

Decoding the strategy of a university management research center: An insider action research proposal

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Abstract

The purpose of my research proposal is to determine initial but crucial steps in formulating and executing a strategic plan fit for an academic management research center. As a researcher directly reporting to and collaborating with the center's Director, Coghlan and Brannick (2010) recommend adopting an insider action research methodology. The latter methodology aims to facilitate change while rigorously documenting learning and generating insights in every phase of the action research cycle, namely (1) Context and purpose, also considered as the pre-step; (2) Constructing, (3) Planning action, (4) Taking action, and (5) Evaluating action. For this particular research proposal, I aim to initiate my first action research cycle covering context and purpose to planning action.

This study is significant in numerous ways. Personally, I am invested in making sure that the center properly formulates and executes an apt strategic plan together with my Director. In terms of practice, the insights that can be derived from my learnings can help inform strategic decision-making of other similar organizations in colleges, universities, and even in industry or civil society. In terms of scholarship, I intend to refine, if not develop, a strategic planning tool, framework or process that can be tested by other researchers.

Given the relative scarcity of using insider action research methodology (Coghlan and Brannick, 2010) in informing strategic planning particular to academic institutions, my research project proves to be novel and significant.

Key Words

Strategic planning, strategic management, research center, insider action research

Purpose and Rationale

Issue in the Workplace

The DLSU Center for Business Research and Development is one with De La Salle University (DLSU) in strengthening its research culture, particularly in the area of business and management. Guided by the mission of “bridging faith and scholarship, influencing policy and practice” (<http://cbrd.dlsu.edu.ph>), the Center recognizes the important role of building DLSU’s credibility as a research university advocating the collaborative studies aligned with the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME).

CBRD’s current director, Dr. Raymund Habaradas, has been leading the organization for three years already. The activities the Center has pursued include: (1) Publications, (2) Lectures, Workshops, and Roundtables, (3) National Conferences, (4) Digital and Physical Channels (website, social media, office), and (5) Externally-funded research projects in collaboration with various faculty from the Ramon V. del Rosario College of Business (RVRCOB). The previous three years illustrate how the Center adopted an entrepreneurial or opportunity-seeking perspective – hiring research assistants and apprentices to help plan and manage the different activities of the organization. Although there was a general direction CBRD intended to take, as evidenced by the organization’s weekly meetings and annual reports, the way the center accomplished its objectives resemble Mintzberg and Water’s version of emergent or entrepreneurial strategy (1985). The latter talks about how new developments influence the leader’s strategic intent and formulation, leading to a realized strategy not exactly resembling the original planned strategy.

A more entrepreneurial strategy fitted the circumstance of CBRD during the previous three-years. Technically a ‘new’ organization established after structural shifts in DLSU, wherein the former College of Business and Economics was split into the RVRCOB and the School of Economics, CBRD’s early years resembled that of a startup. However, having existed for quite some time already, the Director and the rest of the staff have come to an understanding that there may be a need to shift towards a more deliberate strategy. Since the length of term of a Director is not fixed while Research Assistants under research centers have irregular length of stay due to its contractual nature, it is desirable to have a deliberate yet flexible strategic plan. This is to ensure that the gains of the current term are sustained, while helping new leadership to avoid needless groping in the dark.

Looking forward to the next Academic Year, I will frame this action research paper’s issue in the form of a research question: **what should be the three-to-five-year strategic plan of CBRD?** Apart from this research question, the following questions help guide the operationalization of this research project:

1. How should CBRD undertake its strategic planning process? What are the important considerations?
2. What strategic planning framework can this action research initiative develop that other research centers or similar organizations can adopt?

As such, the research questions provide an idea about the objectives or intended outcomes of the project:

1. Produce a comprehensive strategic plan for the Center good for three to five years;
2. Propose strategic planning framework/s applicable to CBRD and similar organizations; and
3. Document learning and developments following the rigor of an insider action research methodology (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010)

In exploring how to resolve this issue, the literature review and proposed methods of interventions shall build on the strategic planning process and other relevant frameworks applicable to this insider action research project.

