SYSTEMIC NAVIGATION

Great Strategy Rarely Comes From One Mind

Strategy worked out at the top and handed down is a tempting model. The organisations that navigate best do something more alive, and more shared.

by Neil Almond



There's a particular kind of leader who believes, quietly or otherwise, that clarity is their job. They work strategy out, then hand it down. It's a tempting model, and it's rarely how the wisest organisations work.

One founder I interviewed for my MBA research said something that has stayed with me ever since: it's very rare for a great strategy to come from one mind. He'd seen it happen, but seldom. What beat it almost every time was the wisdom of several brains, ideally different kinds of thinkers with different points of view. Everyone who needed to own the outcome, he said, needed to be in the room.

He was just as clear that the room has limits. Past a certain size, a strategy conversation turns into a conference, and that, he was adamant, is never a good idea when you're actually trying to decide something.

What the research saw

Across the interviews, a pattern kept appearing. I started calling it sense, decide, act. These weren't three stages handed down a chain of command. They were one continuous, looping movement, held by many people at once.

Sensing was consistently plural. Leaders wanted perspective from many stakeholders before committing to a direction, because they genuinely believed the whole was greater than the parts. One organisation had turned this into something they called Team Brain. If someone got stuck, they'd first check whether the problem had already been solved internally. If not, they'd put a call out to the whole community and get, in their words, "the most astonishing support and replies back". People discovered things about their colleagues' experience they'd never known. It was, that leader said, a more robust and resilient way of being than a classic hierarchy.

Deciding sat close to the action. Boards advised more than they approved. One participant described their board's role as giving opinions without ever mandating a course of action. And people throughout the organisation had real freedom to decide what was best in their own area. Authority hadn't been diluted. It had been placed where the information and the consequences actually lived.

Acting moved at the right speed. Collaborative sensing has a reputation, often earned, for producing paralysis. That isn't what I found. One leader described their response to COVID as super-fast, almost instinctive, while bigger, less urgent decisions were deliberately slower. What made both speeds possible was the same thing: a shared, deeply held sense of what the organisation valued. As one contributor put it, it's easier to make decisions if you're clear what you value.

What it grew into

That simple loop turned out to be an early sketch of something bigger. Over the years since, it has grown into the Pulse, the practice loop at the heart of Systemic Navigation.

The Pulse has three circles. Collective Orientation is where many people make sense of the situation together and agree which way is North. Generative Reorientation is where ideas meet reality through action: every prototype is a conversation with the territory. Adaptive Stewardship is where what has emerged is sustained, adapted and, where wise, scaled, with capability left behind.

Between the circles sit Kairos points: moments of judgement that each ask a version of the same question: what does the system need next? They're thresholds, and deliberately two-way. Sometimes the answer is to move forward. Sometimes it's to go back, and going back is wisdom, not failure. The whole loop returns, always, to purpose.

The Pulse has two honest maps of itself. The teaching map runs left to right, the way a new piece of work walks it the first time. The lived map is circulatory. An organisation navigating well isn't at a stage at all. It's breathing in all three circles at once, at different intensities, as the situation demands. That's exactly what those B Corp leaders were doing when they moved fast in a crisis and slowly on the big calls.

Many minds, on purpose

The Pulse doesn't run on goodwill alone. Three enablers make it possible, and the B Corp leaders had built versions of all three.

- A sensemaking coalition: a cross-boundary group of diverse voices who keep orientation honest. Team Brain was one, built for a whole community.
- A systemic sandbox: protected conditions where ideas can be tried safely, with sponsors and psychological safety, before the organisational antibodies kick in.
- Building for emergence: governance and feedback designed to expect change. A board that advises instead of approving is a good example.

The parts also depend on each other, which is why the loop matters more than any single circle. Sensing without the freedom to decide becomes an exercise in gathering opinions nobody acts on. Deciding without broad sensing is fast, but blind. And acting without either becomes reactive, cut off from purpose and exhausting to sustain.

Held together, they let an organisation be slow and fast at once, depending on what the moment calls for, without the changing pace ever feeling arbitrary to the people inside it. Structure alone won't get you there. The values underneath have to be real enough that people can move quickly without a rulebook telling them how.

For the navigator

If your organisation's decision-making feels too slow or too erratic, here are some questions worth sitting with.

- Who is in the room when your strategy forms, and who needs to own the outcome but isn't there?
- When someone in your organisation gets stuck, where do they turn first?
- Do decision rights sit where the information and the consequences actually live?
- Does your board help you see more, or mostly approve what you've already decided?
- When did you last go back a step because the system needed it, and did it feel like wisdom or failure?
- Is your shared sense of what you value clear enough that people could act quickly tomorrow without asking permission?

Some of the stories here first surfaced in my MBA research into UK B Corps. The thinking has since grown into the Pulse, the practice loop at the heart of Systemic Navigation.

Neil Almond is Chief Systemic Innovator at 91Untold. Join the conversation at www.91untold.com

Continue your thinking.

More perspectives on strategy, leadership and change.
91untold.com/latest-thinking/