

# Pre-Training Reading: Exploring Emergent Strategy

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*This brief overview of emergent strategy is intended as a short primer on emergent strategy, before entering PolicySolve's training on the practice of emergent strategy. It is NOT a complete and thorough review of the concept, nor does it represent the full range of voices and insights about emergent strategy. It is also my interpretation of both the concepts and what each author is bringing forward, recognizing they offer a great deal more than we have space to explore here. We all have our lenses – I hope you have and will continue develop your own interpretation and insights about emergent strategy. To this end, there are links and resources throughout this document to support your learning journey.*

## Defining the Concept

Emergent strategy is a term that has been in use for decades. Many different theorists and practitioners have explored the concept and its application. In this piece, we will dig into three approaches (offered chronologically) that build on each other.

Let's begin with a couple definitions:

"An emergent strategy is a pattern of action that develops over time in *an organization* in the absence of a specific mission and goals, or despite a mission and goals." [Henry Mintzberg](#)

"Emergent strategy is about creating the conditions that expand the agency of a *whole ecosystem* to work toward a shared goal." [4<sup>th</sup> Quadrant Partners](#)

Emergent strategy is a "strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions" and "an *adaptive, relational* way of being." [adrienne maree brown](#)

You may notice from these quotes that the first centers the organization, the second centers the ecosystem (and power/agency within that ecosystem), and the third centers the relationships in a system. The quotes come from some of the thought leaders at the forefront of emergent strategy and each brings something to the conversation that is helpful when thinking about emergence in the context of philanthropic efforts to support systemic change.

## Learning from Henry Mintzberg: The organizational orientation

[Henry Mintzberg](#) is often cited as the person who coined the term emergent strategy. He comes from a business background with a heavy focus on organizational strategies. He explains that strategy is not a decision or even a set of decisions made upfront, but rather many different decisions that occur over time, all of which must be understood in context.

With his colleague, James Waters, he constructed the idea of **strategy as "a pattern in a stream of decisions."** Sometimes this pattern is planned (though, inevitably, the realized strategy diverts from the planned strategy). Sometimes the pattern is emergent, with less attempt to predict the needs upfront, rather letting the pattern emerge as decisions are made along the way to respond to opportunities and needs. Regardless of planned or emergent, strategy can be undertaken collaboratively or imposed on others.

Mintzberg also uses the [metaphor of a strategy being a garden](#), which encourages us to recognize that it can emerge from many different places, can sometimes (though not always) be consciously managed, must be allowed to grow over time, and though intervention can be meaningful, should not be overly controlled. Despite his organizational focus, much about this metaphor applies quite clearly to complex, adaptive systems, where attempts to control how change occurs over time are often unsuccessful, and intervening at opportune moments can be transformative.

One of the more compelling concepts from Mintzberg's work when applying it to the work of philanthropic and non-profit systems change is the notion that **strategy can be a pattern that emerges from past successful action**. Rather than being an intentional choice, strategy can surface organically as the result of past actions that led to meaningful impacts, which then become embedded in how future actions are taken. Of course, this pattern of behavior depends on more than having success in past actions – it also depends on being engaged in learning that helps to make the patterns visible, interrogates them, and supports the adaptation of them. It depends on the strategists [seeing our history in order to see beyond the present moment](#).

This is where 4<sup>th</sup> Quadrant Partners' insights about emergent learning become very useful.

### Learning from 4<sup>th</sup> Quadrant Partners: The learning and ecosystem orientation

Marilyn Darling, Heidi Sparkes Guber, and Jillaine Smith, the founders of [4<sup>th</sup> Quadrant Partners \(4QP\)](#), developed a specific practice of emergent learning, grounded in the desire to support emergent strategies amid complexity. Their work has been refined over the years through practical application within philanthropic contexts among other settings and is grounded in [complex adaptive systems theory](#).

From 4QP, we learn that emergent strategy is not just a series of decisions that an organization has control over (as seen in Mintzberg's thinking), but also about **creating the conditions for many actors within an ecosystem to work toward a shared goal**. Philanthropic strategies designed to change systems may promise to pay deep attention to the context of the system and be adaptive along the way, but typically continue to hold power tightly, directing the work of others and limiting their actions to those things the philanthropic organization believes are needed given their internally held systems sensing. This is not emergent strategy accordingly to 4QP's description. Instead, **emergent strategy acknowledges "the agency of the people in an ecosystem who are doing the real work of social change"** and assumes each person has a unique perspective on what is happening, opportunities to act in the moment, and the skills to make rapid decisions.

