

Creativity and Strategic Thinking: The Coming Competencies

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Summary

Creativity and strategy are no longer optional in today's rapidly changing business environment. Now considered essential to maintaining a competitive edge, many organizations are seeking ways to unleash new perspectives and fresh thinking about their products, markets, challenges and competitors. Understanding the thinking styles involved in the different phases of the creative and strategic thinking processes (not to mention the quality process) allow individuals and organizations to more effectively take advantage and apply the brain power available to them.

Background

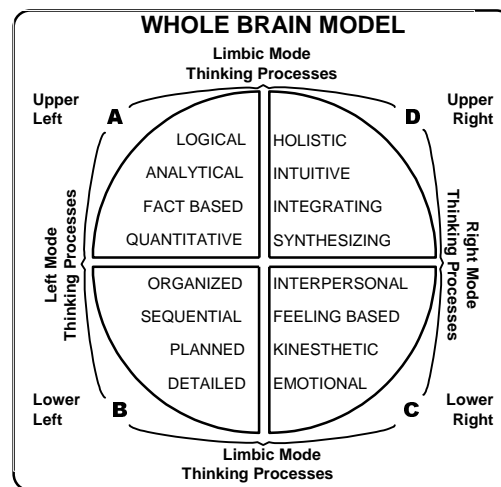
Every decade seems to provide us with a new era of management focus. The 60's centered on *systems* and *decentralization*. In the 70's we saw *strategic business units* emerge with the role of *manager* becoming primary. The *TQM (Total Quality Management)* movement came into view during the 80's and continues to have lasting impact on American business structure- Measurements of customer satisfaction and quality control systems now are an integral part of most American business'. *Radical change* and *re-engineering* seem to have permeated every aspect of our day to day business existence in the current decade. The focus on re-engineering business systems has distracted away from the core requirement that this new era of re-engineering requires. By its very definition, re-engineering requires re-invention, which cannot effectively occur without creativity and strategy.

Ned Herrmann, author of *The Creative Brain* puts it this way: "In the corporation of the future, new leaders will not be masters but maestros. The leadership task will be to anticipate the signs of coming change, to inspire creativity and to get the best ideas from everybody."

How is that accomplished? First and foremost a clear understanding of the source and nature of creative and strategic thinking is required. Our research on the brain and thinking has demonstrated that we all have access to these specialized thinking modes. Yet much of this thinking often lies dormant in our organization waiting to be unleashed. To paraphrase Charles

Handy of the London School of Business (in Fortune magazine Oct 1991) when CEO's are asked how much of the brainpower in their organization is actually used; the answer is 20%. The key to tapping into the thinking potential of an individual or organization lies first in understanding the mentality of their day to day decision making and what they pay most attention to.

In order to determine what you pay most attention to, it can be helpful to look at the Whole Brain model shown here. The four quadrants describe different processing modes that we all have access to. As you look over the model, reflect upon those modes that best describe your preferred mental processes.



Creativity and strategy use all of the above approaches at different stages in the process.

Creativity: What is it and how is it developed and applied?

There continues to be a lot of mystique around the creative process. In fact, once creative thinking is understood as a series of mental processes that can be applied and learned, it suddenly becomes available to us all. Some years ago our company was running Creative Problem Solving (CPS) programs for a large consumer product company's 'brand teams' and their advertising agency counterparts. The ad agency team was uncomfortable that the CPS program was demystifying the creative process they were receiving so much money for.

Once the agency team was convinced they should attend the workshop, it became evident that all participants had a role to contribute to the creative process. Examples included analysis of the problem/opportunity, customer input, breakthrough ideas, technical problem solving, team facilitation, details and follow through. All the different processes across the mental spectrum were required. The ultimate outcome was a greatly enhanced team process, significant savings of

monies spent due to misalignment of objectives and a genuine respect for the different perspectives each of the team members brought to the table.

