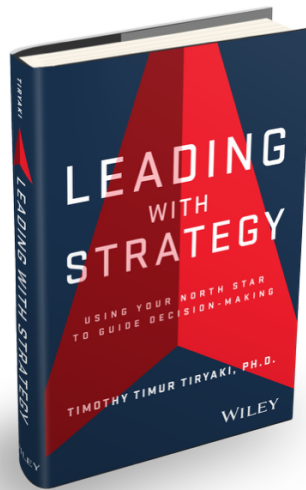


# Leading with Strategy

Bonus Chapter

From SWOT to TOWS: Turning Insight into Strategic Direction

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## Introduction - Why Strategy Literacy Matters

One of the most interesting shifts I see as leaders develop their strategy literacy is this: tools stop being isolated templates and start becoming connected building blocks.

Early on, strategy tools are often used mechanically. We run a SWOT because that's what good strategy processes are supposed to include. We fill the boxes. We discuss. We move on. The exercise feels useful but somehow incomplete.

As strategy proficiency grows, something changes. Leaders begin to understand *why* a tool exists, *what question it answers*, and *what it must connect to next*. Strategy stops being about completing frameworks and starts becoming about designing a coherent path from today to tomorrow.

This is where the relationship between **SWOT and TOWS** becomes powerful.

SWOT is a **current-state sensemaking tool**. It helps us pause, scan reality, and articulate what is true *right now*, internally and externally.

TOWS is a **future-shaping tool**. It takes that shared understanding of the present and asks a far more strategic question:

*Given where we are, what strategic choices are available to us?*

Used together, SWOT and TOWS form a bridge from analysis to action, from insight to intention.

## SWOT, TOWS, and Strategic Objectives: A Simple Flow

Think of the flow like this:

- **SWOT = Current State** → *Where are we?*
- **TOWS = Strategic Choices** → *What can we do about it?*
- **Strategic Objectives = Direction** → *Where do we want to go?*

SWOT on its own is not a strategy. It is a diagnosis.

TOWS is where strategy design begins.

Strategic objectives are where commitment, focus, and execution start to take shape.

## Two Sides of the Strategy Design Equation

SWOT and TOWS are often treated as variations of the same tool. They're not.

They operate in **two different realms** of strategy and it's precisely this difference that makes them powerful when used together.

SWOT lives in the realm of **understanding**.

It helps leaders make sense of reality by surfacing what is true about the organization and its environment *today*. It brings clarity, alignment, and shared language around strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In that sense, SWOT answers a foundational but incomplete question:

*What is our situation?*

TOWS lives in the realm of **choice**.

It takes that shared understanding and deliberately moves the conversation forward. By combining internal and external factors, TOWS forces teams to explore **strategic options**, trade-offs, and directions. It shifts the conversation from observation to intention by asking:

*Given our situation, what strategic paths are available to us?*

This is where the synergy emerges.

SWOT without TOWS often results in insight without movement.

TOWS without SWOT risks movement without grounding.

Together, they cover **both sides of the strategy design equation**:

- One side clarifies **reality**
- The other shapes **possibility**

SWOT provides the *inputs*; TOWS structures the *thinking*.

SWOT builds a shared map of the present; TOWS helps design routes into the future.

When leaders understand this complementarity, strategy stops being a linear checklist and becomes a **deliberate progression**, from clarity, to choice, to commitment.

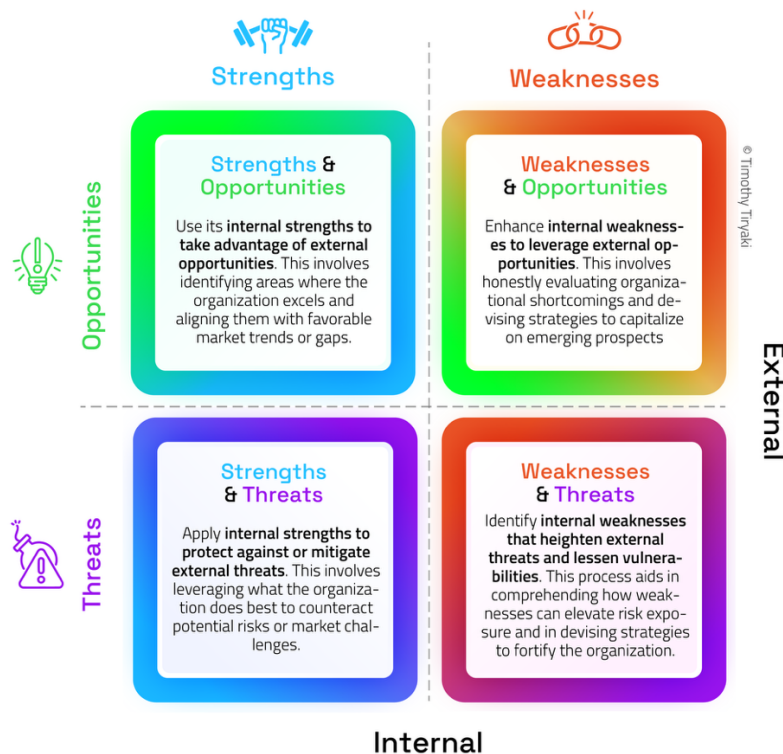
That progression is what turns strategy from an analytical exercise into a design discipline.