Significance of the Action Research

In adopting the lens of Bjorkman and Sundgren's four features of framing and selecting a project initiative (as cited in Coghlan & Brannick, 2010), I affirm this research project's significance. Developing a strategic plan is truly a red and hot issue as emphasized by the Director. Furthermore, my position as a Research Assistant reporting to the Director is a desirable circumstance. As an insider, in attempting to lay out a relational platform, I will capitalize on my strength as an innate learner in working with my colleagues.

Researcher's values

I selected this action research project based on the following reasons, as promoted by Coghlan and Brannick (2010). First, this project offers an opportunity by which I can use scholarly journals and professional networks in acquiring new forms of knowledge, particularly in the context of the education sector. Second, there are opportunities for learning and personal development since this is a requirement in my Master of Business Administration degree and equips me with important wisdom in my current involvement with the university. Third, should I be able to resolve this issue while working directly with my Director and colleagues, my reputation will definitely benefit. Fourth, personal and organizational gain will truly be in a state of balance should my proposals resolve the issue revolving on strengthening the research culture. Finally, given my knowledge as an insider in the organization, I have the ability to propose solutions within financial, labor, and time constraints.

Contribution to theory and practice

Given the interest of various scholars around the world in this subject (Athiyaman, 2011; Billups, 2015; Conway et al., 1994; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Hummel et al., 1998; Mulhare, 1999; Rich & Bartholomew, 2010; Taylor & Machado, 2006), this action research project has the potential to significantly contribute to theory and practice. After the implementation of the research project, empirical data can be synthesized with literature to refine, if not entirely build theories. In terms of practice, the promise of replicating possible policy and project implementations in other universities, research centers, and other similar organizations is a desirable outcome.

Context

Social and organizational situation

Organizational structure

Primarily, the structure of CBRD is set up in such a way that the Director reports to the Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation. Under a research center’s Director, an Office Assistant directly reports to him. Office Assistants help administer the day-to-day operations of the Center. From time to time as resources allow, a research center may contract the services of different Research Assistants. Figure 1 shows a hierarchical chart depicting the organizational structure of CBRD.