As in the above example, we can tap into others a source of creative synergy or discover the unique creative ability that resides within each of us. Due to that uniqueness, it is important to note that the *way* we each approach problems will be different. Through practice and skill building, skills and tools can be acquired in modes out of our preferences. For example, Brainstorming, a widely used creativity technique, would fall into the Upper Right D category, but certainly won't appeal to everyone. This is why you often find people incorrectly using the technique, or wondering why it doesn't produce the desired outcomes feeling frustrated and often "stuck in their own perspective."

Out of the Box Thinking

Perhaps it is because we get "stuck" that we sometimes call Creative thinking "*Out of the box thinking*". Clearly we appear to have an intuitive sense that each of us needs to "break out" of our natural thinking processes, to "get out of our own box". Understanding your brain dominance profile provides a new definition of the mental "boxes" we may create for ourselves. Once you know what your mental default may be, it is much easier to predict those areas that will be a challenge for you and plan for them. Our mental defaults impact all that we do. We become comfortable and develop habits around our comforts. The following exercise is an example of a mental default. Read over the following list for 20 seconds, then turn away and on a separate piece of paper, without looking at the list, write down all the words you can remember.

Bed	Dream	Snore	Sheet	Pillow
Snooze	Nap	Blanket	NightLight	Bedsread

Now look at your list. How many did you remember? Did you write the word "sleep"? Many people do. The brain has a default when it sees all those words having to do with sleep and often "fills in" the word sleep when it hasn't actually seen it. . Other examples of mental defaults occur every day. Your first approach to a problem situation usually uses your "mental default" to try to come up with a result. Creative thinking shifts you beyond that default to discover new ideas and potential solutions.

We have often looked at a problem for so long that we don't even realize that we are using our default. A client was challenged with their packaging of large light fixtures. Breakage would occur and the costs of the packaging were skyrocketing and were difficult to recycle. They were sure they had thought of every possible solution. Using creativity techniques to get "out of the box" they devised the idea of packaging the fixtures in garbage cans which were then resold. Costs dropped significantly as did the breakage, all because of "out of the box thinking"

To get “out of *your* thinking box” it is first important to know what your preferences are (often done using an assessment such as the Herrmann Brain Dominance Instrument or other assessment tools). Next look for ways to develop skills in areas of lesser preference:

- 1) Find a mentor
 - 2) Take a course
 - 3) read one of the many books on creativity techniques, try out several and practice them
- Awareness of your own “box” is the first essential step! A commonly cited anonymous quote says it well:

If you always do what you have always done, then you will always get what you have always gotten.

This couldn't be more true than for strategic planning departments.

Strategic Thinking vs. Strategic Planning

Whenever the word “strategic” is uttered, most people think of planning rather than thinking. They are very different animals indeed. Over the years, large organizations have relegated strategic plans to the planning department and inadvertently created a bureaucracy. Jack Welch, CEO of GE described it this way: “ The (strategic plan) books got thicker, the printing got more sophisticated, the corners got harder and the drawings got better”. Indeed it was an example of triumph of form over substance describing an approach typified as paralysis-by-analysis.

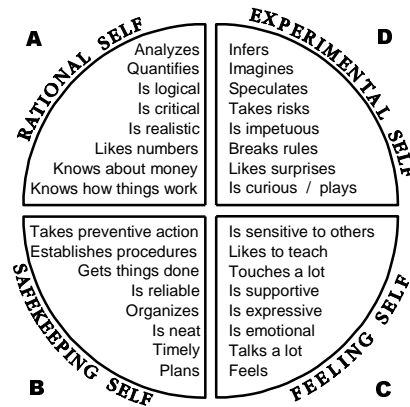
Much has happened and been written in the field in recent years and several new theories of the case are emerging in this decade. One axiom and lesson proves true again and again: Strategic thinking *must precede* strategic planning. Most organizations know a lot more about the planning part of that equation. Stephen and Shannon Rye Wall put it this way in The New Strategists Creating Leaders at all Levels. : “Strategic Planning’s top-down flow and linear procedures are breaking down, just as the hierarchies of management are. What was once a structured, once a year activity undertaken by a single group of senior managers and planners is becoming an iterative, continuous process that involves the entire organization.”

