# Marketplace Research

## From 30,000 Feet High to Sea Level
### How to bring "reinventing yourself" down to earth

*by Richard W. Hobbs, Resident Fellow*

*We have talked about reinventing oneself (a unit of one, a firm, an organization, and a profession) by designing innovative strategies, in a value proposition, of service delivery, within a particular focus or client/user/community base. How do we move from the "what if" to the "how," from the vision to the results?*

*Here, we would like to start to explore the path from theory to reality. From the 30,000-foot level—the broad blue sky—to the "what can I do this Monday?" to get started.*

### Start with a goal

To begin with, one must have a need and the commitment to meeting that need. Internationally renowned competitiveness expert Michael Porter says in an article by Keith Hammonds in the March issue of *Fast Company* that if you want to make a difference as a leader, you have to make time for strategy. As business keeps moving faster, there needs to be a process by which to develop and maintain a strategic process or framework.

Yes, strategy in hard; it is about making tough choices and trade-offs and deliberately choosing to be different. A strategy delineates a territory in which a company seeks to be unique as well as the definition of its value proposition.

Porter stresses that sound strategy starts with having the right goal, and that the only goal that can support a sound strategy is superior profitability. He notes that, although technology changes, strategy doesn't. Strategy must have continuity; it is the basic value you are delivering to the clients, users, and community you are serving.

Therefore, as an entity maintains continuity of strategy, it also has to be good at continuously improving. In fact, continuity of strategic direction and continuous improvement in how you do things are absolutely consistent with each other.

### The role of leadership

I can picture management guru Tom Peters saying with passion, "You think the past five years were nuts? You ain't seen nothin' yet!" The business world is only going to become tougher and more turbulent. Leadership will be more important than ever—and more confusing. Leadership is now about:

- Adjusting situationally
- Rewarding performance and results
- Grooving on ambiguity
- Being totally into design
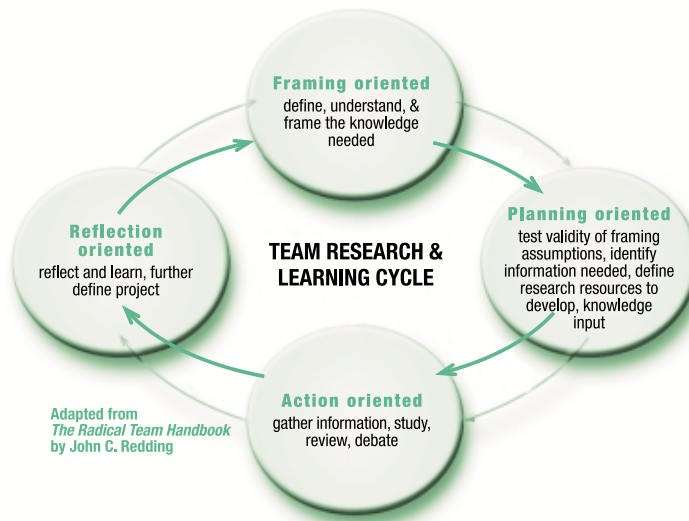- Embracing technology
- Listening intently.

Architects are being called upon to lead by absorbing all of the chaos and information and designing a meaningful pattern amid the splatter. And to be leaders, architects must continually learn; you can no longer stop "learning" to "do." As Peters preaches, "learn fast or be left behind."

In the traditional practice of architecture, alienation among those in distinct fields has meant that "best practices" alone have been pursued. In the emerging marketplace, mere operational effectiveness will not suffice. Architects must step back, strategize, and make choices—and that requires leadership.

### The Internet's impact on design

The Internet and its enabling technologies have changed perceptions about time, space, and people. And in their wake, boundaries, economics, infrastructures, and cultures have been altered and blurred.

