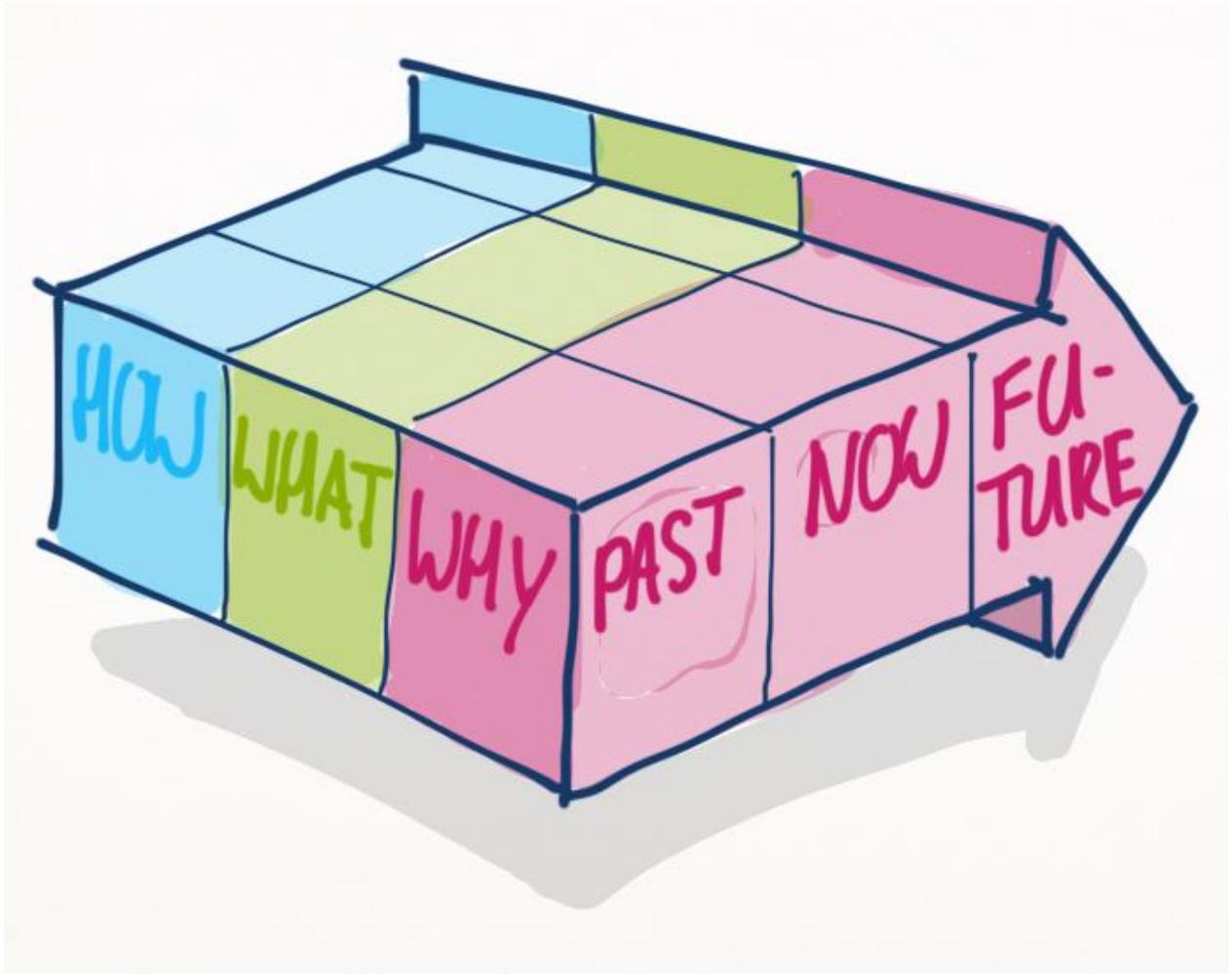


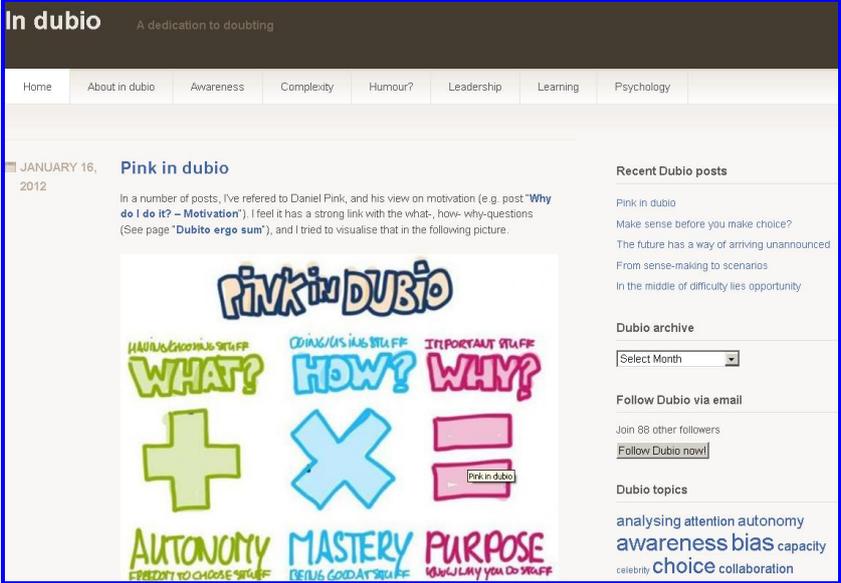
The art of strategic doubting

How can we design our strategic storyline as a piece of art?



Background

This document is an adapted copy of some posts (17th-20th of January 2012) on my blog, called ‘Dubio blog’ on –amongst other things- the importance of asking the right questions, before deciding what to do (in a nutshell).



Screenshot of my blog ([click to open](#))

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Strategic questions

Before I explain what I think a ‘strategic storyline’ could look like, I will explain what I think it should all start with: three simple questions about what we do, how we do it, and why.



The way I see it, the what-, why- and how- questions add up to a formula, where ‘the what’ is the plus or the minus, the how is the multiplier, and the why is the equals symbol. Please allow me to explain.