So what is strategic thinking? Strategic thinking is a *mindset* that allows you to:

- 1) Anticipate future events and issues
- 2) Create alternative scenarios
- 3) Understand your options
- 4) Decide on your objectives
- 5) Determine the direction to achieve those objectives on a winning basis

Once you have accomplished the latter, a plan may be developed. Without a strategic thinking approach as the foundation, so-called strategic plans end up frequently becoming operational or tactical plans in disguise.

To better understand the difference between an operational plan and a strategic plan we can once again look at the thinking style differences they each engage. The model below shows our four different selves from a thinking perspective. Strategic thinking calls for more D quadrant thinking. In contrast, operational thinking requires more B quadrant processes.



An interesting example of a strategic thinking insight involved an activity which used metaphors for products, customers, distributors, vendors and competitors. Once the group had scanned the environment for trends, the process revealed that all indicators were showing that, in the following 8 years, a large percentage of future revenue would come from distributors. However, the groups metaphor revealed that this company had never considered the distributors as customers-in fact they had been more of a dumping ground for excess product etc. The team immediately set about to develop a strategy to focus on the distributor marketplace and learn to look at them as customers to attend to and nurture. This initiated a shift in the divisions mindset about who qualified as a customer.

Gaining the competitive edge with your customers by anticipating

Much of this “shift in mindset” requires looking around the business at your environment as well as taking a new perspective on your customers and asking new questions. An example of that is the work of Gary Hamel and C.K. Prahalad who have explored issues of competitiveness in their ongoing research. They state in Competing for the Future that one of the greatest strategic challenges is to move beyond the focus of today. A domain we know well and collect data on is *today’s business, customer needs and customer types*. Hamel and Prahalad propose going beyond today’s perspective to explore yet *unserved customer types* and *unarticulated customer needs*. Iby, anticipating customer needs and opportunities new strategic opportunities open up for us all. Joel Barker in The Future Edge says it this way: “In times of turbulence, the ability to anticipate dramatically enhances your chance of success”

Strategic thinking requires the kind of mindset that *anticipates* rather than reacts. Rather than solving problems as they occur this approach *avoids* problems and seeks out opportunities. As the hockey player Wayne Gretsky puts it: “I go to where the puck *will* be”.

So how do you get there, where the puck will be? Once again, your current filters will have a great impact on your ability to think strategically. Some activities that promote a strategic mindset are:

- 1) Look at other industries
- 2) Join associations like the World Future Society
- 3) Read books on topics that may have an impact on your business in the future but not today.
- 4) Practice playing chess and thinking several moves ahead
- 5) Look at your own life plan and visualize where you will be and what you will be doing in the year 2010.

In short, “good anticipation is the result of good strategic exploration” Joel Barker-The Future Edge.

How about Quality?

Remember when the US imported the notion of Quality Circles from Japan’s Dr. Kauro Ishikawa in the 70’s? This approach, which was successfully implemented in Japan, did not achieve the same levels of success here in the US. An understanding of the brain and the mentality of quality can help explain what went wrong. Clearly the Japanese culture was able to integrate the left-brained quantitative aspects of the quality processes into the more right brained participative management culture. In our country, most companies were not yet ready to embrace the right-brained notions of participative management in the prevailing left brained culture. As Dr. Joan Cassidy puts it in her paper Learn to Create High Performing Teams. “It was difficult for most managers to relinquish what had worked for them in the past...to give up control, work in groups and make decisions by consensus was anathema”.

Another interesting example emerged in the 80’s with the application of Deming’s approach (more whole brained) and Juran’s approach (a more structured left-brained approach). The impact of the different “mental” approaches meant that certain organizational cultures would favor one expert over the other. Without an understanding of the differences of the two approaches, organizations may be running “blind” to the buy-in or rejection of one approach over another.

Conclusion

While the industrial age required a focus of structure and analysis, it is evident that the Digital era provides the structure and demands different thinking skills and creative approaches. The rapidly changing environment, simultaneous bombardment of information and global perspective will draw on all of our thinking skills. Most of all, each of us will need to tap into our situational brain power, our four different selves as each event requires it, in order to optimize our contributions and become successful.

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