

Emergent Strategy to Build Transformative Teams

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Abstract

This article explores the emergent strategy elements developed by adrienne maree brown in her book *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (2017) and their connection to library middle management. Built on a social justice framework, the six elements of emergent strategy can be used in many settings. The elements are ideal for middle managers working with library teams to help them adapt to change and become more sustainable and productive. The article provides grounded ideas to incorporate emergent strategy into middle management team-building work. The six elements are described in detail alongside their connections to library work specifically, exploring both successes and potential obstacles.

Introduction

adrienne maree brown developed the elements of emergent strategy as a framework for groups to work together. This loose framework connects leadership models used in the works of speculative fiction author Octavia Butler, the concept of “emergence” from leadership writer and practitioner Nick Obolensky, and the lessons that brown has taken from her ongoing work in social justice movements, including the practices and works of Margaret Wheatley and Grace Lee Boggs. The author also borrows from general concepts in biology and uses biomimicry, the practice of using natural systems to solve human problems. In general, these models are not based on business ideas about innovation or growth; rather, “emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience” (brown 2017, 14). The framework of emergent strategy reflects and explores the ways in which people can come together in groups with a shared vision and how those groups can both create and respond to change.

An experienced facilitator, brown has worked primarily with social and environmental justice organizations. Emergent strategy delineates many of the lessons she has learned and offers solutions for moving forward. For brown, the evolution of emergent strategy in its full

conceptualization of six elements and several principles describes “ways for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other, to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for” (brown 2017, 24).

The six emergent strategy elements create the framework of emergent strategy. They are fractal, intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, nonlinear and iterative, resilience and transformative justice, and creating more possibilities. Fractal is taken from biomimicry and focuses on the relationship between small components and larger organizations or organisms. Intentional adaptation is rooted in how we change and how we create change. The interdependence and decentralization element is about group dynamics and how we relate to each other. Nonlinear and iterative returns to the issue of change, but focuses on the pathway itself, which is complex and at times circular, rather than linear. The resilience and transformative justice element is about dealing with and recovering from unwanted change. Finally, creating more possibilities opens the door to imagining new futures. Each of these six elements can be used in a team or group setting to help that group define its vision and work toward it together.

This framework has been taught through the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute, where nonprofits and community groups have undergone training to use emergent strategy within their own teams. Practitioners range from artists’ groups to the Women’s March organizers to lifestyle brands. In libraries, emergent strategy appears in the literature related to instruction, but not for internal library teams; however the framework is well suited to library work.

Libraries and Emergent Strategy

Why look to emergent strategy as a model for libraries? First, because brown fully intends emergent strategy to be holistic; it is meant to be effective and valuable in every part of our lives. For brown, “Grace [Lee Boggs] articulated it in what may be the most used quote in my life: ‘*Transform yourself to transform the world.*’ This doesn’t mean to get lost in the self, but rather to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, as a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet” (brown 2017, 53). In other words, for library workers, libraries and our daily work are as good a place to begin embracing emergent strategy as any other place where we gather and work toward common goals. In fact, part of the message of emergent strategy is that we cannot move forward into healthier and more vibrant futures without also focusing on how we are moving together now.

Emergent strategy has much to offer libraries in relation to change. Whether public, academic, or other, libraries are often at the whims of a larger organization with its own priorities, and changing leadership at higher levels may shift those priorities. Change is a regular occurrence and not necessarily of our own making. Emergent strategy offers ways to move through and respond to change purposefully, rather than reacting to and feeling disempowered by external forces. Emergent strategy gives us pathways through which participants can all understand the common vision and trust the group to travel toward it together. We cannot control change, and it will keep coming, but we can move past reactivity and into growth. We are all working in imperfect systems that we did not create and that we cannot control. Emergent strategy allows us to focus on ourselves and the immediate people and work around us and to be part of change, to create change, and to respond to change.

Because it is rooted in social justice, emergent strategy is also concerned with supporting diversity and inclusion. The strategy's goal is to acknowledge and accommodate different strengths; brown and emergent strategy value paths that bring people together while honoring that we are not, and should not try to be, all the same. "We have to create futures in which everyone doesn't have to be the same kind of person" (brown 2017, 57). In essence, we must recognize that we are already not the same kind of person and commit to finding a way forward while honoring and valuing that truth. The author's work is rooted in Black and anti-capitalist social movements, and emergent strategy reflects that. At the same time, it is a valuable tool for working with those not engaged in those movements. It is a path that any group of people can use, regardless of their engagement with social justice, while also helping them to see value in inclusion and equity.