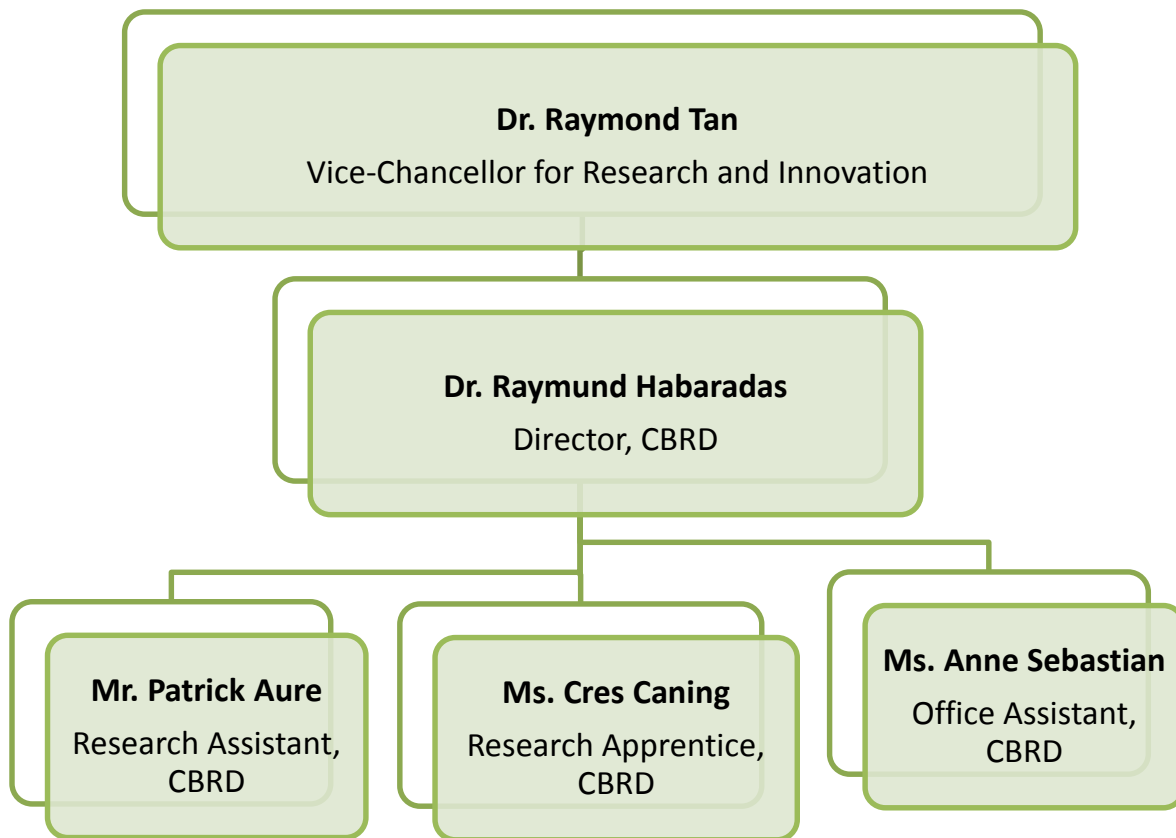


Figure 1. Organizational structure of CBRD as of AY 2015-2016

Researcher’s relative position in the situation

As shown in the organizational structure, my relative position in the situation is someone who reports directly to the Director. Part of my tasks is to propose and execute projects as well. My position is strategic in a sense since I am not burdened with heavy administrative tasks as compared to the Director and Vice-Chancellor. Thus, if ever my Director and the Vice-Chancellor approves certain projects and proposals, I can be at the front lines in executing and implementing them.

CBRD's value creation story

In describing the value creation story of CBRD, I deem it important to discuss first the key stakeholders we mostly work with to achieve our the CBRD mission of “bridging faith and scholarship, influencing policy and practice”. These key stakeholders or customers under the Customer Perspective are essential in designing my balanced scorecard model.

Key stakeholders and value propositions

1. Faculty and graduate students – collaborate with DLSU and even outsider faculty with the value proposition of ***increase their research productivity through publication opportunities in the form of projects***. Our collaboration with faculty members can happen in an individual level (faculty members as individuals agree to commit certain projects for CBRD) or in departmental level (academic departments will share their resources with CBRD to organize public lectures). Moreover, ***faculty and students should find that a percentage of research outputs are applicable to classes in the form of reading materials or teaching cases***.
2. Industry practitioners – in line with the objectives of the university to make research relevant and impactful in terms of practice, CBRD welcomes research projects sponsored by industry associations. Our key value proposition is to ***offer research expertise and learning that is relevant for practice***.

Interaction of units within the organization

I have chosen to focus on one of my organization's key value proposition: providing opportunities for research publications/outputs for faculty and graduate students. Ideally, these outputs are either usable in classes and/or applicable to industry practice. The key players in my model are as follows.

The Research Director - he is in charge of charting high-level strategic directions of the Center, be it recommending research agendas, collaborating with the university's key stakeholders, and choosing what projects and activities to pursue.

The Office Assistant - she is in charge of the day-to-day operations and administrative functions of the organization. Simply put, without her, the office will not run smoothly, if at all.

The Research Assistant/s - usually part-timers in terms of their involvement with the Center, they are in charge of managing assigned projects.

Significance of Research to Development

Personal development

One of my key strengths and talents is being a learner – one who is excited to learn many things. Being able to contribute to theory and practice through the fruits of this action research project allows me to have personal development in terms of intellectual stimulation and productivity.

Professional development

In terms of professional development, I am foreseeing a long-term partnership with the academe industry especially in business and management research. Should this research project succeed, it will boost my reputation and expertise as a researcher, and even as an aspiring faculty. Since the strengthening of the college's research culture is a desirable issue, my time and energy will be great investments for my future career, whether I continue as a part-time or full-time member of the university.

Organizational development

In terms of organizational development, this issue is very much aligned to DLSU's goals of becoming one of the premier research universities in the region. This is also in line with the mandate of the Center as a catalyst of a desired research culture in the community. As such, I firmly believe the potential of this project to advance organizational development.