In the "Then and *continued on next page*



**Framing oriented**
define, understand, & frame the knowledge needed

**Planning oriented**
test validity of framing assumptions, identify information needed, define research resources to develop, knowledge input

**Reflection oriented**
reflect and learn, further define project

**TEAM RESEARCH & LEARNING CYCLE**

**Action oriented**
gather information, study, review, debate

Adapted from
*The Radical Team Handbook*
by John C. Redding

**This cyclical inquiring process is likened to peeling back the layers of an onion, with each layer representing new understanding that is created through new actions. The diagram shows how in steps one, teams create SHARED UNDERSTANDING of what they are trying to do and how they are going to do it. They understand and frame the project, the issue, and the subject. Step two is to define THE PLAN—what we need to know, what actions we can take, and how we can verify what we are assuming is actually true. Step three is to ACT—the key to learning. Step four is to REFLECT on what is learned.**

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Now" diagram in the March issue of *Metropolis*, this change is expressed with great impact. Greater speed, more choices, and more formats increasingly define the environment within which design functions.

Design is modular, and its parts are interchangeable in a networked world. The tension that has existed among various design practices is still here; in fact, it has been heightened by the parallel nature of the "new" work process. How we get along is no longer an implied objective: it's an explicit imperative. Collaborate or the design suffers.

But rather than be threatened by this paradigm, we can learn from Steve Ballmer, of Microsoft, who states that in a world full of visionaries, patience can be the greatest virtue. Who would have believed that from the giant Microsoft would come the following summation of its operating model: vision, patience, and execution? Ballmer sums it all up for architects by saying, "being big or small isn't the crucial issue. If you don't move, you don't move."

So how *do* you move?

### Strategy: the bridge between vision and competencies

To be a leader in the profession and within the market you select, you must develop a vision, supported by a strategy and sufficient resources, to stay ahead of the curve and consistently achieve the competitive advantage. A definition of strategy is that which bridges the gap between our vision and our competencies.

When you are asked about your business strategy, what is really meant is, "what is your vision?" My research indicates that people need to know how to analyze their markets and develop their strategy accordingly.

The strategic thinking process, as described by Michael Robert in *Strategy Pure and Simple*, can be described as that thinking which attempts to determine what an organization should "look" like in the future. Strategic planning systems help choose how to get there; the system is a tool for the process.

One system I am currently exploring is that described in *Radical Team Handbook* by John C. Redding. This tool utilizes the reiterative learning cycle to develop the strategy and, in turn, provides an ongoing framework for consistent and disciplined improvement. With the completion of the first learning cycle, the plan starts a second learning cycle, leading to the development of a strategy based on the research that provides the knowledge base for this iterative learning process.

### We must invent a new process

The tools and the systems are in place and new ones are being developed that will reshape the marketplace. It is up to us to get involved and reinvent through a process similar to the architect's integrated creative design process. It is all about design strategy for the design profession. In today's terminology, it is STRATEGY ARCHITECTURE.

The rewards are likely to be significant. Dick Sabot, cofounder and chairman of eZiba, has stated, "One of the results of the Darwinian shakeout is that with each consolidation and failure, the pie just keeps getting bigger. Anyone who emerges intact is going to have a larger slice of a much larger pie."

We presented a collective intelligence/ knowledge management system diagram in the January 2001 *AIArchitect* that showed internal and external knowledge as primary input components. Internal knowledge is, of course, that which is developed by the firm, on an ongoing basis, for each client/project type in which the firm focuses. External knowledge comprises those trends and business strategies that will affect the client and, in turn, the services and the value proposition that the architect contributes toward the client's competitive advantage.

This is beyond the marketing of services; it is providing a value to the client that raises the bar, the responsibility, and the value of the architect to the client. The work of Wallace Research Group, as an example, serves the architect with marketing information, demographics, statistics, forecasts, and trends—national and global—to assist the client in getting and staying ahead of the curve.

Clients benefit greatly, says Colette Wallace, Assoc. AIA, when the architect looks at all the current events through the lens of client engagement. You understand your client much better when you have the information necessary to speak their language.

Successful firms use research and information in a strategic way that provides them a broad yet in-depth picture of the client's business and culture. To utilize the design professional's strengths as well as gain the best insight, firms can outsource this research or create their own research departments.

A research resource like Wallace Research Group focuses on researching multiple sources; filtering, sifting, and verifying the retrieved information; and providing a summary with reference to the specific needs of the architects served.