Teams and Emergent Strategy

Emergent strategy can be scaled for variously sized groups; as such, it is an ideal tool for middle managers and others in different types of leadership roles in libraries. Emergent strategy can help team members shift to transformative work. When fully engaged in emergent strategy, the team will understand its own value and place within the organization.

Because each team member recognizes and responds to other team members as full human beings, and because they have engaged together in the creation of their shared vision, the group will be more able to make effective decisions. They will show care and concern for individual members and have an interdependence that allows them to share workloads and prioritize together. With these strengths at their core, they will be willing to try new things and to

iterate projects. They will have space to have difficult conversations, and when they find opportunities for growth, they will be able to move toward them.

Individuals within the team will feel valued and understand the value of their contributions to the larger vision. Setting priorities and developing trust will help them achieve a better work-life balance. That trust will also mean that individuals are more likely to speak up when they have concerns, frustrations, questions, or unmet needs. Team members will have the energy and interdependence to grow in their own jobs in ways that are satisfying to them and provide space for reflection. Improved communication means that team members will have the information they need to complete their work. A shared vision means that each individual will contribute to growth and change.

The role of the middle manager in emergent strategy is as a facilitator. This is a suitable role, as it respects the expertise of each team member who brings their own skills and specializations. We can be more effective as facilitators than as guides or teachers. Our role is to bring the team together as a group, work to co-create a shared vision, and help everyone move toward it. By focusing on a bigger picture and a longer timeline, middle managers can facilitate the development of trust within the team, set members up to engage in deep collaborations, and consider how to help individuals and the team grow in valuable and impactful directions.

Assessment is also an important component of emergent strategy. Fortunately, this can often be successfully completed without extensive surveys or the development of new methods. Instead, emergent strategy progress can be assessed through regular group and individual meetings and by behaviors such as reflection and connection to the group vision.

While this paints a picture of what a transformed team can look like, emergent strategy is focused on paths rather than goals. Success is in the process itself. Any library team will continue to meet obstacles that cannot be immediately overcome and encounter problems larger than the group is equipped or empowered to solve. We will always be only a small part of a larger organization and have limited immediate control. But by staying focused on the path of emergent strategy, we can create functional, sustainable, and equitable teams that meet those challenges in ways that respect the shared vision and team members' needs. According to Brown, there are six elements that develop the pathway of emergent strategy.

Fractal

Fractal is the first of the emergent strategy's six elements. Fractal, taken from biomimicry, is about the relationship between small and large, micro and macro. In biology, fractals are

common. They are complex patterns and shapes that are repeated at multiple scales, such as in the patterns on a leaf, where each small component reflects the pattern that also makes up the larger thing itself. In using this, brown turns our attention to the ways in which the smallest changes can create an impact on a large scale. Following this strategy means starting at the smallest scale instead of placing our energy solely on larger obstacles that we cannot control. For brown, “it means bringing my values into my daily decision making” (brown 2017, 54). Emergent strategy concerns itself with how we move forward, rather than the exact goal we are moving toward. We can begin to effect large-scale change by focusing specifically on daily routines and day-to-day work. According to brown, “what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale” (brown 2017, 52).

To start at the smallest scale is to focus on the self. None of us can be good at our work or in working with others if we haven’t begun there. The pace of work itself is the singular place to focus on change. While slowing down is the hardest step, it is the only way to move through the rest. It isn’t possible to be focused on a vision of the future, or even to create that vision, without slowing down first. Although easier said than done, I have found that one straightforward place to focus is on small moments. By investing a few minutes throughout the day on inflection points, we can be more considerate and purposeful in the rest of our work. Those inflection points have multiple purposes—they can be used to reflect on your vision and how it connects to your work of the day, to reprioritize work, or just to rest. But by starting with those few minutes, a new approach can be built.

