioritise and what you will not.

Evidence, logic and context

- **Informed by evidence** – uses data, insights and experiences to shape and influence the challenge, choices and direction
- **Logic** – shows a clear line of reasoning linking elements together
- **Fits the context** – considers the prevailing environment, whether that's regulation, legislation, economic, changing expectations, geography or external opportunities etc.

Actionable and deliverable

- **Action-focused** – focused on change, not activity
- **Is deliverable** – tempers ambition with what is doable (capability, capacity, resources, timing) and plans to close the capability/resources gap.

Measurable, communicated and continually reviewed

- **Proof of success** – defines what success should look and feel like with a small number of meaningful measures
- **Clearly communicated and is commonly understood**
- **Regularly reviewed with course corrections built in**.

One-page strategies vs longer strategy documents

As previously mentioned, one-page strategies have been around for several years. Various books such as *'The 1 Page Business Strategy'*, by Marc Van Eck and Harvard Business Review articles have also covered them in some depth[2].

[2] https://hbr.org/2011/06/strategy-on-one-page by Anthony K. Tjan June 2011

Several organisations still default to lengthy strategy documents even though they are rarely read or consistently remembered.

The comparison below highlights why a one-page approach is more effective in practice.

One-page strategy	Longer strategy document
Forces clarity – distils choices and intent to what matters	Temptation to add things that are not strategy
Memorable – easy to share, recall and use	Easily forgotten – harder to accurately remember or communicate
Shows the logic clearly – the story and connections are visibly linked	Obscures the logic – through dilution of narrative
Speeds up decision making – provides a quick reference to what we are doing	Slows decision making – harder to check decisions against lengthier text
Reduces the risk of 'strategy creep' – provides discipline through limited space	Encourages drift – temptation is to 'add' as issues arise

What one-page strategies are not

A one-page strategy is not a shortcut to a quick fix. The thinking behind it is as demanding. They:

- Do not replace rigorous thinking
- Make trade-offs clearer, not easier
- They do not remove the need for detailed plans
- They do not replace evidence or insight – these should be captured within the headline decisions.

Strategy communication – how to organise your one-page to tell a well-rounded and compelling story

Most one-page strategies share common design principles: organised and visual; laid out in various sections (blocks); seek to condense information to its most salient.

The format I find most effective captures:

- Purpose
- Where we choose to operate
- Where are we today
- What's pushing us
- What's stopping us/pulling us
- Strategic themes + what should be true in the final year of the strategy + proof (success measures).

A case study – setting our destiny… all captured on one-page

Background

A social purpose organisation, providing complex needs support in the East of England, faced tightening funding, changing partner priorities and increasing complexity of needs. Historic ad hoc growth had become fragmented and unsustainable.

Three strategic questions emerged:

- **What do we deliver and what do we stop** – if we prioritised the services that matter most to the people we support, their families and the broader communities, what would our offer now be? What services or processes no longer justify continued investment?
- **How we fund our future** – how will we build financial resilience when competition for external funding has become more precarious and the amounts received far less?
- **How we organise ourselves** – how will we align our teams, resources and governance to fit our ambitions? What needs to change and how easy are the changes and their sequencing? What pace would preserve service quality and team morale?

The hard thinking

To produce an insight-informed strategy, information was gathered from a variety of sources. These included workshops, audience surveys (three audiences: people using the service and their families, the team and executive board), trend analysis and an evaluation of what's consuming most of the organisation's time.

The hard thinking, which happened over several months, was focused on a range of questions, including:

