



The Art and Science of Strategy

By Dr. Brandon Barnett and Bernhard Ries

Can You Define Strategy?

Most business professionals understand what a business plan is – it has a structured format: market opportunity, a differentiated solution, competitive advantage, and a go-to-market plan. *Business strategy*, however, lacks such a universally recognized structure or definition.

As a result, business plans are often mistaken for strategies, leading to a frustrating “choose-your-own-adventure” approach to strategy development. This can result in endless debates, misalignment, and a sense of spinning wheels rather than making progress.

Yet, strategy is essential because it contextualizes a business plan within dynamic market conditions, enabling adaptation and resilience.

At **Trigate Coaching**, we ground our practice in a clear definition of strategy as **a set of choices leading to coherent actions that achieve an aspiration.**

This definition provides a roadmap for leaders and teams to master strategy by focusing on three critical elements:

- **An aspirational role** for the organization in the context of industry, market, and organizational dynamics.
- **A clearly articulated possibility space** of choices the organization can make.
- **A process for testing, pivoting, and communicating** strategy to align the organization.

A plan is not a strategy. Rather, plans emerge from and adapt to strategy.

Great strategy is not a static document; it requires a mindset, an engagement process, and a structured methodology that defines an organization’s unique role in navigating complexity.

The **Trigate Strategy Coaching Framework** organizes strategic thinking into five interconnected pillars: **Mindset, Systems, Position, Choices, and Action.**

These constitute the Art and Science of Strategy.

Strategy: A Blend of Art and Science

Science alone does not capture the full essence of strategy. Beyond the precision of structured analysis lies the equally vital human dimension – intuition, adaptability, and collaboration.



The Balance Between Art and Science

Ultimately, great strategy is a blend of art and science. It requires leaders to balance vision with strategic clarity, intuition with hypotheses, and inspiration with validation.

By using the **Trigate Coaching Strategy Masterclass Framework**, organizations can approach strategy development with greater clarity, coherence, and impact – turning today's uncertainty into tomorrow's opportunity.

The Art of Strategy

The Art of Strategy is about mastering this balance. While frameworks provide structure, it is a leader's ability to listen, inspire, and adapt that brings great strategy to life. We explore that art: how leaders can engage, create, and lead with presence. We focus on the key human elements of strategy: listening, collaboration, decision-making under uncertainty, and leading with conviction.

These principles align closely with well-established leadership theories, strategic decision-making frameworks, and strategy execution models.



1. Mindset: Listening as the Foundation of Strategic Leadership

Great leaders cultivate **curiosity, adaptability, and resilience**, encouraging teams to question assumptions, challenge the status quo, and embrace ambiguity as a source of opportunity.

At the heart of this is **listening**. Effective strategic leaders do not impose decisions in isolation; they actively listen to employees, customers, partners, and competitors. Listening enables leaders to detect weak signals in the market, understand the emotions driving decisions, and refine strategies based on real-world feedback.

AI-powered analytics can significantly enhance this listening process, processing vast amounts of qualitative and quantitative data to uncover insights that human intuition might miss. Tools such as sentiment analysis, customer feedback mining, and competitive intelligence help leaders gain a more holistic view of the business landscape.

However, while AI can surface patterns and recommendations, the uniquely human ability to interpret, contextualize, and judge these inputs remains irreplaceable (at least for now). The best strategies blend **AI-driven insights with human discernment**, ensuring that technology serves as an enabler rather than a substitute for strategic thinking.

2. Systems: Strategy as an Adaptive Team Effort

No company operates in isolation. Strategy requires understanding **external forces** (market trends, competitors, technological shifts) and **internal dynamics** (culture, resources, capabilities).

While some strategies emerge from a single visionary leader, we have found that the **best strategies often emerge from an adaptive team effort**. Encouraging diverse perspectives, constructive debate, and cross-functional collaboration results in more resilient and effective strategies.

Even when a visionary exists, strategy is an interlinked effort that must be **cascaded throughout the organization**. Without alignment and engagement at all levels, even the most brilliant strategy will struggle to materialize.