These same inflection points can be used with team members as well. Just as fractal is about the impact of our daily work, it is also about the impact that we have, as team leaders, on the other individuals in the team. When we make their work/life balance more sustainable and when we take the time to build trust, we impact their work, and therefore the broader team. Begin meetings by asking people how they are and listening to the answer. Consider how their responses may inform the way you move through your meeting together. When meeting with individuals, add agenda items that allow you both to reflect on their work and how it connects to the team’s vision. Help team members set boundaries and prioritize their work. Use your broader knowledge of the institution to direct them in ways that are productive because they are connected to that broader vision. Use your institutional power in your interactions outside the team to hold those spaces and boundaries on behalf of individual team members so they can move forward sustainably. Each of these examples is small or fractal but will impact the overall work of the team and your movement toward your vision and goals.

An important consideration when working with a group is to set ground rules. Even if the group has been meeting regularly, it will make more progress by taking the time for a meta-discussion about how the group is working together. Ask what prevents people from giving their full attention to a meeting. Ask if the current methods of communication among the team are accessible to everyone. Once the team has settled on ground rules, come back to them on occasion. Talk about how decisions are made and be transparent about when and how you might choose to make decisions in a particular way. In each of these steps, give individuals time before a final decision is agreed upon. It is always beneficial to come to an agreement, then set the item aside, and return to it at a later date, as this gives individuals time to reflect and ask questions before moving forward. It creates additional inflection points for team members to consider new ideas or new questions and connect the decision to the group's vision before the decision is made.

One way that I have attempted to normalize slowing down with my own team is by being transparent about when and why I take time off. I communicate this openly to team members, whether it's because I am not feeling well, because I am taking vacation time to travel, or because I really need to sit on the couch for a day. You can suggest that others are welcome to share in the same manner; however, this is not a transparency that should be enforced. Simply let the work of the fractal element of emergent strategy blossom. In my own team, this small change has grown so that now all team members participate, including individuals who used to prefer to tell me privately. Not everyone gives exact reasons, but it is a regular occurrence for someone to post to our team chat when they aren't feeling well or are taking time off to visit sick parents. These posts are met with empathy and continue to reinforce the trust that we have built within the team.

One of brown's emergent strategy principles is "*what you pay attention to grows.*" For a long time, I was convinced that thinking was not working, that there was no productivity there. But consider an inversion in which you have output without thinking—this is where we may feel trapped when work is busy. Thus, the inverse, thinking without output, is actually productive. Moments of reflection create inflection points and make it possible to move in a more meaningful direction. This is what to take with you from this element. It is both the why and the how of the fractal element. Every day, before every meeting, take five minutes, or two, or ten just to think. Look at your vision and consider its connection to the activity you are about to engage in—not to have something to say or to add to an agenda but to understand and value the connection. Enter the meeting or the activity and hold that connection to your vision. Let it

be part of how you approach the work. Let it feed your ideas and your relationships with others. Before each new activity, do it again. Look at your vision and give it your attention.

There are many ways to assess how well you and your team are succeeding at the fractal element. These assessments can be done on a very small scale and still tell you something about where you are on larger scales. For example, you can track whether team members use their sick and vacation time. You can look over your own calendar and see the times that you've scheduled to create inflection points. Agendas and minutes will note whether you have set ground rules as a group and whether you consider your group's vision when making decisions. For larger-scale assessments, annual reviews can show where the team's work is most successfully moving toward the shared vision.

Intentional Adaptation

Intentional adaptation, the second element of emergent strategy, is where these smaller day-to-day elements begin to build to something larger. According to brown, intentional adaptation is "how we live and grow and stay purposeful in the face of constant change" (brown 2017, 69). In other words, it is not only about how we change but also about how we must because the world constantly changes. This element recognizes this truth and asks how we can make that change intentional and continue to grow within ever-evolving circumstances. Intentional change is how a team moves toward bigger goals, setting their shared vision and moving toward it at a sustainable pace.

In libraries we are often stuck in reactive change, where we manage each change only as it arrives. Intentional adaptation asks us to focus on building a clear, shared vision that will enable all team members to respond strategically to change. For brown, this is an intentional focus on vision, rather than strategic planning. By focusing on vision, this element has the added flexibility of working for teams without the capacity for in depth strategic planning. However, even for those libraries and teams that do embrace a strategic plan, libraries function within a hierarchy and with limited control. Intentional adaptation accepts those limitations and asks that we continue to recommit to the shared vision within each new framework. This doesn't mark any particular change as good or bad but accepts the reality and finds a way forward.

