

Force field analysis and its traditional application

This tool was originally developed by Kurt Lewin in 1935, as a pictorial method for describing the forces that operate when strategic changes are implemented in an organization. Lewin described the way ‘enablers’ and ‘constraints’ act as positive or negative forces, pushing a change strategy forward or pulling it back towards the status quo. Lewin didn’t see this as a type of cost-benefit analysis, with ‘pros and cons’. Rather, he saw the force field analysis as describing the difficulty of the journey that a strategy might face in the course of its implementation.

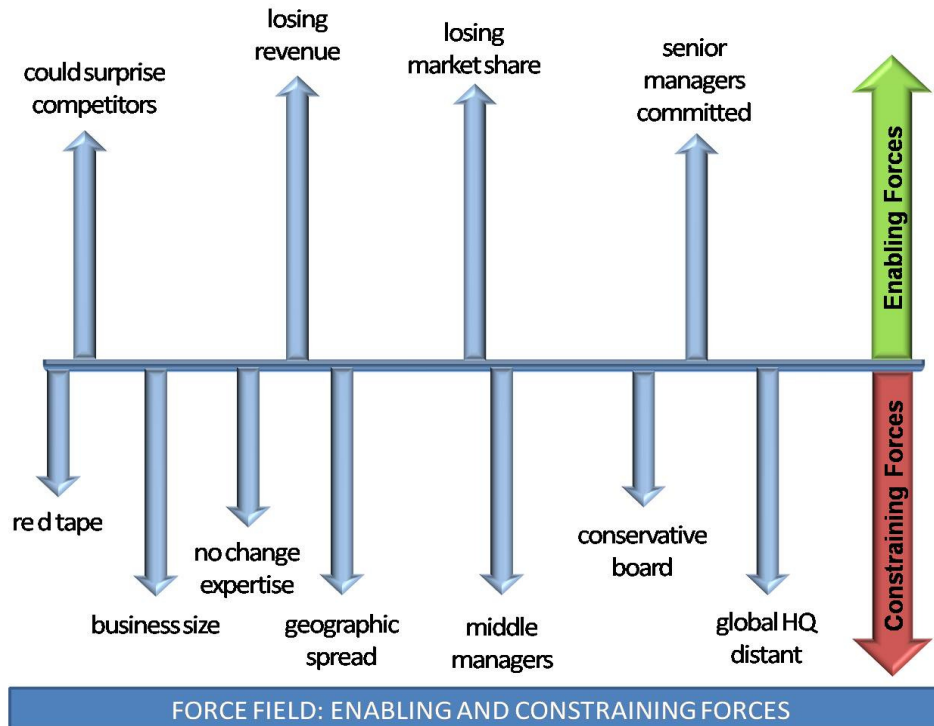
In that context, its real advantage as a tool is in helping us to think hard about the difficulty of a strategic action, as opposed to its attractiveness. It also alerts us to something that may, in fact, be ill-advised or even impossible! On the other hand, it can suffer from being focused too much on the short or medium term – and it can be incomplete. It needs further challenge and validation by certain other tools that fit well with it.

Force field analyses are provided for three scenarios:

1. A division of a large global company needing to generate renewal in the light of client perceptions of stagnation and increasing difficulty associated with retaining key talent.
2. Multi-brand retailer reflecting on drivers and inhibitors of growth.
3. A professional services firm contemplating its strategic strengths and weaknesses.

Enabling and constraining forces affecting renewal

Diagram 1 below captures the views of a senior management team in a particular business unit of a large global company. This team was charged with delivering significant change in a line of business that had been extremely successful in the past but had now begun to lose its way. They were no longer innovative, market leaders in their sector. Competitors had caught up and some were now overtaking them. Market share was at risk. Recently, several key contracts had not been renewed – clients felt nothing fresh was on offer. It was harder to hold on to key talent, and even harder to attract bright new people. This was a business in urgent need of renewal.