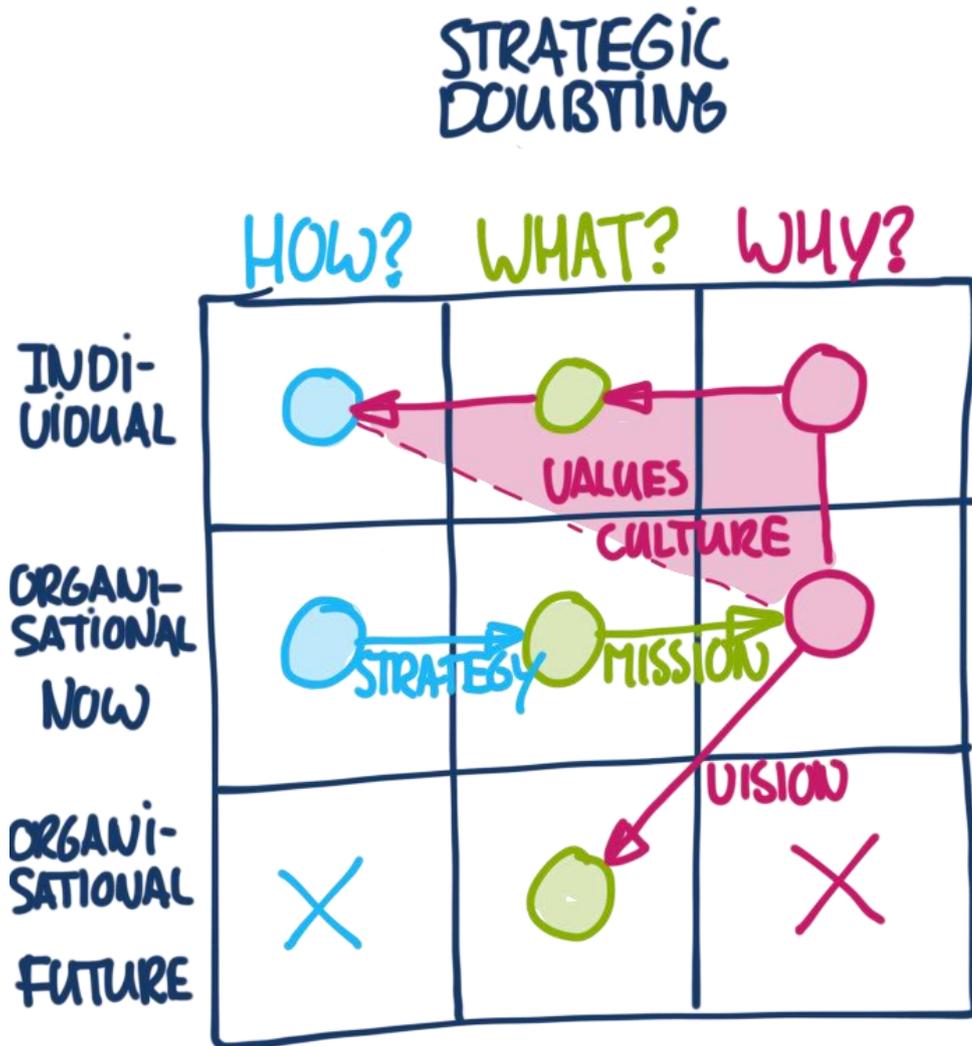
- **WHAT?** The what is about the choices that we make, the things we decide to (go and) do, and the plans that we have. All the choices that we make add up to a plan or a todo-list.
- **HOW?** The how is about the methods that we use to get things done. The actions that we actually perform. Whether we get the things done that we planned for (what), depends on our effectiveness and efficiency. Hence the multiplier symbol, the methods (how) make the impact of our decisions (what) smaller or bigger.
- **WHY?** The why is what we end up with, the results of the combination of our decisions and our actions. Ideally, when we make our decisions (what), we have some idea on what we would like (or need) to achieve (why). The equals symbol stands for results, both planned and not planned.