It is important that these visions be truly shared among team members. Rather than guiding these discussions, middle managers need to embrace their facilitator role. It can be valuable to share information you have so that decisions are made with the full group's knowledge and understanding, but to create a truly shared vision, each team member needs to contribute to the process. Realistically, this kind of vision creation may take a group only about two meeting

sessions. Share information and examples in advance of discussion, take time to brainstorm, then move toward refining a vision in which everyone finds value. When everyone values the vision and sees their own contributions and role within it, then no single person is responsible for carrying the weight or finding paths toward that vision. Whether or not you choose to create a full strategic plan with the team, settling on a shared vision will help guide everyone's work. This allows the team to move either independently or together, focused on things within their control.

Within my own department, our shared vision was created after a more extended period. We engaged in selecting, sharing, and discussing relevant readings, with team members selecting their own readings that they wanted to share with the group. While this extended the amount of time put into the vision creation process, it created opportunities for each team member to highlight issues of interest and value to them. At the same time, it built shared understanding within the group. Vision creation itself took less than two hours, with some members volunteering to find examples for us to review. Importantly, these discussions should keep in mind the needs of individual members to be full contributors to the dialogue, incorporating flexibility and multiple paths to contribute to the shared vision.

Once the vision is created, the team must actively engage with it regularly, both individually and as a group. There are many ways to do this—it can be added to the beginning of an agenda, for example, or directly to agenda topics so that your shared vision is explicitly incorporated into relevant discussions. This could be when planning a new event or deciding whether to take on a new task, as centering the shared vision will help set priorities. During meetings, ask people to speak about how the vision is reflected in their current work. Discuss which parts of their work feel like they will never come to fruition and which parts don't feel attached to the vision.

Finally, reactivity to change can be difficult to overcome, which makes having that vision front and center so critical. Even then, don't be surprised if you continue to struggle with adapting to change. Recently, as a co-editor, I had a request from someone to extend their deadline far beyond the timeline that had been agreed upon. I had a reactive response that we wouldn't be able to adapt to their needs. Upon reflection, however, my co-editor and I returned to our vision for the process of this writing project—to create an intentional space to support authors and accommodate various needs. It became clear that we would need to change not our vision but the pathway to reach that goal together.

Once the shared vision is created, it can be incorporated into other types of assessment. For example, if the team conducts workshops or instruction, add a question about the team's

vision statement to see if and how that vision is coming through in your work. Within the team, check in with team members individually to see that everyone uses the vision and makes connections to their own contributions. As the team grows together, ask team members how other members' work contributes to the shared vision.

Interdependence and Decentralization

A shared vision is the place from which the third emergent strategy element, interdependence and decentralization, emerges as “mutual reliance and shared leadership, vision” (brown 2017, 87). Interdependence is built on trust, which has the space to grow when the team has agreed on the direction that they are heading together. This means that to keep moving forward productively, everyone must “*move at the speed of trust,*” as one of brown’s principles reminds us. A team will not magically or immediately transform. They are not going too slow or too fast. They are taking the time that is necessary to reach their transformation. Inevitably, it will go slower than you like. Perhaps you will feel frustrated, give up, or fall back on old patterns. Keep returning to that shared vision and move in that direction.

Interdependence creates benefits for the team by spreading capacity across many individuals rather than a single person. As trust is built, it becomes easier to balance capacity across the team and to shift work that the entire team has agreed is a priority because of its relationship to the vision. It also “decentralize[s] our idea of where solutions and decisions happen, where ideas come from,” which means that teams become more agile and more able to adapt to change (brown 2017, 87). The facilitator also needs to learn each individual’s strengths and skills, as well as their individual goals, to continue building trust.

Trust requires transparency. As such, “interdependence requires being seen, as much as possible, as your true self. Meaning that your capacity and need are transparent” (brown 2017, 93). Both within the team and outside it, we must show our work, both our strengths and our weaknesses. Let team members understand when someone is at capacity and build ways for people to step in to help each other and to prioritize across the group according to your shared vision, rather than setting those priorities individually. As the team leader, and someone likely with more knowledge about the broader organization, share all that you can about what you know. Transparency here not only builds trust but also makes it possible for the team to adapt to incoming changes and bring all their skills to the work.