Literature Review and Initial Constructing

Overview

This section shows my literature review of strategy and the strategic planning process. Instead of focusing on clearly laying out the theoretical underpinnings of the strategy concept, I selected seminal definitions and applications that are most relevant to my perceived organizational context—that is, strategy for nonprofit organizations.

What is strategy?

Thompson et al. (2014) characterize strategy as answering the following four basic questions: (1) Where are we now? (2) Where do we want to go? (3) How are we going to get there? (4) How do we measure our actions? These questions give us indications on how strategy involves intending to meet certain objectives, formulating plans, and executing plans to achieve a certain goal.

Mintzberg and Waters (1985) contends that strategy can be visualized in two ways: deliberate and emergent strategies. Figure 2 shows how the intended strategy can become different from the actual realized strategy. The deliberate strategy (or strategic plans) can be affected by emergent strategies arising from changes in the environment or assumptions.

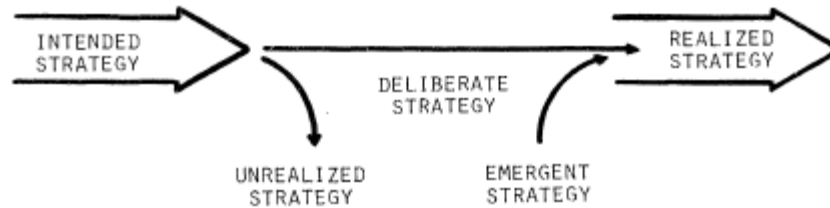


Figure 2. Deliberate and emergent strategies (Mintzberg & Waters, 1985)

Strategic planning process for nonprofits

Allison and Kaye (2015), in Figure 3 propose a strategic planning framework for nonprofit organizations. Aligned with how different authors conceptualize strategic planning (Billups, 2015; Conway et al., 1994; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Mulhare, 1999; Taylor & Machado, 2006; Thompson et al., 2014), Allison and Kaye mention the need to manage leadership, business model, organizational capacity, theory of change, and environmental scan.



Figure 3. Strategic planning framework (Allison & Kaye, 2015)

Allison and Kaye (2015) flesh out the details to their strategic planning framework by outlining the necessary steps and processes to come up with a plan. Figure 4 shows the ten points subdivided into three sections: first steps, the strategic analysis, and setting the course or implementing the strategic plan.



Figure 4. Step-by-step strategic planning process (Allison & Kaye, 2015)

Various authors have written their thoughts on the strategic planning in a higher education or nonprofit organization setting. Table 1 shows a literature review summary highlighting insights.

Table 1
Literature review summary on the strategic planning process for nonprofits

Authors	Insights about strategic planning process
Billups (2015)	Three essential elements should be managed: (1) leadership, (2) context, and (3) conflict
Conway et al. (1994)	There is a need to identify an organization’s ‘market orientation’ and define its target segments to be served
Fathi and Wilson (2009)	The strategic planning process is applicable to universities and higher educational situation. There is a need to consider changes in the environment and target segment feedback to inform new strategies that may emerge
Hummel et al. (1998)	Universities engaging with industry partners demand re-organization or alignment of strategy to the structure. This is essential to leverage on limited resources and maximize them.
Mulhare (1999)	The strategic planning process is vital for organizations following systems and structure
Rich and Bartholomew (2010)	To get resources, corporate partnerships and other forms of alliances can be tapped for funding

Authors	Insights about strategic planning process
Taylor and Machado (2006)	In order to respond to new demands, there is a need to rethink organizational structure and the institutional management model within which the actors are operating. Moreover, there is a need to develop proactive and flexible approaches to strategic management especially in higher educational institutions.

Observations, Reactions, Judgements, Interventions (ORJI)

The literature review showed a characterization of how strategy and strategic planning work in nonprofit organizations. I realize that there are lessons and insights that can be applied to CBRD's specific context – particularly those of Mintzberg and Waters' view on deliberate and emergent strategy (1985). Reading from the strategic planning process proposed by various authors, it seems that the framework of Allison and Kaye (2015) provides the most comprehensive fit. To further illuminate my thoughts and reflections as the action researcher in constructing the situation, Table 2 details my observations, reactions, judgements, and interventions.