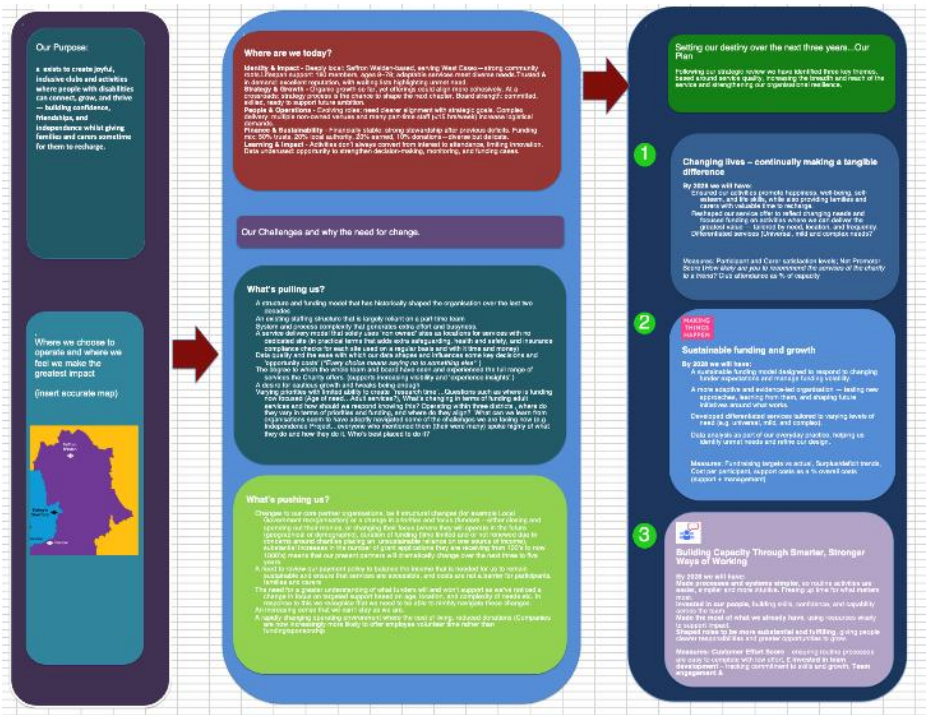
- What is our purpose and why do we exist? Do we remain unique and relevant in the areas we operate and is our uniqueness valued and fundable?
- Does growth mean geographical expansion or breadth of services offered? In launching a new service or closing an existing one, what information would we need to have evidenced for us to feel more confident that we were making the right decision?

Their strategy on a page

Having not previously seen a strategy captured in one page, being more familiar with lengthier documents, they were happy to consider adopting one if its merits and benefits were clear.

What they particularly liked:

- Something everyone could quickly grasp and execute
- Clear, concise, easy to interpret and action-focused
- Tells a complete and visually engaging story.



Getting started: The one-page plan checklist

Strategy building blocks	Questions to help with your thinking
Purpose (start with the 'why')	Why do we exist? Why does this matter now? What problem are we here to solve?
Where do we choose to operate/compete?	Which geographical area, services or issues will we focus on? What have we chosen not to do?
Where are we today?	What is known? What is working? What is not? Is there a shared understanding and consensus on our starting point? Would someone who knows us read this section and immediately know it is accurate, honest and fair?
What's pushing us?	What external factors are creating pressure or opportunities?
What's pulling/stopping us?	What internal constraints are slowing us down?
Distinctiveness and ambition	What is the one thing that makes us special? How special is it, really? How far are we willing to go to make it exceptional? Are we aiming to be: better, the best, or truly different/unique? How does this shape our strategic intent?
What are our strategic intentions and what do we want to look and feel like in the last year of this strategy?	What big shifts or outcomes are we seeking? How might these be grouped within a few themes?
Execution focus and proof – what actions would move us the furthest?	What few actions would have a disproportionate impact? Which one or two success measures tell us we are making progress?

Summary

Strategy is more than a test of how much we can generate, analyse or present. The test is whether it's commonly understood – and acted upon.

One-page strategies are designed to clarify the thinking, not simplify it, stripping away everything that dilutes its intent. In so doing, they become a recognisable reflection of the organisation and set a clear course for people to follow.

In short:

- Clarity > volume
- Ambition > comfort
- Distinctiveness > imitation
- Evidence > assumption
- Execution… is everything.

Next steps

A helpful way to get you started is to test your strategy against these principles. Can it be expressed on one page without losing its meaning? Does it tell a compelling story from insight → choice → action? Importantly, does it help people make better decisions?

It's worth returning to Jefferson's observation: never use two words when one will do. The same rule applies here. A clear strategy isn't simply elegant, it's influential.

About the author

Andrew Wilson is an accomplished leader, consultant and coach with over 28 years' experience in the housing sector. For the past 17 years, he has specialised in leading major organisational transformation, including establishing a new landlord within a group structure, successfully turning around failing organisations and enhancing team performance and customer service across a range of housing providers.

He holds a BSc in geography, is a Chartered Member of the Chartered Institute of Housing (CIHCM) and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (FRSA). His executive development includes Cranfield University's advanced development programme and further study at Harvard Business School.

In addition to his professional work, Andrew serves as a volunteer business consultant with the Cranfield Trust, providing pro bono mentoring and management consultancy to charities and voluntary organisations.

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