Interdependence does not require knowing the intimate details of a team member’s life. Interdependence and trust can exist around and about the work—the vision and the goals that you are moving toward together. Don’t be surprised if further trust develops from this, but it isn’t

necessary and should never be forced. Engaging in team-building exercises can be valuable if they are around your vision, rather than divulging personal information. Personally invasive “get to know you” questions are not necessary for this interdependence. At the same time, fostering collegiality and changing the environment can be valuable tools to help people reset and approach discussions from a new perspective. For example, a group reading related to a team goal or a team meeting outside your regular place of work can help people engage in new ways.

There are many paths forward to build interdependence in a team. To start, have team members explain their work to each other and its connection to the vision. If there is capacity, this can be expanded to full internal trainings on aspects of the work. Trainings can be prioritized—if a team member were to leave or become unavailable, what are the gaps that would need to be filled immediately? Shared documentation can also help fill these gaps. If there is no capacity for significant internal training, work toward the ability of team members to explain the value of other members’ work. Everyone will become a better advocate for the team by gaining an understanding of how each member is working toward the shared vision.

Recently, one of our department members was away on an extended leave. While we often manage leaves by temporarily discontinuing services, in this case, we determined that managing a particular fund for authors was worth prioritizing while the individual was out of the office. Prior to the leave period, they trained three additional team members to take on rotations of managing the fund. This, of course, had the benefit of making the service available; it also served as an instructional opportunity for other department members. They gained an in-depth understanding of the value of their coworker’s contribution, the task’s connection to our shared vision, and became better advocates for that component of our work.

Regular meetings can move the group forward as well. Incorporate check-ins for team members to discuss their current capacity, where they are having success, and where they are struggling. Destigmatize the idea that having a slow week means someone is not working to capacity, but also move toward balancing that load across the group when possible. For those who are overburdened, these discussions should not be a complaint session but a way to put items into the center of the group for consideration. Let the group consider priorities, vision, and ways they can share the burden. Whatever shifts in work occur, remember to celebrate both those who agree to step in and those who need to step away from the work being discussed. Both are engaging in a productive interdependence that makes the work more sustainable and moves all of you on a path toward your vision.

At times, it may be valuable to remove yourself from meetings to further grow decentralization among team members. Recently, I was expecting to be away for an extended

period and realized that this would be an opportunity for team members to work on their own facilitation skills and take on leadership responsibilities. I gave them an overview of expectations for facilitators and asked interested volunteers to take on this role. Then, I checked in periodically to be sure that no one was overloaded with responsibility and that issues were still being brought up for discussion and prioritization.

Encouraging decentralization of power within the team necessitates the team lead moving into a facilitator role rather than acting as an all-knowing leader. While your unique knowledge is valuable, it is no more valuable than that of other team members. As the team works toward the emergent strategy element, it is critical to make space for the team to engage with each other, rather than look to you specifically for answers.

There are two primary ways for the team to gain insight into how successfully they are moving along the path of interdependence and decentralization. The first is to imagine the team's work with one individual no longer involved. This should be done for each member of the team, including the team lead. This will give a sense of where the gaps are and where there is still work to be done. The second way to gain insight is by focusing specifically on the decisions of the team. Consider and evaluate how the team manages decision-making without the team lead. This will highlight gaps as well, and it will point to areas where there may be need for more documentation, more information sharing among group members, or more work to discuss vision and priorities. If anyone expresses that they are unable to take time off, or if anyone needs to be contacted while they are supposed to be away from work, that is a clear, resounding gap in the path toward interdependence.

Nonlinear and Iterative

The next element of emergent strategy, nonlinear and iterative, considers the multitude of ways to tread the path of transformation. It is about the pathway not being linear or direct because change happens at various rates and comes from different sources. Acknowledging the lack of linearity includes understanding that every part of the process is about learning and experimenting rather than failure or success. According to brown, "if we release the framework of failure, we can realize that we are in iterative cycles, and we can keep asking ourselves—how do I learn from this?" (brown 2017, 105).