Emergence, in the 4QP model, is not adaptation of a strategy or course correction by a philanthropic actor. They recognize that amid complexity in systems change work, [emergent strategy is the collective intelligence and learning of the ecosystem](#) that surfaces opportunities for action based on past successes and unexpected moments.

This is where adrienne maree brown's insights about the people in the process of emergent strategy come into play.

### Learning from adrienne maree brown: The relational orientation

[adrienne maree brown](#) is an author and activist with a deep understanding of social movements. Her work is grounded in her study of Octavia Butler's speculative fiction that has advanced critical insights about race, sex, and power. brown's book, [Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds](#), was published only 4 years ago, but already has tremendous momentum. She embraces many of the same concepts of emergence that have been proposed by others (including bringing ecosystem metaphors to life) and brings a deep understanding of nature, humanity and relationships within emergence:

"Emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical connections. dare i say love. the quality of connection between the nodes in the patterns." [brown's blog post on flocking](#)

As with the two previous thought leaders, there is much that could be unpacked. A few highlights that are particularly relevant to philanthropic work in systems change include:

### *Learning from ecology*

brown reminds us to learn from the patterns in the natural world as we seek to change systems. She highlights metaphors from nature that help us think about how social movements (and one might argue, broader systemic change) emerge over time. Notably, she is not the first to focus on these metaphors – in fact, they show up across many different emergent strategy writings. They are a powerful way to capture our imagination and help emergent strategy come alive. Three metaphors that she and others center that I find very compelling are:

- A flock of starlings: The flock's synchronized movements, which are guided by simple rules, allow them to react to the environment as a group. They have no leader, yet they can transform their actions together.
- A fern: Ferns are shaped as fractals – which is an object that displays the same shape as any scale, though it may have more layers and complexity as it grows in size.
- A dandelion: Dandelions, described as a weed, are resilient with roots that make them hard to get rid of. They change rapidly, overnight moving from flower to seed heads, and spread wide and far.

### *Being like water*

In philanthropy and non-profits, we love to predict the future (often narrowly, based on our own strategies and goals). Yet, when seeking to change systems, we must let go of our desire to control the future (which also gives us the opportunity to let go of our anxieties about that future). Chances are that your experience exploring systems concepts has including grappling with the non-linear nature of systems change; yet, it is likely your work also uses linear theories of change or other strategic plans that make claims suggesting that if we intervene in these ways, the system will change in these other ways, which will contribute to these guiding stars/long-term goals. In other words, we continue to predict a very specific future.

To remind us of the falseness of these predictions, brown quotes Peter Hardie: “The universe is both orderly and chaotic. We understand it to a point, and then there is mystery.” What we do with this mystery is what matters.

### *Be wrong*

This is easily one of my favorite insights in any emergent strategy reading (and it comes up a lot!). brown grounds this concept in not just our openness to being wrong, but how we show up when we are wrong. She reminds us to be wrong, be open to being wrong, and be particularly open even after you've been a strong defender of an idea. To be soft when you are sure you're right, and be aware that there are multiple truths – not one definite, unquestionable truth about a system and a strategy. Being wrong (or failing, making mistakes, etc.) is part of systems change work and emergent strategy.

By the way, in addition to being wrong, we also have to be kind when others are wrong. brown reminds us that “the line between constructive critique and hater is a hard one to navigate.” Instead of focusing on critique, we can focus on learning, on being curious, on having genuine interest in what has happened and why, on the thinking others brought to the work.

### *Taking care of ourselves and others*

Finally, brown includes in her description of emergent strategy the health and wellbeing of the people who are helping the strategy emerge. She challenges some of the core norms of our (western) way of working, ways that prioritize productivity, are driven by deadlines, are grounded in competition, and reject our emotions as part of how we work together. She also reminds us that we are praised and rewarded for being good at what we do (which makes doing what we don't know deeply uncomfortable, even risky). Yet, when we seek to change systems, we are often doing the impossible and unimaginable.

