CHAPTER 1

Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent

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Introduction

How do strategies form in organizations? Research into the question is necessarily shaped by the underlying conception of the term. Since strategy has almost inevitably been conceived in terms of what the leaders of an organization ‘plan’ to do in the future, strategy formation has, not surprisingly, tended to be treated as an analytic process for establishing long-range goals and action plans for an organization; that is, as one of formulation followed by implementation. As important as this emphasis may be, we would argue that it is seriously limited, that the process needs to be viewed from a wider perspective so that the variety of ways in which strategies actually take shape can be considered.

For over 10 years now, we have been researching the process of strategy formation based on the definition of strategy as ‘a pattern in a stream of decisions’ (Mintzberg, 1972, 1978; Mintzberg and Waters, 1982, 1984; Mintzberg et al., 1986; Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985; Brunet, Mintzberg and Waters, 1986). This definition was developed to ‘operationalize’ the concept of strategy, namely to provide a tangible basis on which to conduct research into how it forms in organizations. Streams of behaviour could be isolated and strategies identified as patterns or consistencies in such streams. The origins of these strategies could then be investigated, with particular attention paid to exploring the relationship between leadership plans and intentions and what the organizations actually did. Using the label strategy for both of these phenomena – one called intended, the other realized – encouraged that exploration.

[...] Comparing intended strategy with realized strategy, as shown in Figure 1.1, has allowed us to distinguish deliberate strategies – realized as
Pure deliberate and pure emergent strategies

For a strategy to be perfectly deliberate — that is, for the realized strategy (pattern in actions) to form exactly as intended — at least three conditions would seem to have to be satisfied. First, there must have existed precise intentions in the organization, articulated in a relatively concrete level of detail, so that there can be no doubt about what was desired before any actions were taken. Secondly, because organization means collective action, to dispel any possible doubt about whether or not the intentions were organizational, they must have been common to virtually all the actors: either shared as their own or else accepted from leaders, probably in response to some sort of controls. Thirdly, these collective intentions must have been realized exactly as intended, which means that no external force (market, technological, political, etc.) could have interfered with them. The environment, in other words, must have been either perfectly predictable, totally benign, or else under the full control of the organization. These three conditions constitute a tall order, so that we