What does strategic doubting look like?

Why are we here? Where are we going, and how will we get there? How can we get all the noses in the same direction? What questions do we ask ourselves during the process of creating a strategy, and what questions do we answer while communicating about it? Being fully aware of what we are doing, how we do it, and why is crucial both for our own understanding of 'our meaning of life' and for engaging others to buy into our ideas. This document describes what I think are some elements of good strategic communication. Let's start with trying to define some of the most common strategic concepts:

	Wikipedia's definition: (Source Wikipedia)	What-, how-, why-definition:
Vision	Defines the way an organization or enterprise will look in the future. The vision is a long-term view, sometimes describing the organization's picture of an "ideal world". For example, a charity working with the poor might have a vision statement which reads "A World without Poverty."	Defines what the company will look like in the future (future what) if it continues to pursue its purpose (why).
Mission	Defines the fundamental purpose of an organization or an enterprise, succinctly describing why it exists and what it does to achieve its vision. The mission statement provides details of the organization's operation and says what it does. For example, the charity might provide "job training for the homeless and unemployed". The statement may also set out a picture of the organization in the future.	Defines the company's purpose (why) and plans/choices (what) to pursue that purpose.
Values & Culture	Beliefs that are shared among the stakeholders of an organization. Values drive an organization's culture and priorities and provide a framework in which decisions are made. For example, "Knowledge and skills are the keys to success" or "give a man bread and feed him for a day, but teach him to farm and feed him for life". These example values may set the priorities of self sufficiency over shelter.	Defines (ideally) a set of why's that all stakeholders of the organisation share and use when making choices (what). All the personal why's (whether shared or not) add up to a companies culture.
Strategy	Strategy, narrowly defined, means "the art of the general" (from Greek stratigos). A combination of the ends (goals) for which the firm is striving and the means (policies) by which it is seeking to get there. A strategy is sometimes called a roadmap which is the path chosen to plow towards the end vision. The most important part of implementing the strategy is ensuring the company is going in the right direction which is towards the end vision.	Defines the plan (what), the organisation has to reach its vision (why), and the methods (how) it is deploying to implement those plans.

Now, let's investigate how strategic concepts connect the what, how, and why. I tried to visualise how above elements connect the different questions, both for the organisation and the individual.



Explanation: The picture proposes how strategy, mission, vision and values connect the (current and future) why, how and what of the individual and the organisation. The arrows show the direction, e.g. the vision describes how the current organisational why leads to the future organisational what.

How does my personal identity compare to my organisation's identity?

How do we select the right people to help us bring the organisation to where we want to be in the future? How can we get everybody aligned with our corporate strategy? How can I communicate my strategic plans in a way that people will feel motivated to work with me on it? Do these questions sound familiar?

Have you ever thought that, even though you might be convinced your strategy is a good one, you have a hard time explaining it to others? Do you recognise it that people often use the same old 'buzzwords' to explain their strategy? And that these 'soundbites' are pretty much what all companies strive for? I agree that a strategy, and communication around it should be generic enough to make it possible for everybody in the organisation to feel part of it. But at the same time, it should be specific enough to motivate individual employees to act on it.