Google's **OKR system** exemplifies how objectives can be effectively aligned with overarching strategy, ensuring executional cohesion. However, while OKRs successfully waterfall goals through the organization, few companies apply the same structured approach to strategy itself.

Closing this gap by embedding structured alignment into strategy – not just objectives – can significantly improve strategic outcomes. A strong system fosters **dynamic interactions**, ensuring that strategy is not a rigid directive but an evolving process shaped by real-world inputs.

3. Position: Leadership Presence, Psychological Safety, and Strategic Awareness

Strategic positioning requires clarity on where your organization stands in the market – its **strengths, vulnerabilities, and the unique space it can own**.

But positioning is not only about external market dynamics. It also requires an understanding of the **internal landscape** – the team dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and the organizational culture that shape decision-making and execution.

At the heart of this view of positioning is **leadership presence**. The ability to inspire confidence, articulate a clear vision, and engage others in a shared purpose distinguishes great leaders.

Psychological safety is critical in this process. Teams perform best when they feel safe to voice concerns, challenge assumptions, and experiment without fear of retribution.

By fostering psychological safety, organizations unlock more open dialogue, better decision-making, and stronger alignment.

4. Choices: Balancing Head, Heart, and Network in Decision-Making

Strategy is fundamentally about making choices. Yet, many organizations hesitate to commit to a direction, fearing they might close off better opportunities.

Great strategists recognize the importance of balancing three dimensions of decision-making:

- **Head (Analytical Reasoning):** Using structured problem-solving and data-driven insights. Amazon's A/B testing and customer analytics exemplify this approach.
- **Heart (Intuition and Values):** Trusting instinct and envisioning future scenarios beyond immediate data, like Steve Jobs' intuitive product decisions.
- **Network (Collective Intelligence):** Leveraging diverse perspectives, mentors, and peer networks to stress-test decisions - an approach commonly used in Agile methodologies.

This balance aligns with strategic frameworks like **Bounded Rationality (Herbert Simon)** and the **Cynefin Framework**, helping leaders navigate uncertainty and make more effective strategic trade-offs.

5. Action: Communicating for Coherent Execution Under Uncertainty

Strategy without action is merely wishful thinking.

Leaders must translate strategic insights into concrete initiatives while ensuring their teams understand not just **what** needs to be done, but **why** it matters.

