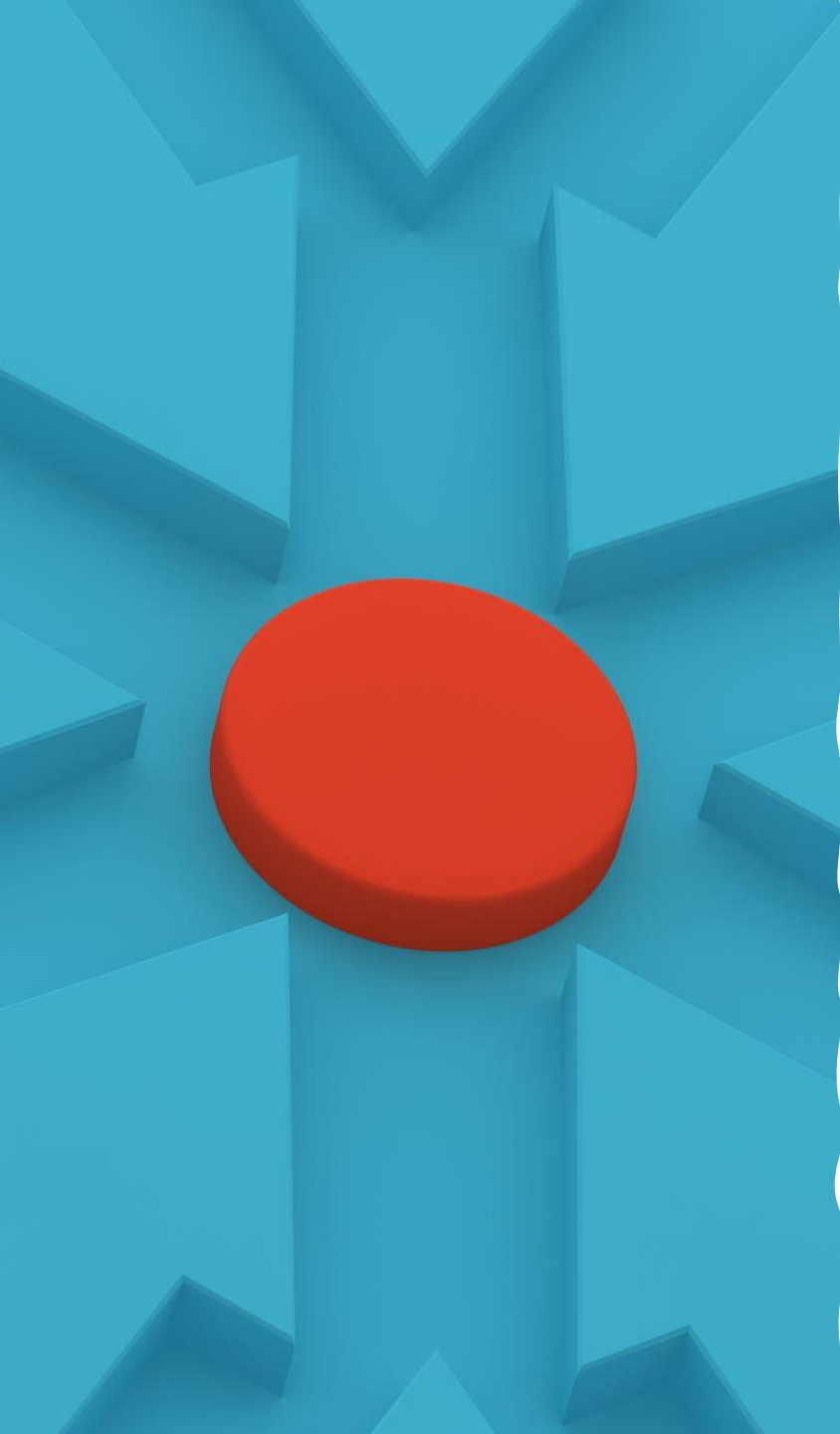




Strategy When the Ground Keeps Shifting: How SMEs Can Adapt Without Drifting

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Aim

For organisations the danger is either over-planning in a world that changes too quickly or reacting so often that the business loses direction.

This workshop aims to help you find the middle ground: clear direction, adaptive action, and regular learning.