With so many new projects, one-time events, and singular instruction sessions in libraries, the easiest place to begin with iteration is with the kinds of projects that are not regular occurrences. This will give the team time to see the benefits of iteration and to adjust to thinking about their work in new ways. Time for assessment needs to be built into each project, including

debriefs upon completion. At times, debriefs fall into venting sessions. If groups need a venting session, that should be accommodated—allow for people to express their frustrations, then move to the next stage of debriefing. People need to be ready to move forward and figure out how to turn those frustrations into productive changes.

I first fully embraced iteration when working with someone in my department who was already skilled at implementing it. When they began a new large library program, the very first proposal set the expectation that this would be the first iteration. The timeline included the collection of feedback from participants and other stakeholders. By the end of the first year, the vision for the program was unchanged and continued to reflect our larger departmental vision. The program itself, on the other hand, looked very different from the original proposal because they had continued to respond to and incorporate changes all along the way. At the end of its first year, the program became a better reflection of our departmental vision because it continued to adapt. While changes were fewer over each passing year, we used a pause in the program each summer to completely review it, looking for ways to make the project more closely meet the vision and considering potential changes that could have an impact. The program was not only incredibly successful, but the team was able to prioritize and sustain it even after its creator left the organization because they had incorporated so much of emergent strategy along the way.

By focusing iteration on one-time or new work first, steps can be planned at the start of a project to set expectations and to align with the shared vision. Often, though, the most valuable aspect of iteration, but the hardest to achieve, is incorporating it into ongoing work. One goal that can help is to regularly pause and reflect to readjust ongoing work. This is more likely to occur when external changes happen, but it is just as worthwhile when the work is stable. If the team is already comfortable with the fractal element, that can help with incorporating moments to pause and adjust. This may happen during a natural lull in the work, such as the aforementioned program that paused during the summer. There is much to be gained from reflecting on ongoing work when the result can be impactful for both the work itself and those doing it. The more that reflection, feedback, and change are expected, the more they will be accepted.

As a team leader, the nonlinear and iterative element requires learning to both give and receive feedback. “In a non-linear process, everything is part of the learning, every step. That includes constructive criticism, it is part of the feedback loop—experiment, gather feedback, experiment again. This is how we learn” (brown 2017, 106). Feedback may be uncomfortable, but it is necessary to successfully move toward that shared vision. I have found that the best

way to improve this skill is through practice. This can be done through roleplay with a trusted colleague about a real or invented issue. In this roleplay, ask specifically for feedback about your approach to see if it aligns with your values, is respectful, and focuses on lessons and change. brown explains critique as “spend[ing] less time on the imperfection of the process, and more time articulating and crystallizing our lessons” (brown 2017, 113).

Much like critiquing a new project in a debrief session, the goal of giving feedback should always be to help team members grow. It’s important that the feedback be expected and that everyone present agrees that they are ready to engage in a feedback conversation. Rather than focus on a critique of a person or their strengths and weaknesses, consider this an opportunity to discover more about what they need to be successful. If you come from a perspective of correction, you’ll miss all of that. Giving feedback should come “from a space of relationship, partnership, and advancing a solution” (brown 2017, 120).

Team leaders need to grow their own skills at receiving critique as well, which should also be roleplayed. It is valuable to ask for feedback on your work from those who can be honest with you. If you are unsure about your facilitation skills, for example, invite someone to observe a regular meeting and offer ideas for improvement. While asking for feedback regularly is critical, stay aware of power imbalances and workplace hierarchies—your own team may not be able to offer those critiques, no matter how often you ask. Look to others outside the group who know your work and continue to roleplay your own responses to receiving feedback.

Much of iteration is in the repetition itself. Two years ago, when a team member progressed from student employee to staff member to librarian, they were often focused on detail work. When I realized that they struggled to consider big-picture issues in their new role, the result was a first conversation that was likely anxiety-inducing for both of us. Instead of letting that fear lead us to avoid the issue, we continued to speak on the topic at least once a month. Within just a couple of months, it was mundane. Even better, two years on, while this librarian still has deep strengths in detail work, the repetition and ongoing attention have resulted in phenomenal growth, in which they actively include big-picture thinking as part of their reflection process.

