

“Strategy as Vision is Strategy as Mush.”

So says Michael Porter, the ex-Harvard professor who advises the UK government on cluster theory and on productivity¹. We wish his client would listen to what he says. Government does not understand the difference between vision and strategy – and it is wasting time, effort and money. People are being spun candyfloss dreams instead of real choices about the future. Lists of motherhood and apple-pie aspirations are being sold as visions and unachievable visions are being sold as strategies. It is time the public sector learnt to tell the difference between a vision, a strategy and a plan.

A vision should describe a possible future in a way that makes people want to go there. There is nothing about a vision that says it has to be morally right or sensible. Adolf Hitler had a vision of a thousand year reich. Clive Sinclair had a vision of a small battery- powered transport for single people. So, before you sign up to someone’s vision, make sure it is achievable and desirable.

A vision is usually the work of a few people with a strong sense of purpose. Committees do not have visions (unless someone has spiked the water). Departmental guidance from civil servants does not produce visions. Bottom-up community consultation does not produce visions - it produces wish lists. These methods produce something like the “visions” from these community strategies:

“Our vision for the future of is to measureably improve the quality of life for the people of by tackling some of our biggest problems and making it a borough we can all be proud of.”

“The environment, prosperity and distinctive character of are sustained, these benefits are shared more widely and problems which reduce the quality of life are tackled.”

A vision should not melt in the mouth like candyfloss. It should be specific and substantial. Try Martin Luther King’s famous speech “I had a dream ..” He saw that “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.” You don’t need a monitoring and evaluation framework to know if his vision is working, just stand outside the school gates and see for yourself.

A vision is not a strategy. A vision tells you where you would like to go. A strategy tells you how to get there. And, if you want to go in one direction, you can’t go in every

¹ Reported by Donald Nordberg in the Strategic Planning Society newsletter, November 2002.

direction – you have to make choices.

Before you create a strategy, says Porter, you have to make sure you have the right goal. In business, the objective is clear – to achieve a superior return on invested capital. In the public sector, there can be competing objectives – but that makes it even more important to pick the right one. The objective of a regional economic strategy (RES) ought to be to improve the economic performance of a region, using a simple measure like GDP. However, RESs are now weighed down with so many other objectives – community, social, environmental, sustainable – that there is little chance of them ever delivering a coherent economic strategy. Community strategies appear to have no definable objective at all, other than to please all the people all of the time.

Porter sets out five tests to see if a business has a strategy. We've adapted them to fit public sector economic regeneration strategies. The five tests are:

1. Do you seek to deliver a differently-structured economy than those of competitor cities/regions, addressing a different sets of demands?
2. Do you have a materially different supply side economy to deliver that proposition?
3. Have you had to make tradeoffs - to choose not to deliver things that the private sector wants?
4. Do the choices you have made have linked implications across the public sector?
5. Are these choices going to be in place for some time?

It seems to us that most public sector strategies fail the first three of these tests. Each one is no different from all the others – for example, the RESs are all chasing the same clusters and every town centre strategy sets out to attract the other's retail spend. They fail to make any trade-offs or sacrifices (three cheers for Liverpool for acknowledging it will never overtake Manchester; three boos to every town relying on “polycentricity” to avoid the truth about its competitive position). Most of what passes for strategy is actually a list of aspirations or basic good housekeeping or a plan.

A plan is not a strategy, or, in Treasury-speak, outputs are not the same as outcomes. Plans should be short term fixed responses to a strategy or a forecast. Plans should be disposable or updatable – as the old military maxim puts it “Few plans survive initial contact with the enemy.” Yet we are still creating five-year plans and refusing to review them – clothing our children in concrete overcoats. Strategies, by contrast, should be robust and flexible enough to cope with change and they should remain in place and relevant for some time.

We think that if people could tell the difference between visions, strategies and plans, each one would be better thought out – and they would work better. Sometimes, if people could see clearly, they would change their mind about what they were trying to do. Sometimes, they might realise that what they were doing was a waste of time, and stop doing it. So, let's have better strategies for better objectives. Let's have strategies that don't read like letters to Father Christmas and, if we can't have that, then let's not bother with them.