

Surfacing the intangible: Using integral futures in strategy

by Maree Conway

There are many forms of integral thinking and at their deepest level, these cognitive frames allow us to explore the development of human consciousness. I was introduced to Ken Wilber's *Integral Theory* when I was studying strategic foresight, and its use has changed how I approach my work and how I think. Like any framework or model, it won't suit everyone (they usually call it flawed) and it is only useful if it is useful in the context in which it is applied.

Until now, I have used integral mostly in stealth mode in my work. Honestly, a lot of people aren't ready for integral. They want the single right answer and they want it now, so they can solve the problem and get on with their work. Conventional strategic planning gives us this process where we focus on the plan, rather than how we think about the future the plan is intended to move us towards. The glossy plan becomes the holy grail, and our thinking is trapped in today.

A gap between doing and thinking strategy

Wanting the right answer immediately is all about the doing of strategy—ticking a box, following a process, getting an outcome that can be measured, moving on to dealing with the next problem, living in the short term. These sorts of responses to change generate thinking about the future as a project.

We observe the future as disconnected from today, we package it up by following *the* strategic planning process, writing words that sound like change is happening

(usually in the form of a restructure), then measure it to see if the strategy has been executed effectively. Or the executive group comes up with a strategy and presents it to the organisation and says *go forth and implement my plan*.

This is what I increasingly call strategy in a box, contained, seemingly controlled, with apparently measurable outcomes that are supposed to inform everyone's work. It's about doing something, using a process that keeps our thinking trapped in today.

Doing strategy ignores the human factor in strategy. It ignores the reality that unless each person understands the rationale for change from their perspective and wants to be involved in the thinking around how to respond to change shaping their organisation's future, to co-create *our* future, it matters very little how perfect your strategic planning process is or how good your strategy looks on paper.

Jeanne Leidtka (*Strategy as Experienced, Rotman Magazine, Winter 2011, pages 29–38*) talks about this as both knowing and feeling strategy, to experience strategy both cognitively and emotionally.

Putting the human back into strategy development is strategy that has closed the gap, escaped the box, that has people and collaborative processes at its core. This is about *thinking* strategy, moving beyond the conventional. It is this thinking about strategy that strengthens decision making and problem solving because it starts from the future not only the past and the present.

Using integral to connect doing and thinking strategy

An integral mindset connects the doing and thinking in strategy development.

Integral Theory is complex, multi-faceted, well researched and contentious. Like any

About Integral Futures

Integral Futures is an approach to Futures that uses Ken Wilber's Integral Theory as its framework. Integral Theory contains a holistic, four quadrant model that explores the interior (intentional) and the exterior (behavioral) of the individual and the interior (cultural) and the exterior (system or social) of the communal or collective. (Wilber, 1996).

Integral theory tells us that reality arises in the presence of and through the consciousness and experiences of individuals and collectives which can then be observed through behavior, science, nature and social systems. What distinguishes Integral is that it considers the subjective experience and integrates it along with the objective, inter-subjective, and the inter-objective. The effects of one quadrant affect the others and a balance of all four quadrants will contribute to the health of the individual and or the collective. (Terry Collins)

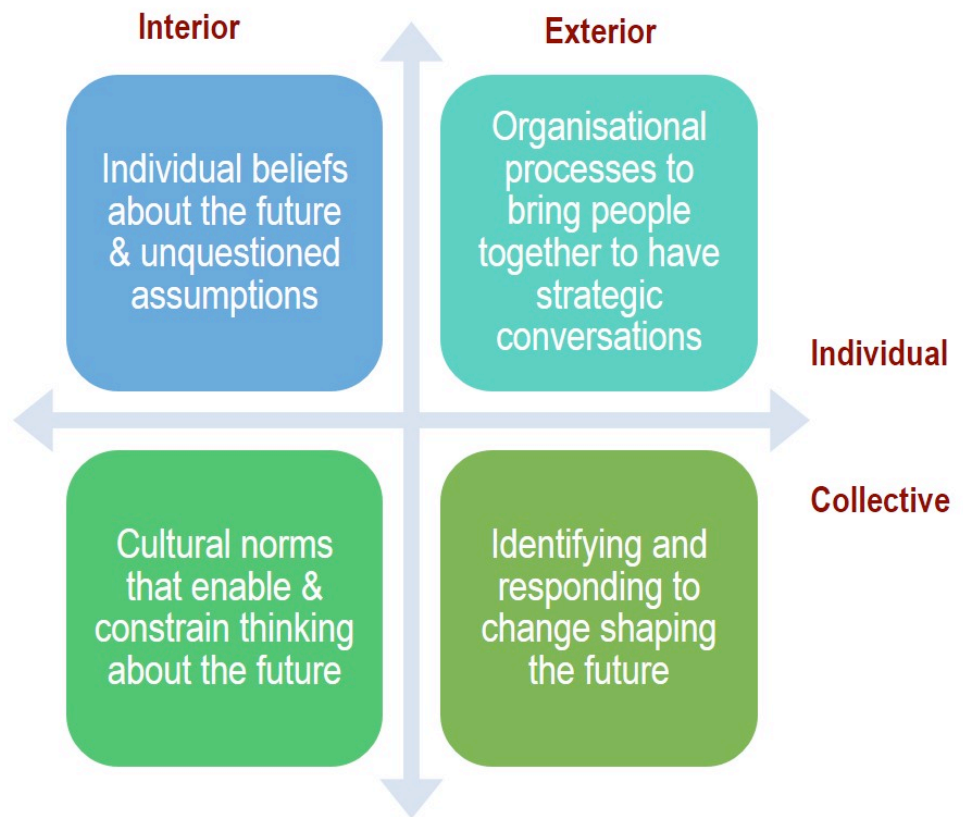
model or framework, its use is context bound and helpful if it helps to understand something better. A primary organising concept in Integral Theory is the four quadrant framework with which to view human consciousness and action. These four quadrants each represent a particular dimension of reality and a particular perspective on the world that are structured around interior/exterior and individual/collective domains.