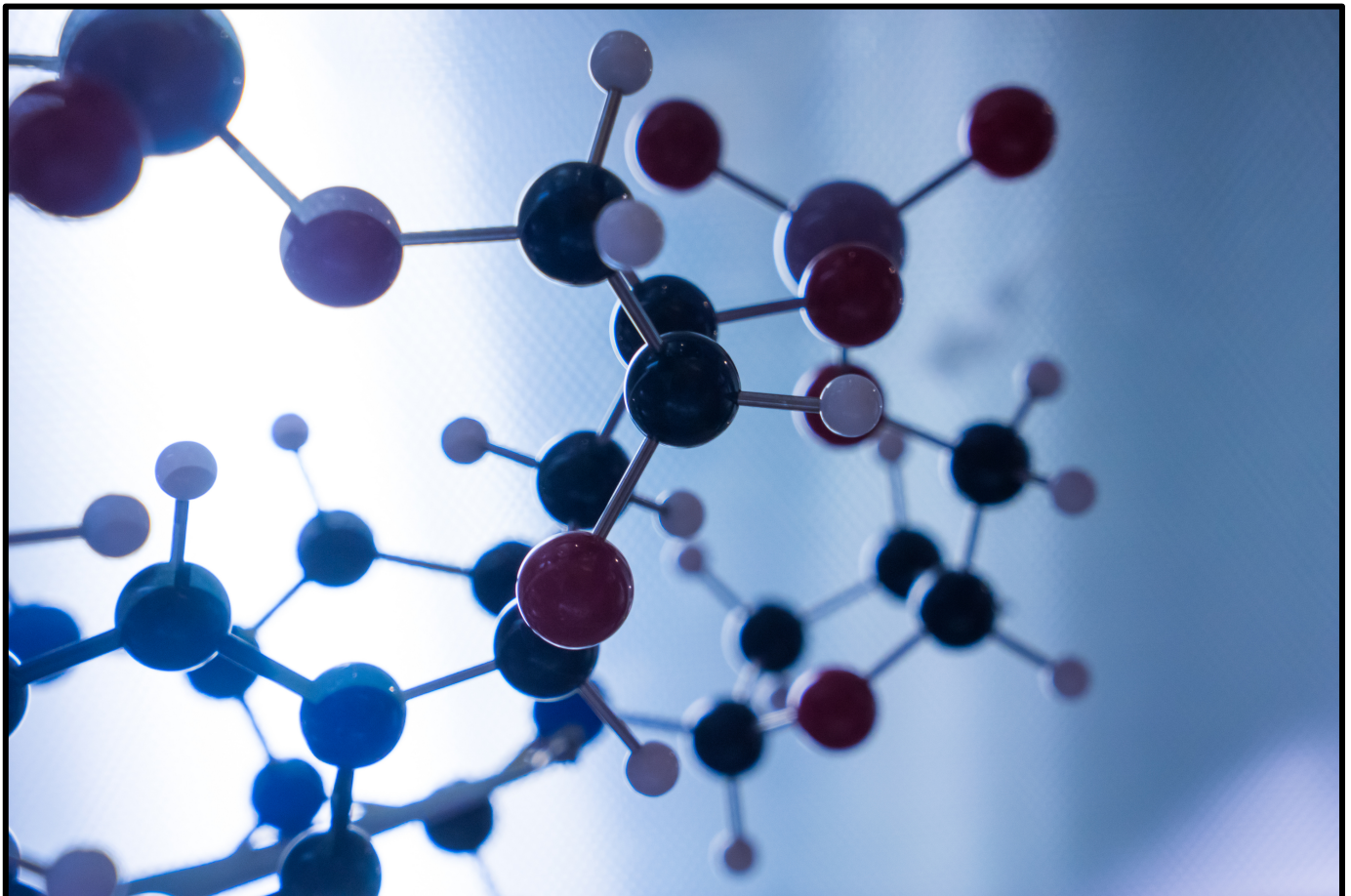
And execution requires more than action - it requires **communication**. Strategy must be clearly articulated so that teams at all levels can align and move forward with confidence.

Without clear and compelling communication, even the best strategy can fail in implementation. Leaders must **connect vision to action, inspire alignment, and reinforce strategy** through consistent messaging.

The Science of Strategy

Artful leadership alone does not capture the full essence of strategy. To complement the human dimension, a strategy requires a structured discipline grounded in scientific methods, analytical rigor, data-driven models, and systematic frameworks.

The Science of Strategy explores how leaders can employ systems thinking, scientific methods, and hypothesis testing to logically define its aspirational role, its plausible options, and a coherent course of action.



1. Mindset: The Quest for Strategic Clarity

In an unpredictable world, strategy leaders cannot rely on fixed plans based on accurate predictions. Instead, they must cultivate **strategic clarity** – a mindset that prioritizes learning over certainty, preparing for the future over predicting it, and positioning their organization within complex systems over chasing short-term gains.

Success in strategy comes from preparing for multiple possible futures rather than betting on a single prediction. Leaders must develop adaptive strategies that allow for flexibility rather than committing to rigid plans that risk obsolescence. Therefore, Strategic clarity requires leaders to treat strategy as an **ongoing experiment** rather than a static plan. Every decision should be a testable hypothesis, not a definitive answer.

Instead of asking, “Will this idea work?” leaders should ask, “**What do we have to believe to be true for the idea to work?**” and continuously refine their approach based on real-world feedback about those beliefs.

Strategy is more than a plan to establish product-market fit – it is about understanding the systems that shape industries. Markets, technologies, regulations, and customer behaviors evolve in nonlinear ways. Long-term success depends on recognizing patterns and shifts rather than reacting to short-term metrics. Organizations should build the capabilities needed for the next major industry transformation, staying ahead of change rather than chasing it.

The best strategy leaders do not seek certainty – they **seek clarity**. Instead of rigid plans, a strategy leader prepares the organization to navigate uncertainty and complexity with coherent action through a mindset rooted in scientific reasoning, continuous experimentation, and adaptability.

