



The Art of Strategic Thinking

The ability to develop an inspiring, coherent, game-changing strategy in order to frame an organization's direction has long been considered one of the key responsibilities of any senior leader and their leadership team. Unfortunately, most organizations today would not receive top grades for their business strategies in terms of inspiration, or coherence, or the game-changing impact, let alone all three. There are some pretty basic reasons why most organizations fail to achieve even a fraction of the dominance or brand recognition of the well-known global market leaders. The fact is, most business strategies today are adequate enough to allow an organization to get by, but they are simply not creative nor challenging enough to allow for true differentiation.

Most organizational strategies fail the test of ambition required to set a new standard, or change the entire direction of an industry, or to dominate the space. As a result, they are surely not distinctive enough to create new opportunity out of thin air. In the end, they are often not strategies at all, but rather a collection of tactical goals and objectives, conveniently clustered together under a banner that the leaders have chosen to call a strategy but which, in reality, is not.

Most of the business leaders we have produced since the end of WWII have a belief and a grounding in the principles of incrementalism and process efficiency. They grew up as managers and then became leaders by invoking the tightly constraining economic principles of control, zero defects and narrow tolerances. They emphasized the science of management and believed good strategic planning would produce superior, recurring results. Their narrow perspective and

intellectual naiveté, suggested that wise men could create a strategic plan created scientifically on a foundation of facts and precedents, and that their superior blueprints need only then be executed.

Most leaders, whether intentionally or not, have denied that an equally rightful place be given to the “art” of strategic thinking. They are not even open to the possibility it is the quality of the thinking that goes into the plan that ultimately determines the quality of the plan, not just the quality of the planning per se. Strategic thinking is about new possibilities, new combinations, new answers and, more than anything else, the competitive advantages flowing from disruption, disintermediation and dissonance. These are the three horsemen of the apocalypse that break free from the constraints of a plan and, in so doing, create new space and new strategies.

The focus of a value building strategy should be on identifying unique solutions to wicked problems. It requires a bold declaration of intent and a commitment to tackle those problems in a focused and determined manner, no matter what it takes. It begins with the identification of a chronic, worrisome problem, a curious anomaly, a puzzling paradox or a troubling trade-off that demands to be resolved. It ends with an all out effort to deploy the available resources in a creative manner in order to execute the strategy with full force and effect, gaining strength along the way and leaving others puzzled by the secret of your success.

Business strategy should be a deliberate, provocative argument, a bold if not brazen point of view. It should attract attention, criticism and maybe even ridicule. It should destroy old ideas, alter rusty paradigms and debunk dusty beliefs. In order to craft a strategy of this type, there has to be a vibrant exchange of wild ideas and a ferocious debate amongst those charged with bringing the strategy to conclusion. The objective must be to craft a distinctive strategy, not a cheap imitation of what others are doing already. Leaders must fuel the planning exercise with abundant honesty, positive purposeful energy and total intellectual curiosity, and they must demand the same of others.