So how can we craft a motivating strategy, and how can we communicate it? To start answering that question, first of all we have to ask ourselves: "**what is strategy?**". In the previous section, I described it as: "the plan, the organisation has to reach its vision, and the methods it is deploying to implement those plans". Often, when people talk about strategy, they don't talk about its **relevance**, but rather about **how to implement it**. Does 'aligning' and 'cascading down' sound familiar? In my opinion, both (and probably more) should be in the mix.



How for me a strategy should be described

First of all, for me to embrace my company's strategy, I have to see the relevance of it for myself. I can only relate to it if I can see the value of it for me personally, now and in the future. The image above describes (part of) how I would like to see my company's strategy presented. In one picture, I should be able to see how my 'personal identity' (top part of the arrow) compares to 'my organisation's identity' (bottom part of the arrow). And I should be able to see if we have a future together.

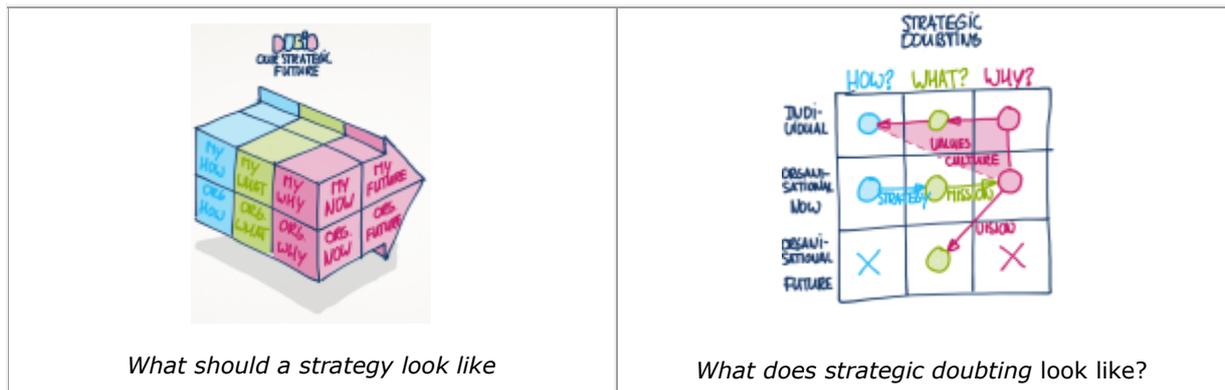
Maybe not the most difficult part of the picture is to describe **strategy as a shared direction** (I share 'my what' with 'my organisation's what', the green part of the arrow). If I can see what choices my organisation is making, I can see if there is a match with the choices I am making. And, better yet, I can choose to adapt my choices to those of my organisation. In order to do that, I have to be able to specify the overall strategy of my organisation to my specific situation. Which of my organisation's choices affect me? To which choices can I contribute? No rocket science so far, right?

Slightly less obvious however, is to describe **strategy as a set of core capabilities** (My 'organisation's how' and how 'my how' can contribute to that. The blue part of the arrow). If I would know what my organisation considers its core capabilities are (what my organisation is really good at), I probably would feel a little proud to be part of that. If I would know how my team's capabilities, together with other teams' capabilities add up to a picture of what we are good at as an organisation, I think it would motivate me. If I'm motivated by what I am good at (See [Daniel Pink on mastery, autonomy and purpose](#)), I think I would be motivated by knowing what we are good at collectively. Maybe a stretch, but still interesting I think.

Most powerful for me personally is to describe **strategy as a set of shared beliefs** ('My why' is 'my organisation's why'). Knowing what my organisation believes in gives me the opportunity to consider if I believe the same. Knowing what my organisation considers its 'dot on the horizon', and what beliefs and values are guiding it in its choices, help me evaluate the relevance my own choices and actions. Why am I doing what I do?

Creating our company's strategic storyline

Now, let's have a look at how the picture from the previous section (the arrow) compares with how we normally communicate about our strategy. If we assume our strategic communication should make as many connections between the current and future what, how and why of the company and its employees as possible, it will be an interesting exercise to look at what 'connections' we usually focus on. In the beginning of this document on strategic doubting, I had a look at how I think mission, vision etc. compare to the what, how and why (see image below on the right). Now, let's try to take that a step further.