2. Systems: Strategic clarity on the other side of complexity

Good strategy starts with **systems**. While a business plan may start with a product idea, technology, or customer need, strategy starts with the **forces** that shape the environment.

There are many frameworks that help leaders understand the system in which their business operates. Porter’s five forces assess the shifts of power and profit pools in a

stable yet competitive market. Christensen's Disruption Theory describes a shift in the market as the basis of competition change reset the competitive landscape. Platform theories describe how certain solutions empower an ecosystem of innovation, creating network effects and product stickiness. These tools are very powerful in assessing the appropriate market dynamic. However, they do not comprehend the **nonlinear destabilizing effects** of market transformation, such as the way **AI** is transforming every industry today.

To achieve strategic clarity in an increasingly complex environment, strategy leaders require a framework that embraces complexity and starts with the system.

The Grove/Burgelman Model: A Foundation for Understanding Transformation

Andy Grove, co-founder and CEO of Intel Corporation, was a strategy luminary on par with Porter and Christensen. His book *High Output Management* provides a recipe for measuring business execution and success. More famously, Grove documented his decades of wisdom in the best-seller *Only the Paranoid Survive*. Those of us who followed Andy and his analysis of the semiconductor industry, even after he left the company formally, were privileged to benefit from the continued evolution of his thinking.

For Trigate Coaching, Grove's canonical paper on corporate survival facing complex ecosystem dynamics is foundational to modern strategy development and the **Trigate Strategy Masterclass Framework**. Co-authored with Stanford Professor Robert Burgelman, the article "Let Chaos Reign, Then Rein in Chaos – Repeatedly: Managing Strategic Dynamics for Corporate Longevity" published in *the Strategic Management Journal* provides a structured framework for understanding when and how industries undergo true transformation. They write:

"It is generally acknowledged that relatively few companies survive as independent entities for very long periods of time... We think that an important reason for this lack of institutional longevity is that most of the time companies operate in a stable industry structure and develop a strategy-making process geared toward coping with linear strategic dynamics, which are relatively easy to understand and predict; but at some times in their evolution they face nonlinear strategic dynamics that overwhelm their capacity for strategy-making."

Grove and Burgelman's words have never been more prescient. This is exactly the situation leaders face today (and, interestingly, Intel leaders in particular). AI is a

significant technology inflection whose impact will create **nonlinear strategic dynamics that threaten to overwhelm** leaders' capacity to develop strategy.

Grove and Burgelman go on to provide their conclusion on the best approach to address this situation.

"We arrive at the same fundamental questions as posed in formal theories of complex adaptive systems: What is the balance of exploitation and exploration that will maximize a company's survival chances in the face of different nonlinear strategic dynamics situations?"

In other words, **Complex System Theory** is the key to understanding transformative industry dynamics. They distill this observation into a useful 2x2 framework, with axes defining 1) if and 2) how rules of the industry are changing.

Table 1: A framework of strategic dynamics

		Company's Strategic Actions	
		Rule-abiding	Rule-changing*
Ecosystem's Strategic Actions	Rule-abiding	Stable industry structure	Company-controlled industry change
	Rule-changing	Company-independent industry change	Runaway industry change

1) Is the Ecosystem stable or are the rules changing, &

2) Is my company taking strategic actions to optimize according to the rules or to change the rules?

* Rule-changing actions have the potential to change the competitive context for all players (they materially change the competitive value of existing product-market positions and/or distinctive competences of the players).

Their framework distinguishes between two fundamental types of industry conditions:

- **Stable & Linear:** Industries in which competitive rules remain relatively fixed and predictable. Companies succeed by optimizing known processes, improving efficiency, and iterating on existing business models.
- **Unstable & Complex:** Industries in flux, where market rules are changing—sometimes due to technological advancements, regulatory shifts, or the entry of disruptive competitors. Success requires a different approach, one that accounts for emergent dynamics and nonlinear change.

Critically, Grove and Burgelman note that these shifts are not always endogenous (arising from within the industry). External forces – such as **AI** – are also **catalysts** that introduce systemic instability, demanding a new strategic paradigm.