The best part about finding success on this element’s pathways is that it frees up energy and attention. Moving away from a focus on failure or success to a focus on the lessons learned keeps groups moving productively together. The team becomes more adaptive the more they practice because everyone will expect iteration and nonlinear progress as part of ongoing change. Measuring iteration by repetition is an easy way for the group to see the progress that they have made. Keep track and celebrate when you find lessons and make changes to adapt to them.

Resilience and Transformative Justice

Emergent strategy accepts that there will always be obstacles and struggles to overcome. The resilience and transformative justice element explores internal and external setbacks, focusing on how to recover and transform. brown offers examples of dysfunctional or abusive group dynamics that can affect individuals and the team. Some of these signs are ignored boundaries; a lack of direct communication; a lack of accountability; a “culture of blaming or dishonesty that breaks down trust over time” (brown 2017, 139); returning to the same arguments that you thought were resolved; or “feel[ing] dismissed, hidden, or disrespected, *and/or* like you can’t acknowledge reality, be transparent, or respectful” (brown 2017, 140). Resolution, when possible, is through transformative justice, which rests on honesty and boundaries: “Real-time transformation requires stating your needs and setting functional boundaries” (brown 2017, 149). It requires engaging in honest conversations to unearth why the obstacles have arisen, focusing on learning and iteration, and a desire from everyone to make the situation better.

In libraries there are many typical external setbacks, from budget reductions and reorganizations to changes in leadership and new strategic plans created without the team’s input. The resilience and transformative justice element is about using all of the preceding emergent tools to adapt and learn and to focus energy on resistance when necessary. Team leaders often have no control over these larger challenges, so rather than expend energy working against them, the goal is to reorient our focus to the things that the team can control. This generally looks like returning to the other emergent strategy elements and putting energy into the team’s vision. It will require discussion and planning, but the team should keep their vision front and center as they learn how to adapt to the new situation as well as where it is worth pushing against the change. As before, venting sessions may be necessary, but the facilitator should move conversations toward adapting paths forward with the vision in mind.

Team leaders will also need to facilitate internal challenges. These could be disagreements, interpersonal issues between team members, or losing members from the team. Critically, if interpersonal issues are connected in any way to individuals not fully respecting others or their needs, this needs to be managed immediately. Emergent strategy can still be a guiding force to focus the issue on learning and growth, but the team leader needs to address this, put a stop to the behavior, and ensure that all individuals on the team feel safe and respected.

For brown, we live in a culture that has normalized lying: “I am not saying you are a liar—I am saying we are a culture of liars . . . we are taught that our truths are disruptive, and that disruption is a negative act” (brown 2017, 142). While this may not affect every team, brown

asserts that US cultures prioritize traits like “getting along” or “keeping the peace” over truth and honesty. In this context, she asks emergent strategy practitioners to prioritize truth-telling. For individuals, she recommends a fractal approach to building new behaviors: tell people “no” when necessary and be honest in the smallest of circumstances, such as when someone asks how you are.

As a team, prioritizing the truth allows for progress toward trust and transparency. In the early stages, it may be helpful to offer alternative ways for team members to share honestly with you any issues that they are having. Allow for multiple methods of communication and even for anonymous submission if trust has not been built yet. If this route is taken, as the lead, you must commit to addressing anonymous feedback to progress. Deal with the issue seriously and address it honestly if it is outside your control. In the meantime, continue to grow facilitation skills to help the team address issues productively together. As a team leader, roleplay interactions that make you respond defensively or by hiding the truth. As brown reminds emergent strategy practitioners, “you can be honest and compassionate” (brown 2017, 143).

Part of honesty within the team includes honesty about your own power (or lack thereof) within the broader structure. Let the team know when you’ll have to expend political capital to push back on something. Expend that capital when you can, but include the team in the decision-making process. You and the team will encounter obstacles that cannot be overcome, but as trust within the group is built and everyone learns to adapt more readily to incoming changes, everyone can find pathways to progress.

Measuring resilience within the team will be apparent in how the group responds to obstacles, though early on, it can be useful to engage in a small survey to gain clarity in how well individuals feel respected in the group, whether their needs are being met, and what issues they see. As the team lead, continue building facilitation skills. Periodically reflect on how you manage conflict and how honest you are in both easy and difficult conversations. The element of resilience and transformative justice is not so much a goal to be reached but, like all emergent strategies, a path to stick to.