These norms deserve to be challenged in our work. Building on brown's insights, in my experience, one way to challenge them is to NOT seek the leaders of your emergent strategy and systems change from among those who have succeeded the most due to these norms. The person who can achieve productivity in themselves and others, master a skill and be an expert, and deliver on a deadline, may not be the person who can create an ecosystem ripe for emergence. Find the greatness in those who are right now being overlooked.

## Weaving together different theories of emergent strategy

Mintzberg sees strategies emerging organically from past successes. Yet, within organizations and systems, **we often see strategies and patterns that emerge organically and are deeply harmful**. Something about these patterns make them successful, but that is not the same as the patterns being equitable, just, or acceptable. Within an organization, a pattern may sustain because it forced productivity in the short-term, yet it can be the very pattern that drives burnout, turnover, and other poor outcomes. Within a system, a pattern may sustain because it directly rewards those in power. Yet, to provide those benefits, the pattern may be simultaneously causing harm to marginalized communities and undermining the long-term sustainability of the system and its resources.

4QP reminds us to be intentional about how we learn when engaging in emergent strategy and systems change, which helps us **to not allow these organic patterns to be unquestioned**. Remember: in their understanding of emergent strategy, 4QP seeks an ecosystem approach that empowers (or leverages the natural power of) many actors throughout the ecosystem. The beauty of this approach is that it creates an **opportunity to collectively redefine what a successful system pattern looks like**, who benefits from it, and how it will sustain.

brown not only describes emergent strategy as something shared, as a way of building power among many, she also reminds us to be **bold, disruptive, and caring** as we engage in emergence. She grounds the concepts of emergence, including how it grows into something greater than where it began, in the concepts of humanity and ecology and our need to care for ourselves and each other as we act as agents for change.

Together, these thought leaders have constructed a theory of how change can happen that is difficult to wrap our heads around – it contrasts with how we are taught strategy should be – and yet, it is hard to deny that it happens all around us, all the time. Observe any system you are working in: How much of what is happening is the result of intended, planned patterns? How much has emerged naturally over time? **If emergence is how systems naturally change, then interventions that embrace emergence and expand who has the agency to engage in emergence may be our best route to changing systems**.

Rob Ricigliano [offers us this practical advice](#) that helps to bridge between the certainty and structure of a planned strategy and the ambiguity of emergent strategy. In deploying emergent strategy, he explains that we must try...

“...to thread the needle between being too control-based (technical strategy) and eschewing any strategy as being too deterministic. For example, emergent strategy focuses on **developing and testing key assumptions** and well-articulated hypotheses and **thinking probabilistically** (instead of predicting or guaranteeing specific outcomes), identifying markers of progress while **being open to other key shifts/impacts both positive and negative**, focusing on improving effectiveness at understanding and engaging a system rather than claiming success or burying failure, etc.”

This leads us into the topic for our training. We will move from the theory of emergent strategy into the practice of it, including how it can look, feel, and be supported within philanthropy and non-profits. Our training will dig deep into these concepts, and give you an opportunity to explore them with each other.

## Reflection

To help hold onto the ideas shared in this brief reading, please use the space below to identify five key insights you want to have front of mind about the “what” of emergent strategy as we investigate the “how” during the training.

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## Other Resources

Excited to keep digging deeper? In addition to the hyperlinks throughout this summary, below are additional resources from the thought leaders named above and others who are exploring emergent strategy:

**WHY emergent strategy is needed:** Nick Obolensky and his team at Complex Adaptive Leadership have generated [wonderful insights about complex systems](#) that help us understand why emergent strategy is necessary.

**WHY philanthropy needs to use emergent strategy:** Marilyn Darling’s blog post at the Center for Effective Philanthropy’s shares insights about [why philanthropic organizations should invest in an emergent approach](#).

**HOW philanthropy can use emergent strategy:** adrienne maree brown’s [Emergent Strategy Primer for Funders](#) offers funders the next step – how they can show up to enable emergence in the ecosystems they work

**HOW philanthropy has actually used emergent strategy:** Erica Snow, Jewlya Lynn, and Tanya Beer’s case study of a [foundation approach to creating room for adaptation and emergence](#) helps to investigate the how of emergent strategy, sharing tools and practices that could be replicated in other settings.