When we communicate about **values, or business principles**, for me that -ideally- connects the company's current why (why 3 in the image on the next page) and my current why (why 1). I say 'ideally', because I think it's tricky to draft descriptions of values that are more than 'buzzwords'. It would be interesting to see if we can strengthen this connection, e.g. by investigating what our **common beliefs** are. Knowing which beliefs I share with the company I work for will give me a feeling that I belong here. That doesn't mean that we should agree on all beliefs and values, even a discrepancy can motivate me to start a debate about it with colleagues and potentially steer the company towards a different why. Of course, the company (read: people in strategic positions) should allow for 'movements' like this to grow, otherwise a 'difference in beliefs' can lead to unrest.



Conecting the elements of what a strategy should look like for me

Communicating about our **company's strategy**, e.g. in quarterly strategic updates, we usually focus on the strategy in the strictest sense of the word, meaning the choices we made as an organisation, and the plans we made to make it happen. So during those publications or town hall meetings, we only make a connection between our organisation's current how and what (how 3 and what 3). For the audience of these communications, it can be hard to 'listen to the why' of the strategy or to see the personal relevance of it. It requires quite a lot of effort to see how what I do individually contributes to the bigger picture (connecting what 1 and 3). It is hard to align because the organisation's plans are too high level to link to my personal plans. Somehow, I have to find a way to specify overall choices to my particular situation. However, even if we manage to do that, still something is missing.

I'm not sure if in most companies it is common to communicate about the **company's mission**, but -if it's a good one- I think that could be very valuable. I say 'if it's a good one' because there is a risk that companies, especially big ones, focus too much on the how and the what, and 'reverse engineer' their why for marketing purposes. Sometimes, the main focus is on measurements of success (e.g. cost-income ratio or profit) and the scope is quite short term. The value of communicating a good mission statement is that it explains why we made the choices that we made as a company. It provides some meaning to what we do. Probably the same thing can be said about the **company's vision**, that should probably precede the mission.

By Maarten Hoekstra, adapted from my blog: dubioblog.com

This together leads to what you could call the **company's strategic storyline**, explaining:

1. What we want the company to look like in the future (what 4), followed by
2. Why we want it to look like that and what is guiding us on our path towards that future (why 3), followed by
3. What choices we've made to make sure we reach that ideal future (what 3), and
4. Provide focus to help people make choices on their individual contributions (what 1), followed by
5. How we are going to act on these choices, what methods we will use (how 3), and
6. What skills and capabilities we need to act on these choices (how 1)

I think this storyline can be used for the overall strategy of the company, but also for different sub-strategies, e.g. on a specific product or service. It provides some context and relevance to what we are doing, which I think is necessary for people to buy in to it. That said, I feel there are more ways to 'connect our strategic dots'. For one, there still is a disconnect between most of the 'future dots' and 'current dots', and maybe we should include some historical background as well.

Strategy as a piece of art

In the previous section, I described how I think creating a storyline, describing 'the meaning of life' for an organisation can help people within the company 'own' the strategy. And before that, I described three approaches to describe a strategy: strategy as a shared direction, strategy as a set of core competences, and strategy as a set of shared beliefs. I would like to add another perspective to that: **strategy as a piece of art**.

As I argued in my last post, I believe that a good strategy should include the how, what and why, and include a future perspective. However, for it to become a true piece of art, it should also include some background. Why is our current strategy different from last year's strategy? What were the considerations that brought us to these strategic choices? Did we have any doubts about this, or were we pretty sure about what to do? Having answers to these questions, for me provides the background, and 'human touch' necessary for me to embrace the strategy.

For me that's where the art comes into the strategy. The personal value of a piece of art is not only in the way we see feel or hear it, or the 'face value', but also in what we believe it really is, or where it came from. In his talk "The origins of pleasure" (see below), Paul Bloom explains how this works along some clear examples. My view is that this is also true for strategic communications.