Question...

“When you look back over the last few years, did your business follow the plan or did the plan follow the business?”

Most SMEs do not fail because they lack a 30-page strategy document. They struggle because **decisions accumulate without enough reflection.**

Strategy emerges from repeated choices: which customers you serve, what work you say yes or no to, what you invest in, what you tolerate, and what you stop doing.

Today is not about writing a strategic plan. It is about recognising the strategy your business is already enacting and making that pattern more deliberate.

Strategy as direction, pattern and adaptation

1. Strategy as direction: Where are we trying to go, and why?
2. Strategy as positioning: Who do we serve, what value do we create, and why should customers choose us?
3. Strategy as pattern: What do our repeated decisions say we are really prioritising?

Mintzberg explains strategy as “**a pattern in a stream of decisions**”, and contrasts this with the more conventional idea of strategy as a formal plan.

Eisenhower’s famous planning insight was this: “**Plans are nothing; planning is everything.**” A plan quickly becomes outdated, but the habit of planning builds awareness, readiness and judgement.

Activity 1 - “What is your real strategy?”

Consider your last 5 significant business decisions. What pattern do they reveal?

For example:

- Taking on lower-margin work to maintain cash flow.
- Saying yes to too many customer types.
- Investing in staff, technology or marketing.
- Avoiding difficult conversations.
- Prioritising survival over growth.
- Moving towards premium customers.
- Becoming more dependent on one client or sector.
- Choosing flexibility over efficiency.
- Choosing efficiency over innovation.

Now complete three sentences:

1. Our decisions suggest that we are currently prioritising...
2. This is helping us because...
3. This may be limiting us because...

Key Insight: your strategy is already happening, whether or not it is written down.

Adaptability without drift

A simple model: **Anchor, Scan, Choose, Learn**

- Anchor: What must not change? Purpose, values, core customers, quality standards, reputation.
- Scan: What is changing? Customers, costs, technology, regulation, competitors, labour market, supply chains.
- Choose: What decisions do we need to make now? What will we stop, start, continue or test?
- Learn: What evidence will tell us whether the choice is working?

Key message: Adaptability is not about constantly changing direction. It is about changing intelligently while staying anchored to what matters.

Activity 2 - “One strategic choice”

Identify one live strategic issue in your business, but frame it as a choice, not a problem.

For example:

- Not: “We need more customers.”
But: “Should we pursue more customers, better customers, or deeper relationships with existing customers?”
- Not: “We need to use AI.”
But: “Where could AI improve our customer service, operations or decision-making without damaging trust?”
- Not: “We are too busy.”
But: “What kind of work should we stop accepting?”

Issue template:

- The issue we face is...
- The real strategic choice is between...
- The option we are leaning towards is...
- The risk is...
- The small test we could run in the next 30 days is...
- The evidence we will look for is...

The emphasis should be on small tests, not grand transformation.

Consider practical experiments:

- a revised offer,
- a new pricing tier,
- a pilot with a customer segment,
- a different marketing message,
- a trial use of software,
- or a decision to stop low-value work.

Takeaways

1. Your strategy is already visible in your decisions.

Look at what you repeatedly say yes to, say no to, fund, ignore, delay and tolerate.

2. A strategic plan is less important than strategic discipline.

The discipline is to pause, notice patterns, test assumptions, and make choices deliberately.

3. Adaptability needs an anchor.

Without an anchor, adaptation becomes drift. Be clear about what should remain stable: such as purpose, values, reputation, customers, capabilities or place.

4. Strategy is choice under uncertainty.

You rarely have perfect information. The task is to make informed choices, run small tests, and learn quickly.

5. The most strategic question may be: what should we stop doing?

For many SMEs, growth depends less on doing more and more on becoming clearer about what we do best and what not to do.

Activity 3 - Takeaway challenge

Write down one sentence
before you leave:

*“In the next 30 days, I will
make my strategy more
deliberate by...”*

For example:

- Reviewing the last 5-10 decisions with my team.
- Identifying work we should stop accepting.
- Testing a new customer segment.
- Clarifying our three strategic priorities.
- Creating a monthly strategy review habit.
- Rechecking whether our pricing reflects our value.
- Asking whether our current customers match our future business.