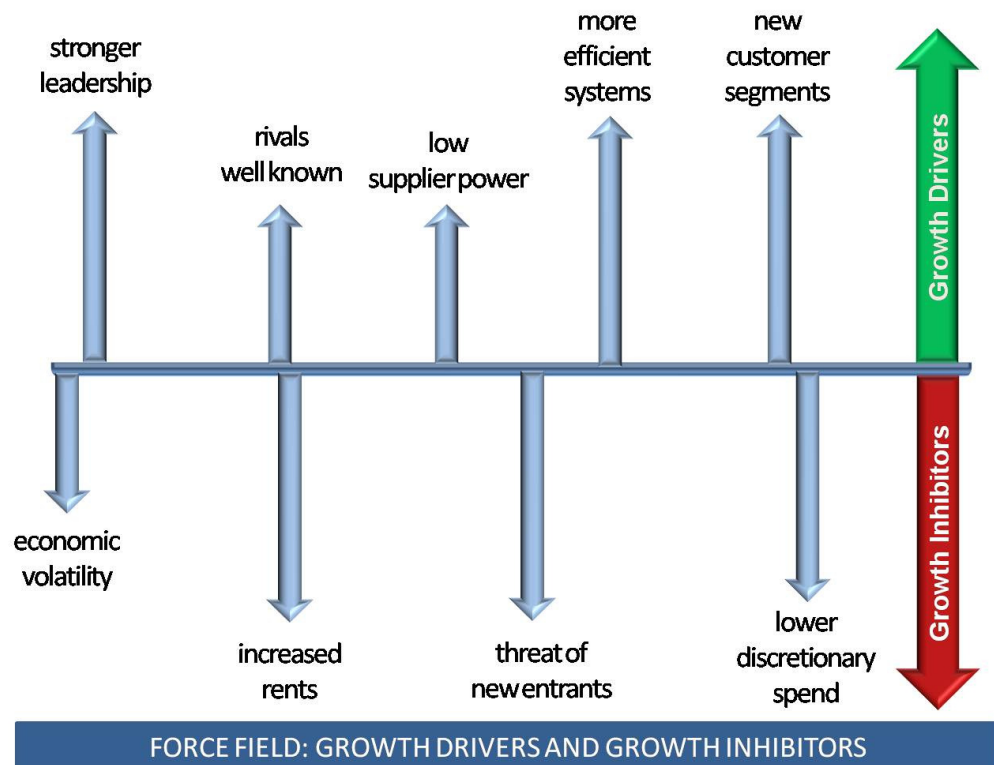
You can see from the force field analysis drawn up by senior managers that they foresaw significant challenges ahead. The key point is that a force field analysis of this type should not simply be used to hold a mirror up to reality (reflect) but to probe more deeply to determine what can be done (reshape). Indeed, that is just what these managers moved on to do, by examining the power base of each stakeholder group and identifying leverage points for the change that was so urgently needed. This helped them to set out on a problem solving sequence that was eventually very fruitful. With a better power base in position, they were finally able to move forward.

The attraction and usefulness of the Force Field analysis lies in the way it helps us differentiate between two different and opposing aspects (positive and negative) of the same variable. So this opens up multiple possibilities for applying the tool to support analysis of various categories of strategic problems. Here are a few you may enjoy looking at and taking back to your own team.