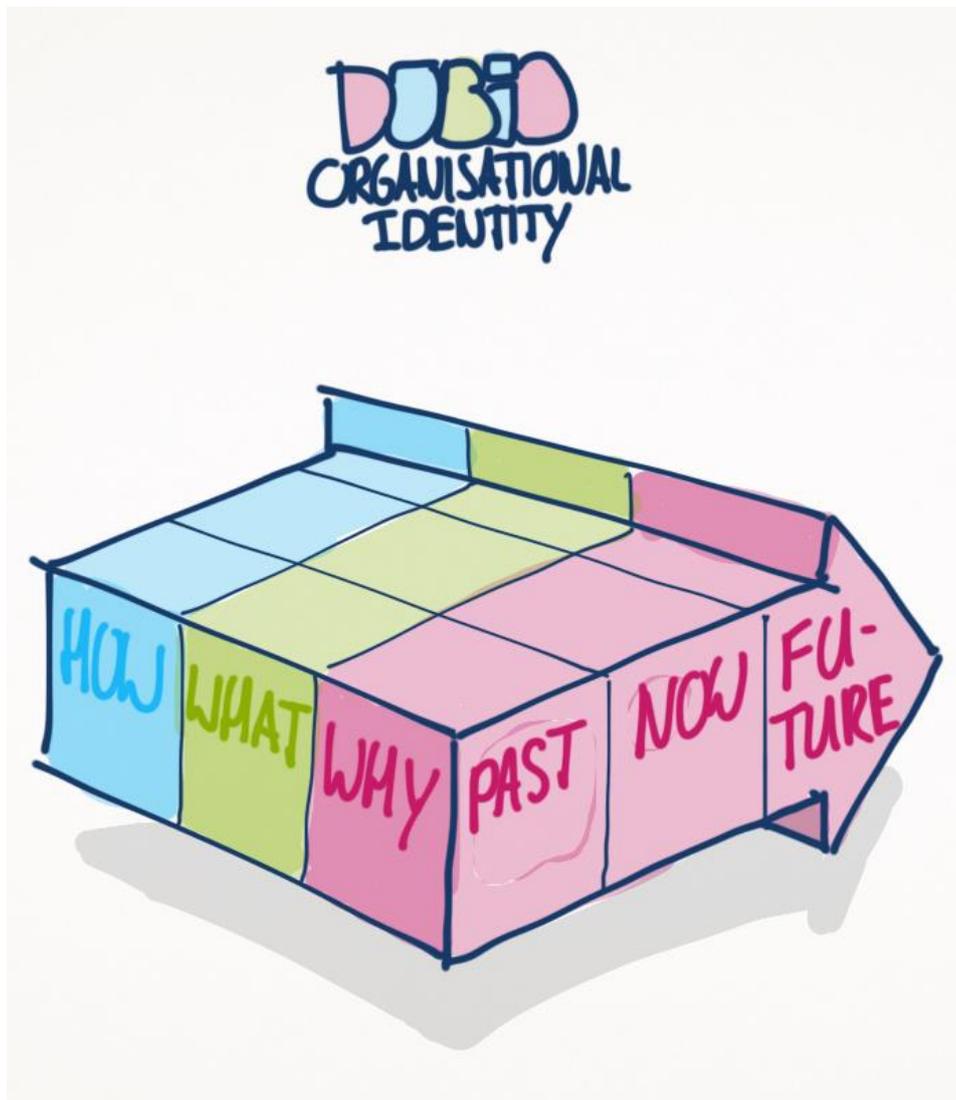


*Video: Paul Bloom, the origins of pleasure (Ted.com)
(Click on image to open)*

Even if objectively, our strategic communications are great, it could be of low value to an individual employee because of her/his (subjective) perception of it. As, like Bloom argues, our beliefs about the history of an object change how we experience it, we might consider adding **some historical background** to our communications. We want to know how it came about, and that a lot of work and expertise went into it. While talking about the future direction of our organisation or team, we could for instance consider sharing some stories about our considerations and the doubts that we had while shaping our thoughts on this. Probably it would be even better to actually include people in the process, but even sharing the thought process could help.

Another point Bloom makes is that for a piece of art to be perceived as valuable, it should be considered **original**. I wouldn't be surprised if this is also true for communications on strategy. Is a strategy more valuable if it's distinctly different than that of other organisations or teams? I guess so.

When designing a description of our organisational or team identity (probably a better word than strategy?), we could consider adding a 'past perspective' to the mix. Combined with the what- why- how- questions, it could look something like this:



I realise the comparison between a strategy and a piece of art is a bit makeshift, but my point is that it might be good to approach it in a similar way, especially in our communications.

I hope this makes sense, if only a little. Please let me know if you would like to share your view on this, or if you have suggestions for improving or extending my reasoning. You can let me know [via email](#), or comment on my blog.

Maarten

By Maarten Hoekstra, adapted from my blog: dubioblog.com