Table 2

Observations, reactions, judgements and interventions about CBRD

Observations	Reactions	Judgements	Interventions
CBRD's initial strategy is hard to characterize – much depends on the personal priorities of the Director and emerging mandates of the university	I read more about the characterizations of strategy, such as that offered by Mintzberg and Waters (1985)	CBRD resembles that of an organization acting on a mix of a deliberate and emergent strategy	Given that my observations are similar with the observations of my Director, I intend on considering this in proposing a strategic plan for CBRD
Planning for CBRD's strategy is complex due to the following constraints: (1) unpredictability of leadership in the Director role; (2) managing and hiring part-time research assistants; (3) funding	I felt challenged since I am part of the center and I take pride in helping organizations crystallize their organizational design and strategy	Building on my prior action research proposal during my early masters coursework, I updated my action research topic to include planning for CBRD's strategy	I am proposing a strategic planning process anchored on literature and prior practitioners' experiences in managing nonprofit organizations
CBRD can serve many different stakeholders, each with different needs and wants	I felt uneasy given the constraints of the center – there might be a risk of losing focus or wasting	It might be a good idea to flesh out the center's strategic planning process, with a focus on identifying	My preferred tool or framework for illuminating organizational design and elaborating the

Observations	Reactions	Judgements	Interventions
	energy everyone might be a good idea to pick a certain niche first	servng the CBRD's business model.	business model is Osterwalder and Pigneur's Business Model Canvas (2010). I propose to make this a feature of the upcoming strategic planning workshop mentioned in the methodology section of my proposal

Methodology

Action Research Cycle

This paper aims to cover the pre-step of 'context and purpose', the first step of 'constructing', and the second step of 'planning action' in the action research cycle shown in Figure 5. The previous sections have outlined the context, purpose, and constructions of theory for this action research project. This section, in particular, intends to outline the specific steps in planning action for data gathering and execution.

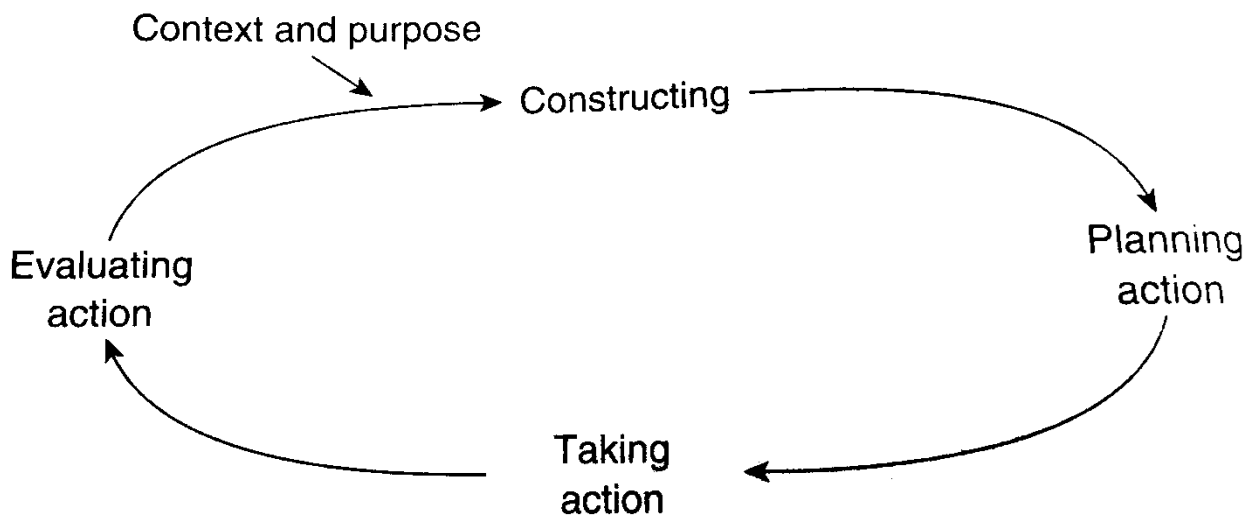


Figure 5. The action research cycle (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010)

In constructing and planning action, it is important to consider the importance of collaboration and dialog in the organization (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010). My personal and professional relationships with the Center's members are solid, as evidenced by the teamwork and camaraderie we have experienced in executing different projects and events. There is open communication between us, which lays strong foundations in pursuing the action research cycle.