Industry Evolution Over Time: The Role of Stability and Change

Grove and Burgelman's complexity framework is even more powerful when **industry dynamics** are considered. Industries do not remain permanently in either a **stable** or **unstable** state – forces move industries between these states in an infinite game of adaptation and survival. A stable industry can be thrust into instability by the actions of a powerful market player, shifts in economic or regulatory forces, or the emergence of a transformative technology like AI.

As the new competitive landscape takes shape, the industry eventually stabilizes again (even if temporarily), but under a different set of rules, value networks, and dominant players than before.

We see this pattern repeatedly in nature. Ecosystems can remain stable for long periods until an external force – such as the introduction of a new species, a shift in climate, or a natural disaster – disrupts the existing balance. When a keystone predator such as the wolf was reintroduced to Yellowstone National Park, the entire ecosystem changed, affecting species distribution, plant life, and even river flow patterns, leading to a new, stable state that differed significantly from the prior equilibrium.

This natural process mirrors what happens in industries undergoing transformation. AI, as an inflection point, is akin to a keystone species or a climate shift – it does not simply change one part of the business environment but restructures the entire ecosystem, requiring companies to adapt or risk obsolescence. As Grove and Burgelman conclude, The tools of complexity used to understand natural phenomena are key to understanding business transformation as well.

Trigate Coaching recognized the power of complexity science years ago and were **early pioneers** in adapting casual network maps, simulations, and perturbation theory to model the dynamics of complex business ecosystems. We coach leaders and teams to **start with the system**.

3. Position: an aspirational role within the complex system

The science of strategy perspective is that all companies are nodes in vast business ecosystems connected to suppliers, customers, regulators, and competitors. While a business plan focuses on product-market fit, competition, and resource allocation, a strategy identifies **the company's role in the dynamic ecosystem**.

Success is not just about winning market share but about shaping and leveraging these relationships. Companies that define their role within a broader system can create value beyond their own organization – for example, by setting industry standards, orchestrating partnerships, or facilitating innovation networks.

Businesses that integrate into high-value networks (e.g., platforms, supply chains, digital ecosystems) can create self-reinforcing advantages, making them more resilient to competitive pressures. The ability to control key points of value exchange within a system can be a more durable competitive advantage than simply being the best at a given product or service.

Because **complex systems are constantly evolving**, defining strategy around a company's role rather than a fixed plan enables adaptability. Instead of assuming a predictable future, companies should design strategies that account for multiple possible futures, allowing for quick pivots when necessary. A company's role in a system determines who depends on it, how value flows, and how easily it can be replaced. The strongest strategies are built on deeply embedded roles that create sustained influence rather than temporary competitive advantages.

Defining the company's strategic aspiration as a company's role within a complex system shifts the focus from rigid planning to **dynamic positioning, adaptability, and network influence**. In an era where industries are increasingly interconnected, companies that understand, navigate, and shape the systems they operate within will achieve sustained competitive advantage.

4. Choices: Creating multiple strategic options with corresponding beliefs

Strategy isn't about crafting a fixed plan; it's about making intentional **choices** that guide **coherent actions** toward achieving a clear **aspiration**. Unlike traditional business plans – which can obscure critical choices and limit flexibility – a strategic

approach thrives on optionality. By deliberately creating strategic options, leaders define a space of possibilities, setting the stage for hypothesis testing, continuous learning and adaptation.

Consider strategy as an evolving hypothesis rather than a rigid plan. Every strategic choice is rooted in **underlying beliefs** about global, trends, market conditions, competitor actions, and organizational capabilities. Effective strategists approach these beliefs scientifically: they form hypotheses, test them rigorously, and refine them based on evidence. Rather than committing to a single trajectory, they maintain multiple pathways, constantly adjusting their focus as new information emerges.

This dynamic scientific method emphasizes portfolio thinking. Strategic clarity comes from maintaining and managing a portfolio of options – continuously asking, “**What would we have to believe to be true** for a defined course of **action** to achieve our **aspiration?**”, and then taking action to **validate those beliefs**. Beyond a plan that experiments with a product and customers, strategy experiments test beliefs that underlie the strategic options.