Exploring the factors driving growth – retail client, multi-brands

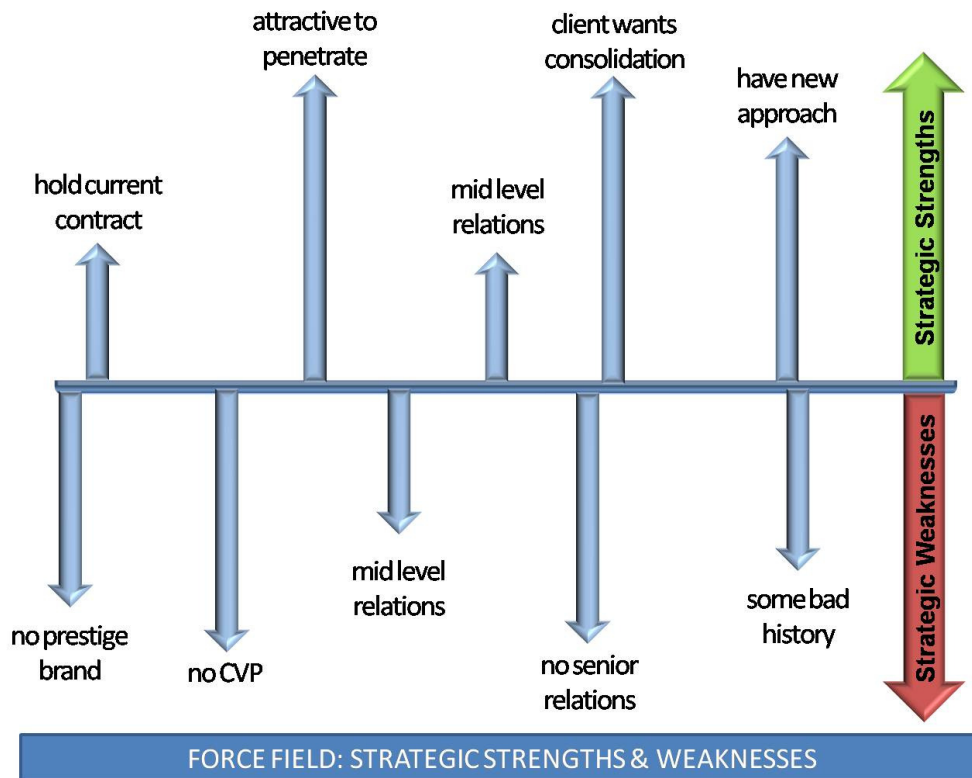
Diagram 2 shows the force field analysis completed by the senior team of a large, multi-brand retail chain, debating the situation they faced and the growth drivers that might be an asset at that time. While economic volatility and, therefore, lower discretionary spending patterns might inhibit growth, they also saw evidence that these same factors might bring them some new customer segments. Rents, both for shops and for warehouse space, had significantly increased and were likely to go higher. However, their own investments in strengthening the leadership bench and in more robust and versatile systems, meant their position in relation to their competitors looked good.

Standing back and looking closely at this force field drew attention to the threat of new entrants into a market ripe for change and opportunity. This insight led to the scenario planning which turned out to be critical in preparing them for what happened next, when those new entrants did, in fact, emerge.



Designing a new approach to account management – professional services firm

Account management is often seen as simply a tactical response to the weekly or monthly issues that tend to arise in the course of a prolonged contractual relationship, bounded by a service level agreement. But it can also be a mechanism for implementing a strategic shift, repositioning the business one account at a time. This client delivered a service to various large organizations and the force field analysis below outlines how the management team viewed their largest account, one due for renewal in some months' time.



The company wanted not just to secure the renewal of this contract but to find ways of moving ‘up the food chain’ towards the higher margin work that they knew was there. Their force field highlights both their strengths and their Achilles heel. While they have the advantages of being in the space already, two factors were stark: they didn’t have a clear value proposition for this client and they didn’t have relationships at the right level of seniority. It quickly became clear that they needed to put time and effort into repositioning their brand as one with a premium or prestige appeal. They also needed to draw in their own Board Chair to give the relationship much more visibility and clout. It was this force field itself that became part the visual message they took to the Board, arguing for a strategy shift towards higher margin work. As well, this force field confronted the team with the urgent need to redesign their human capital strategy, as it was now misaligned with the direction they wanted to take.

Summing up the force field

Force field analysis, as you can see, is a flexible tool that can support collaborative thinking. It enables teams and their leaders to explore various possible scenarios and map how different variables might interact. Other applications include:

1. identifying sources of competitive advantage
2. competitor profiling
3. stakeholder agenda mapping

It's a simple and straightforward tool with an immediate visual message. This means it is just as much at home on the shop floor as in the boardroom. It is one of the particular suite of tools we have seen cascaded down through an organization and across geographic boundaries. It's clarity and drama mean it travels well and we have successfully introduced it in strategic planning and change leadership situations in cities as different from each other as Sydney and Honiara, London and Jakarta.