Planning Action – Data Gathering

Specific plans of action

For data gathering, I intend to draw on the plans of action I have already used in my previous research projects, such as conducting interviews, focused group discussions through meetings, and even drawing from the information of CBRD’s minutes of the meetings. While doing this, I will synthesize information with the ORJI framework to enable an environment conducive for personal, professional, and organizational meta-learning.

For the initial data gathering phase, I intend on participating in an upcoming two-day strategic planning workshop with all the CBRD staff. To further specify my plans of action and how I intend on operationalizing my main theory, Table 3 shows my operational framework for data gathering. The table will feature the data and information I intend on collecting, juxtaposed with questions I intend to ask.

Table 3
Operational framework for data gathering

Method	Data needed	Sample Questions
Focused discussions and interviews	Business model	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Who are the organization’s Key Partners? 2. What are the organization’s Key Activities? 3. What are the organization’s Key Resources 4. What is/are the main Value Propositions that the organization will offer? 5. Who are the Target Segments that the organization will serve? 6. How will the organization communicate its services to the Target Segments (Customer Relationships) 7. How will the organization ‘distribute’ its services to the Target Segments (Channels) 8. How will the organization measure its success? What are its key success indicators? 9. How will the center manage its funds, budgets, and costs?
	Strategic planning process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where is the organization now? (internal and external assessment) 2. Where should the organization go? (vision and mission) 3. How will it get there? (changes in its business model) 4. How will it measure its progress?

The tools I intend to use are my smartphone, tablet, and computer in documenting this information and storing them securely. To backup data, I will use the cloud computing services

of Google Drive and Dropbox to ensure that no literature, data, and analysis will be lost in case of unforeseen circumstances. After documenting data from various faculty members and the CBRD staff, I will reconcile and synthesize them with literature to refine action plans.

Specific strategies for role duality and organizational politics

Coghlan and Brannick (2010) highlight the need to pay attention to role duality and organizational politics in pursuing insider action research. Since role duality may lead to conflicts between the researcher and actor responsibility, action researchers must note the possible implications to the navigation of politics within the organization. Table 4 shows the tasks and processes I must consider in implementing my action research project for CBRD. I did not include the considerations for the third person since this paper focuses on insider action research.

Table 4

Role duality in first and second person practice (Coghlan & Brannick, 2010)

	Task	Process
First Person	Holding and valuing both sets of roles simultaneously	Catching internal responses to conflicting demands and dealing with them
Second Person	Holding and managing demands of both roles, particularly in situations of conflicting role demands	Role negotiation with significant others

It seems fortunate that the issue I identified does not necessarily conflict with my role as a research assistant. It is in the best interest of my Director and the Center to implement new strategic plans. However, the most evident challenge in my dual roles does not revolve on conflicts of interest. Most probably, it will revolve on balancing time for my existing responsibilities in research projects with the need to do this action research initiative.

The timing of my action research proposal is impeccable, given that my academic timelines are in line with my Director’s timelines in strategic planning. As such, I can negotiate my role well with my Director so that we can arrange responsibilities that are fair to my current ones and conducive for the action research initiative.

In relation to consultants, I do not see the need to hire nor contract their services. I designed this initial action research to fit the resources of CBRD. Given the Center’s limited resources, it is desirable that no external consultants will be hired.

Collaboration with Co-Workers

Related to how I intend on gathering data, I will capitalize on my good relationships with co-workers to ensure collaboration. To make data gathering as least painful for them as possible, I will integrate focused group discussions on our regular meetings as part of the agenda. In

addition, I will use free time both as an opportunity to bond with my fellow research assistants and as an opportunity to get their ideas in trying to strengthen the college's research culture.

Framework for 'Taking Action'

Thus, in translating my plans into action, Table 5 details the action steps in intended outputs in executing my action research proposal.

