Strategy Knotworking

Idea In Short

When a strategy must respond to a complex environment, involve the people who will carry it out in its design. Strategy Knotworking guides a group through six questions: purpose, baseline, context, challenge or paradox, ambition, and action and evaluation. The process uses shared templates and iterative activities so participants can revise their thinking as new connections emerge. It can take about six hours in one session or be split across several days. Invite everyone with a stake in the strategy, keep the purpose visible, and distinguish external context from competing pressures. End with a limited set of strategies, next steps, measures, owners, and review milestones.

A strategy developed by a small planning team can look coherent on paper and still lack the ownership or adaptability needed for complex work. Strategy Knotworking (SKW) brings together people who will execute the strategy and guides them through six connected questions: purpose, baseline, context, challenge or paradox, ambition, and action and evaluation. The group builds a shared strategy story, revisiting earlier answers as it learns. This approach reflects the Liberating Structures principle “Amplify Freedom and Responsibility.” It treats strategy as a collaborative process that must respond to uncertainty rather than a document completed once and handed down.

Work through six questions

The first question is purpose: what is the deepest need behind the work, and why does it matter to the group and the wider world? Participants use paired interviews and small-group conversations to develop a purpose statement. The second question is baseline: where is the group starting from honestly? Ecocycle Planning can help map existing activities, capabilities, and relationships. The third question is context: what is happening around the group that demands creative change? Critical Uncertainties helps participants consider plausible futures and strategies that can adapt.

The fourth question is challenge or paradox: what competing pressures must the group face at the same time? Wicked Questions can help articulate those tensions without forcing an early either-or choice. The fifth question is ambition: given what has emerged, what seems possible now? Participants generate bold but actionable options. The sixth question is action and evaluation: what will the group do next, and how will it know whether it is making progress? This final stage turns the strategy into coordinated work.

Let insights reshape the draft

The sequence is structured but not strictly linear. Participants may discover that their purpose statement needs revision after mapping the baseline or context. A proposed ambition may expose a constraint the group did not name earlier. The shared template makes the evolving strategy visible and allows notes to be moved or amended. The host should normalize revision as part of the method, not a sign that the group failed to plan.

Context and challenge need distinct treatment. Context describes external conditions, opportunities, and uncertainties. Challenge or paradox names competing demands the group must address together, such as consistency and local adaptation or short-term performance and long-term capability. Confusing the two can lead participants to map the environment without clarifying the tensions they need to navigate. The facilitator can ask whether an item is something happening around the group or a pair of pressures within its choices.

Include those who will execute

Strategy Knotworking is designed for broad participation. Invite people who will act on the strategy, people with relevant expertise, and those affected by its outcomes. Their involvement can improve the group's understanding of current conditions and help create shared ownership. Leaders should explain which decisions participants can make and where approval is needed. If participants assume that they are setting a strategy but the decision is already closed, the process will undermine trust.

The standard design takes about six hours, either in one session or split over up to four days. It uses an open wall, a large template, movable notes, and smaller group discussions. Online, a shared digital canvas can support the iterative work; keep participants in the same small groups across rounds to reduce the friction of repeated breakout changes. The host

needs to manage time while allowing enough space for each question. A long process benefits from breaks and clear transitions.

Build ambition from evidence and possibility

When the group reaches ambition, it reviews the purpose, baseline, and context. Participants ask whether the purpose needs adjustment, what patterns they notice, and which current strategies may be obsolete or newly possible. They then develop ideas individually, compare them in quartets, and share options with the whole group. The ambition should be bold enough to move the work and actionable enough to connect to a first step.

A list of possibilities is not yet a strategy. The group must select a limited number of priorities and decide how they work together. It should identify what to start, what to stop, and what dependencies need attention. A strategy that includes every attractive idea will be difficult to execute. The facilitator can ask which choices are essential to the purpose and what the group is willing to defer.

Connect action with evaluation

The final question asks what the group will do next and how it will know if it is making progress. Participants define next steps, owners, and indicators that can be observed. A progress statement can name who will do what and what outcome that action should create. Measures should help the group learn, not reward activity for its own sake. The team can use a visual tracking board to coordinate work and an Ecocycle map to review how initiatives evolve.

The group should set future milestones to revisit the strategy. The context may change, assumptions may prove wrong, or new options may emerge. A review date gives participants a formal moment to adapt rather than wait until execution has clearly failed. The strategy should explain how the group will respond to new information and which decisions can be adjusted locally.

Strategy Knotworking is useful for long-term initiatives, organizational transitions, and strategy in uncertain environments. Research on adaptive strategy and collective ownership emphasizes learning, broad participation, and clear feedback loops. The Harvard Business

Review discusses strategic agility and participation in strategy execution, while the Project Management Institute covers benefits realization and evaluation. 1, 2, 3

Tell the strategy story

At the end, the group should be able to explain its choices by walking through the six questions. Why does the work matter? Where are we starting? What is happening around us? Which tensions must we address? What seems possible? What will we do and how will we evaluate progress? If participants cannot tell that story, the template may contain disconnected answers that need more integration.

Strategy Knotworking takes time because it asks a group to connect purpose, analysis, possibility, and action. Its iterative design helps participants adapt as they learn, while broad involvement builds ownership among those who will execute the work. A usable strategy is not simply a plan on a wall; it is a set of shared choices, near-term actions, and review points that let people respond to changing conditions together.

- 1Strategic agility
- 2OECD strategic foresight
- 3Benefits realization management

Summary

Strategy Knotworking builds a strategy as a shared, revisable story. Participants move through six questions, from why the work matters and where the group stands to what it will do and how it will learn. The process assumes that strategy in a complex context cannot be fully settled in advance. Its value comes from involving implementers, connecting analysis to action, and revisiting earlier assumptions as the group learns. A clear template, disciplined timing, and review milestones help participants retain coherence across a long session. The resulting strategy should remain usable: a small number of actions, measures, owners, and dates for adaptation.