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Why Sometimes Going 'Off Strategy' Is How You Win

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by Mark Jenkins | [Comments \(6\)](#)

The Hungarian Formula 1 Grand Prix took place a couple weeks ago and was won by a likeable Australian—Mark Webber, driving a Red Bull Racing RB6. At the end of the race he was almost 18 seconds ahead of Fernando Alonso's Ferrari, a huge margin in this highly competitive sport where tenths of seconds can mean the difference between winning and being the first of the losers (an F1 expression for coming second). But in the early stages of the race things looked very different for Webber, who was back in third place. The plan was to come in for their obligatory pitstop should the safety car come out as it would slow the field down, but when debris on the track brought out the safety car, Webber and his crew quickly threw out the plan. The problem was that the competition—Ferrari—would probably do exactly the same. So he skipped that step altogether, taking the lead with a clear track in front of him. It was a risk: he still needed to make a pitstop before the end of the race. So to do that, without losing the lead he'd just gained, he would need to build up a 20 second lead to allow time for it. That is exactly what he went on to do.

Formula 1 isn't the only place where success is dependent on going 'off strategy.' In organizations strategy often creates inertia, locking you into a course of action and commitments, a course of action which is also often clear to your competitors. One of the benefits of 'war gaming' exercises is to understand and anticipate the strategies of the competition. By suddenly going 'off strategy' you can wrong foot the competition and create new opportunities. Probably the best known example of this is when Honda entered the US motorcycle market. The plan was to launch products into the 350 & 250cc motorcycle categories, but they missed the key selling season and also were unable to make inroads into the dealer network. A buyer from Sears spotted one of the Honda team riding around on a 50cc bike, which they brought over for their own use, the buyer asked if they could sell it through their catalogue and the rest is history. Honda dodged the competition and created a whole new niche in riders who weren't interested in motorcycles, they just wanted simple, clean transportation, it wasn't in the plan, but Honda made it happen.

How will you know when it's time to go "off strategy?" Think through these simple questions, as a start:

- If we stick to the current plan, will we really achieve our full potential?

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- What are the upsides from going off strategy, do they outweigh the downsides?
- What would the competition least expect us to do? And what would be the rewards for doing this?
- Does going off strategy allow us to exploit the things we do really well, and minimise the impact of the things we do less well?
- Other than it's not in the plan, what's the argument for not doing it?

Being unpredictable in this way maybe the one way you can end up winning the race—just ask Mark Webber.

Mark Jenkins is a professor of business strategy and Director of Research at Cranfield School of Management, Cranfield University

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 **Geoff Webb** 21 hours ago

I agree. You should never confuse your plan with your purpose!
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 **Gerald Nanninga** 19 hours ago

Since when does unpredictability have to come from going "off strategy?" This implies that normal strategies can never be innovative, opportunistic, or anything different from conventional industry wisdom. Isn't the primary role of strategy to help find unique positions and create new opportunities? Does not that, by definition, lead to breaking away from the pack and doing things differently (perhaps surprisingly differently)?

Strategies put you in a particular (hopefully unique) position. That unique position is what creates opportunities to exploit. Honda could not have exploited its 50cc bikes if they were not in their portfolio. Mark Webber could not have found his opportunity in formula 1 if he did not have a strategy which got him close to first place to begin with.





It would seem to me that opportunism and unpredictability should be "on strategy." This is not "randomness", but rather exploiting the opportunities which make themselves available to you because of the unique position your strategy places you in. Without that unique strategy, you would not have been in a position to have had the opportunities in the first place.





This should be normal, not "off strategy."

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