## The TOWS Matrix: Making Strategy Explicit

The TOWS Matrix systematically combines internal and external factors to generate *realistic, context-based strategic options*.

# The TOWS Matrix

Ideate and build through your **SWOT Analysis**



Each quadrant represents a different strategic posture from growth and ambition to protection and survival.

This is important: **good strategy doesn't live in one quadrant only**. Wise leaders explore all four before deciding where to place their bets.

## The Four Strategic Directions

### *SO Strategies (Strengths–Opportunities)*

**Goal:** Use internal strengths to capitalize on external opportunities

**Theme:** Growth-oriented, offensive strategies

Guiding questions: - How can we leverage our core strengths to seize emerging opportunities? - Which of our strengths align most directly with the opportunities we see? - What would it look like to double down on our advantages?

These strategies answer the question: *Where can we grow fastest and smartest?*

### *ST Strategies (Strengths–Threats)*

**Goal:** Use internal strengths to mitigate or neutralize external threats

**Theme:** Defensive, resilience-focused strategies

Guiding questions: - How can our strengths help us reduce the impact of key threats? - Are there threats we are uniquely equipped to handle? - Which capabilities give us an edge under pressure?

These strategies answer the question: *How do we protect what matters while staying competitive?*

### *WO Strategies (Weaknesses–Opportunities)*

**Goal:** Reduce weaknesses by leveraging external opportunities

**Theme:** Developmental, adaptive strategies

Guiding questions: - Which opportunities could help us overcome our weaknesses? - What partnerships, learning, or innovation could accelerate improvement? - Which trends could help us leapfrog internal constraints?

These strategies answer the question: *How do we evolve and build capacity?*

### *WT Strategies (Weaknesses–Threats)*

**Goal:** Minimize exposure and reduce risk

**Theme:** Survival, stabilization strategies

Guiding questions: - Which weaknesses make us most vulnerable right now? - What actions are non-negotiable to avoid worst-case scenarios? - Where must we simplify, restructure, or pause?

These strategies answer the question: *What must we protect or fix to stay viable?*

## Why This Progression Works

By linking SWOT → TOWS → Strategic Objectives:

- You move from **analysis to action**
- Your strategy becomes **evidence-informed**, not opinion-driven
- You align internal capabilities with external realities
- You create a shared strategic language across the organization

Most importantly, you stop confusing *insight* with *direction*.

## Workshop Guide: Turning SWOT into Strategic Objectives

This is a simple, highly engaging way to move teams from discussion to decision.

### Step 1 – Develop the SWOT

Create the SWOT together on a physical or digital whiteboard.

- Capture strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats clearly
- Avoid debating wording too much, clarity matters more than perfection
- Treat this as your shared reality snapshot

This becomes the foundation for everything that follows.

### Step 2 – Guided TOWS Discussion (Circle Format)

1. Divide into **four groups**, one per TOWS quadrant (SO, ST, WO, WT)
2. Review the guiding questions for your assigned quadrant
3. Each participant must propose at least one suggestion combining:
  - **One internal factor** (S or W)
  - **One external factor** (O or T) ...into a strategic proposition

Example:

*“Because we have [Strength X], we could pursue [Opportunity Y] by...”*

Discussion format: - Sit in a circle - Go around the table - Each person shares one idea per round - Complete at least **two full rounds** - Passing is allowed

Keep it light. Capture personal notes. Let ideas emerge without judgment.

## Step 3 – From Strategic Ideas to Draft Objectives

After the discussion:

- Each person shares **one standout idea** they believe has strategic potential from the group's ideas
- As a group, cluster similar ideas
- Refine them into **3–5 draft strategic objectives**

Use directional, imperfect language such as: - “Develop...” - “Strengthen our ability to...” - “Increase the impact of...” - “Build capability in...”

This is not copywriting. It's sensemaking.

## Step 4 – Prepare to Present

For each draft objective, prepare a short rationale:

- Why does this matter now?
- Which strengths, opportunities, or risks does it address?
- What future does it help create?

Your goal is not elegance, it's **clarity and alignment**.

## A Final Reflection

Strategy maturity isn't about knowing more tools.

It's about knowing **how tools connect, when to use them, and how to move forward once insight is gained**.

SWOT helps you see clearly.

TOWS helps you choose wisely.

Strategic objectives help you commit.

That progression, when practiced well, is what turns strategy from an exercise into a living discipline.

Thank you for your interest in Leading with Strategy. If you enjoyed this complimentary chapter, please be sure to order the book, gift it to colleagues and friends, and share it online!