Table 5

Framework for taking action via the strategic planning process

Strategic planning process (Allison & Kaye, 2015)	Action steps	Outputs
Setup for success	Group discussions and meetings	Action research proposal
Internal stakeholder engagement	Group discussions and meetings	Action research proposal
Mission, Vision, Values	Group discussions and meetings	Updated vision and mission statement
Environmental scan	Strategic planning workshop	PESTEL analysis
Theory of change and program portfolio	Strategic planning workshop	Clarified strategic intent
Business model	Strategic planning workshop	Business model canvas (see <i>Figure 6</i>)
Organizational capacity	Strategic planning workshop	Organizational design
Leadership	Strategic planning workshop	Leadership positions required
Completion of strategic plan	Post-workshop writing	Final action research paper; a working strategic planning framework specifically designed for CBRD
Execution	Pilot	Documentation

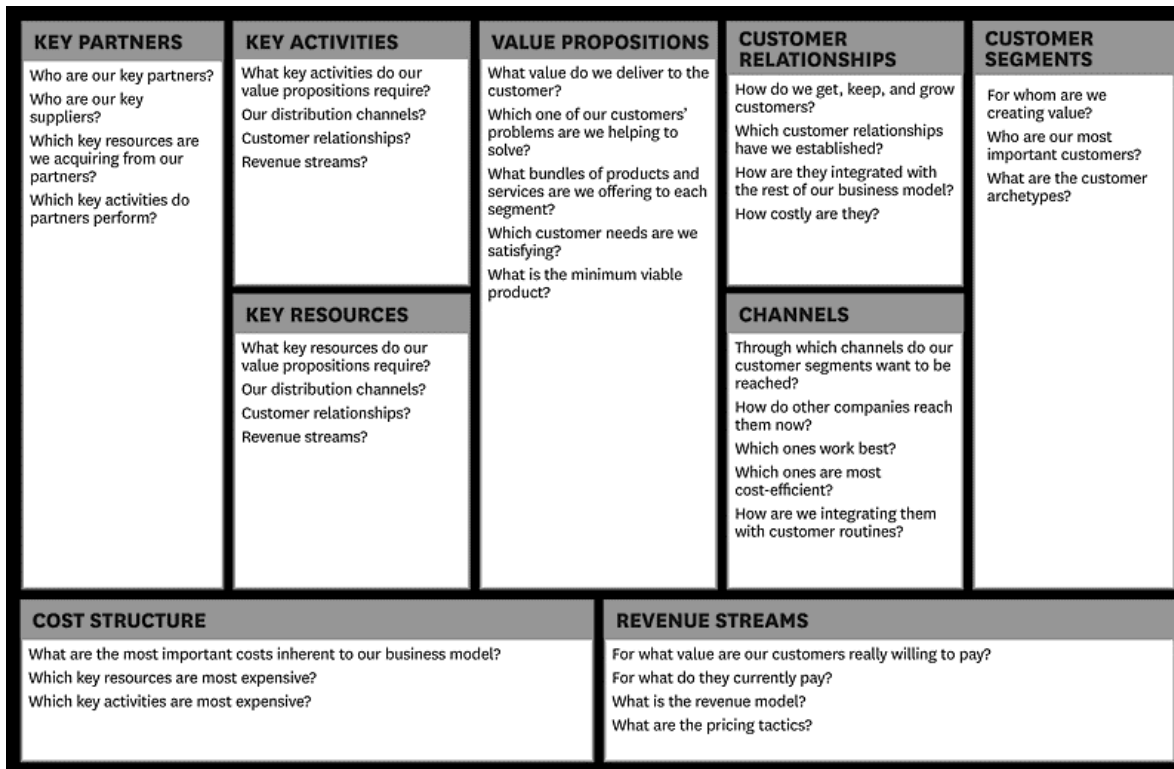


Figure 6. The Business Model Canvas (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010)

To conclude this action research proposal, I will use the aforementioned methodologies and the strategic planning framework of Allison and Kaye (2015) while considering the nature of CBRD's strategy as detailed in my ORJI and Mintzberg and Waters' (2015) differentiation of deliberate and emergent strategies. Apart from proposing a strategic plan for CBRD, I intend to come up with a customized strategic planning framework for the center as my contribution to knowledge and practice.

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