This graphic shows my interpretation of the Wilber's integral four quadrants to highlight what we need to pay attention to when we are crafting strategy.

The right hand *exterior* quadrants are where we do strategy, where we identify change that matters, where we create change management and strategic planning processes, write strategic plans, where we have annual workshops, produce KPI reports and create new goods and services. We need this work but doing strategy in this space alone will not result in the changes organisations are seeking when they invest time and energy. In Leidtka's terms, we know strategy here in the rational, cognitive sense.

The left hand quadrants are the realm of human consciousness and organisational culture. Intangible, non-empirical and tacit in nature, this is where we think strategy. We feel it, understand it emotionally. This language alone is enough to send strategic planning aficionados running in the opposite direction. You can't develop a KPI for someone's ideas about or images of the future.

The left hand quadrants are where we need to explore our responses to change when we are asked to do new things. It's where we as individuals either accept or resist change, decisions usually based on unquestioned assumptions. Here we also draw on our understandings of our organisation's culture, but its impact on



The integral futures matrix as a strategy mapping model. Source: Maree Conway

how we make decisions about our responses to change is largely subconscious. In Leidtka's terms here, we feel strategy, we have an emotional reaction to it.

It's not hard to see why conventional strategic planning approaches are contained in the strategy box in the right hand quadrants. The left hand quadrants are messy, can't be measured and tap into feelings not data.

They require that we have processes to engage people in authentic ways, to involve them from the beginning to the end of the strategy development process.

Developing KPIs for this space is quite difficult. To make the decision to engage with people and culture in the strategy process is of course akin to opening Pandora's box. If we are to be futures ready however, we must re-connect people and process.

Integral in my work

I have kept integral on the back burner in my work since I learned about it in 2002–2003. I occasionally used it with audiences that I knew were open enough and ready enough to understand and not dismiss the framework. People who understood that dealing with complex change, wicked

The left hand quadrants are messy, can't be measured, and tap into feelings, not data

problems, a VUCA world—whatever we call the environment we operate in today—required more than a good change management process to ensure strategy is implemented in meaningful ways. They understood the value of thinking about what goes on in our minds and the influence of culture on the actions we take every day. They understood that their people underpinned and would shape the success of their organisation's future.

surface diversity of views about the future to create possible futures as much as we value data and forecasts to create the one certain future.

To integrate thinking and doing strategy to create a space first where we gather to think strategy, to feel it, to acknowledge our emotional responses to what our bosses want us to do, to work collectively on what needs to happen next. Where our thinking is expansive and divergent.

It is time to get strategy out of the box to move from pragmatic to progressive futures

As a result, I focused my business mainly in the right hand quadrants on the doing of strategy, on helping people scan and identify change that mattered for their organisations. Using scenario thinking helped me inject the future into the strategy process to help them shift their thinking and to identify future facing options. We worked together to write strategy documents that avoided the formulaic approach of conventional planning approaches.

I often listened to their exhaustion and frustration at dealing with this conventional planning that they just couldn't accept in their hearts and minds and was grateful when they said scanning and scenario thinking had opened their minds to the future. I was working in this conventional strategy box while trying to push its boundaries as far as I could.

It is, however, now time to get strategy out of the box to move from, as [Richard Slaughter](#) says, the pragmatic to the progressive futures space. To make visible how I re-frame strategy development using the [integral four quadrants](#). To value people and culture as much as process. To

The outcomes of that thinking need to be written down as strategy and that does need a box of sorts. We need convergent thinking in this box to focus on doing, to getting things done, to enacting the strategy. This is a new strategy box however, because it's not the fixed box of conventional strategic planning; instead its sides are permeable, letting new thinking in as it emerges, adjusting processes as needed, focusing as much on KPIs as on making sure the strategic questions are right—rather than aiming for the right answer.

The integral frame scaffolds the thinking activity in the left hand quadrants with the doing box in the right hand quadrants, integrating the thinking with the doing of strategy. For me, this integrated space connecting thinking and doing might mean fewer conventional jobs (such as one day introductory workshops on foresight that others can do better). It means working with people on projects, establishing a relationship, working out how to bring isolated clients into a new collaborative space where we can have a continuing collaborative conversation about using foresight in practice. ◀



Maree Conway is a strategic foresight practitioner who helps people co-create shared futures to enable their organisations to be futures ready. This article is adapted from a post on Medium.

There are more resources related to using integral futures on [her new website](#), and also at the [Integral Futures](#) site, managed by Terry Collins.