Adaptability is central to this approach. The future is inherently unpredictable, and resilient companies embrace flexibility. Through scenario planning, leaders prepare for multiple plausible futures represented by beliefs (“What we would have to believe to be true”), ensuring strategic agility in the face of uncertainty. Real-time data drives ongoing adjustments, helping organizations respond effectively as circumstances change.

Ultimately, strategy isn't about perfection but about building resilience – the ability to thrive no matter what the future holds. By embedding continuous experimentation and adaptability into their strategic approach, companies remain agile, prepared to capitalize on opportunities rather than being disrupted by unforeseen events.

Strategy leaders do not bury the choice.

5. Action: A Scientific Approach to Strategy Enables Clear Communication & Coherent Action

Effective strategy demands coherent action—and coherent action depends on everyone in the organization clearly understanding the strategy. **Communication**, therefore, isn't just an additional task; it is **integral to strategy** itself.

Strategies often fail because they aren't widely understood, accepted, or adaptable. Without clarity, leaders, managers, and employees find themselves constrained, lacking both options and agency. Execution becomes fragmented, with teams attempting to optimize their own local goals while struggling to respond effectively to new information. The result is frustration, incoherence, and wasted effort.

A scientific approach to strategy addresses this challenge by clarifying not just **why the strategy matters** (the Art of Strategy), but **why it logically makes sense** (the Science of Strategy). It narrates the strategic journey: illuminating the dynamics shaping the market system, the organization's role within that system, strategic options along with their underlying beliefs, and the rationale behind choosing a specific path. Crucially, it also articulates how the organization plans to continually learn and adapt.

This method **empowers everyone** – from executives to front-line employees – to actively engage in strategy as an ongoing, hypothesis-driven process. Each stakeholder becomes a participant, equipped to test assumptions and contribute insights. Moreover, this structured yet flexible approach enables tailored communication: Board members may focus on global trends shaping the market system; managers seek clarity on strategic options and rationales; customers value transparency about how the organization adapts to their evolving needs.

When the strategy story is clearly communicated as a logical journey, stakeholders understand their roles and can align their actions accordingly – even if they don't fully agree with every decision. Everyone knows how to engage in meaningful strategic dialogue and how to respond effectively to new developments. Ultimately, clear strategic communication, driven by a scientific approach, is a powerful tool for achieving coherent, adaptive, and unified organizational action.

About Trigate Coaching

At Trigate Coaching, we bring decades of industry experience and expertise from extensive careers, which allow us to provide invaluable insights and guidance to our clients. We are well-versed in strategy and deeply understand the intricacies of developing leaders and teams.

Experience the Trigate Coaching Competitive Advantage:

- ◆ The Art and Science of Strategy
- ◆ Strategy Leadership Expertise
- ◆ Strategy for AI
- ◆ Actionable Strategies
- ◆ Custom Business Coaching

Elevating Leaders and Teams to Master Strategy



About the Authors

Dr. Brandon Barnett

Throughout his 30+ years in the tech sector, Brandon Barnett has held leadership roles involving corporate and business unit strategy, mergers and acquisitions, market insights, innovation portfolio management, and communication to the board of directors. He has successfully developed and executed strategy within competitive ecosystems and culture-driven organizations, collaborating with senior technologists and executive business leaders to establish a unified strategy.

Brandon's strategy approach is rooted in complex systems theory, in which networks of companies and stakeholders can self-organize to create and deliver value. With a background in physics, he has pioneered the application of this theory to strategy, actively sponsoring research and publishing on the subject. The fusion of complex systems theory, hands-on experimentation, and AI has enabled Brandon to develop a transformative approach to strategy.

Bernhard Ries

Bernhard Ries has over 30 years of experience in the Tech Sector in roles spanning across software engineering, product & brand marketing (including leading Intel's "Intel Inside® Program" and working closely with leading PC OEMs on joint marketing programs), business development, and corporate strategy, culminating in leading Intel's Corporate Strategy Office, reporting to the CEO and leading a team of senior strategists to drive the transformation of the company. Bernhard's expertise lies at the intersection of strategy, communications, and organizational development. He is an ICF-accredited and Hudson Certified Coach.