Create More Possibilities

In the final strategy element, brown asks us to create more possibilities through collaborative ideation. Collaborative ideation is about creating something new with others. “At the human scale, in order to create a world that works for more people, for more life, we have to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world. We have to recognize that a multitude of realities have, do, and will exist” (brown 2017, 158). The more people actively

engaged, the more this new reality can be fully realized. Individuals bring different life experiences, different knowledge, and different strengths and capacities; by working together, our new ideas can more fully reflect the desires and needs of more people. In addition, by bringing people into the creative process at the start, they are more likely to invest, as it is the product of their creation. This is the place where the creation of inflection points, the focus on vision, and the building of trust “are creating a world we have never seen” (brown 2017, 163).

While imagining the creation of a new world can feel overwhelming, this should be viewed in context with all of the emergent strategies. Ideation, as brown points out, “is just the verb for coming up with ideas” (brown 2017, 264). When a team has built trust and understands how to work together, focused on fractal aspects of an idea within their control, this process is all about bringing everyone’s ideas together and using them to move forward. This can happen in both large and small ways. During regular department meetings, for example, encourage other team members to add agenda items for discussion and problem-solving. Rather than jumping to offer your own opinion, create space for other team members to generate ideas with each other. If a particular problem feels unsolvable, break it down into smaller problems and start again. If an offered solution feels impossible, rather than immediately shutting it down, give yourself time to think it through first and consider if there’s something you’ve overlooked—a way in which it may be possible. In other words, try not to say “no” until you’ve fully considered it and thought through various angles. Maybe that idea truly is impossible, but something related or fractally smaller is not.

Beyond regular meetings to discuss daily issues, have planning meetings. These may also incorporate the iterative strategy by creating space for reflection on past work. The planning can and should be structured, but still purposely create space to generate ideas. During the first planning meeting with my team, we used our new mission and vision statements to generate three themes that I organized our planning day around. During the block of time for each theme, everyone was given post-it notes and asked to write their ideas related to that theme, which we then organized, discussed as a group, and finally voted on. This helped us reach an agreement about what ideas to focus on and plan around. While the day was largely a success, we were all still early in our journey with emergent strategy. One idea in particular gained a lot of interest, even though none of us in the room had more than minimal control over it. Department members were concerned with low student pay in the libraries. I was tempted to toss the post-it to the side and claim that it was out of scope. But I let discussion of the issue happen. Rather than say “no,” I was direct about it being outside of our control and asked what the department wanted to do. As discussion continued, I let go of some of that defensiveness and instead

steered us slightly to the side—I could and would continue to advocate for student wage increases, but knowing that this was a long, slow process that may not even work, we began to think about what to do in the meantime. We talked about how to make the work worthwhile for our current students, even without a raise. While none of our solutions solved the problem outside our control, what we were able to give students was new, meaningful work, invitations to coauthor papers and presentations, and invitations to broader discussions to deepen their knowledge and assist in their job searches. If I had said “no” at the outset, certainly the students still would not have received wage increases, but we also wouldn’t have examined all the ways within our control that we could help them move on to library jobs.

Conclusion

I recently reread the documents from the first strategic planning session I led three years ago, having just read *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* for the first time. Since then, I have learned many lessons about reducing my own defensiveness, letting others lead, adapting to change, and adapting myself to bring out others’ strengths. It is also clear from the documents that I had never led departmental strategic plan creation before, and I have continued to iterate on that process every year. On the other hand, there are still items in that first draft that have meaning for us today and that continue to drive our work forward. The first thing that I took to heart from brown shines through in the documents: that with a shared vision everyone will be more invested, and that letting everyone dream up their ideal library workspace and how it will impact users creates new ideas and projects for years to come.

Emergent strategy, as developed by brown, is broad enough to have numerous applications wherever people come together to work toward a common goal. By applying this strategy to libraries, library departments and teams will have valuable tools to find and work toward that shared vision. With daily practice and time to reflect on the bigger picture, brown offers pathways that respect all members of the group but also recognizes that there will always be challenges to overcome. The six elements of emergent strategy are broad enough to account for many types of groups and purposes, while still offering structured pathways for library groups to travel to meet their specific goals and vision.

Reference

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Published: November 2025