

**The “4 Box” Approach
Thinking Outside The Square**

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The Boxes – analysis of the business environment, competitive positioning, the development of strategic vision and option management – are interrelated, and may be seen as a set of handles with which to grasp a strategic business problem, or alternatively as a kit of tools for its analysis.

‘Strategic planning is about managing options, creating them, identifying them, selecting the right ones, against a background of knowing what you want to do, ie the strategic vision, within the business environment.’

A critical role of this thinking process was to surface different perspectives and different mental maps with which to challenge conventional thinking and encourage debate in a learning process. There was no simple formula for generating useful scenarios: the methodology depended on the use of multi disciplinary teams and open, free-thinking brainstorming sessions.

Techniques used for competitive analysis and positioning were largely those available from the academic and consulting spheres which have been adopted in various degrees throughout the group. This analysis was designed to create a better understanding of the nature of competition and the factors which affected the ability to sustain profits.

These elements, together with an analysis of the business itself, formed the basis for a review of the strategic vision for an operating company.

Here a standardized format was used so as to pull out the key components of a vision statement. In this format the notion of ‘distinctive competences,’ in which an effort was made to identify the ways of securing competitive advantage, played a vital part. As a consequence, options could be generated and assessed which would lead to a strategic plan.

A Group Planning Perspective on Planning in Pearson Partners.

Planners have moved in recent years from being experts and number crunchers to being facilitators of processes. we have been encouraging people working in planning to take more responsibility for the planning processes, to see themselves as facilitators of a management process.

We put the emphasis here for two reasons. First, is to get management ownership of the plans they make and second, to encourage matching scenario work to strategy, to make links between a scenario and what it means to business.

To many managers, planning is a bit of a distraction to their day-today operations, especially strategic planning. Business planning is very well established, everybody knows they have to do them. In the major operating companies, these business plans are well accepted and seen as a management tool.

The approach to planning, as a part of Pearson Partners Management System has changed over the years so that now the objective is to subsume, planning activities into the practice of 'strategic management,' effected by satellite or local management teams.

The role of group planning has evolved to be one of developing useful tools and techniques which can help managers and owners of SME's cope profitably with the uncertainties and difficulties of the modern business world.