

Towards a Hybrid Model of Strategic Thinking: Revisiting the paradox of strategy development versus design

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ABSTRACT: *This paper explores the nature of thinking which leads strategists to success and make them comfortable in meeting the challenges of 21st century business world. Different forms and modes of strategic thinking have been explored, based on left brain-right brain dominance theory of Sperry (1962). Left-brain thinkers are viewed as proponents of developers while right-brain thinkers are viewed as proponents of designers. A new model—hybrid strategic thinkers—has been proposed, to fill the gap in the modes of strategic thinking available in strategic management literature.*

Key Words: *left-brain thinkers, right-brain thinkers, logic, intuition, creativity, hybrid strategic teams,*

1. INTRODUCTION

Strategic thinking is not a new concept. About 2500 years ago, sun Tzu (a Chinese strategist) discussed this concept as “comprehensive thinking and investigation required to meet the challenge of war is the greatest concern of state”(Sun Tzu). Strategic thinking has been expressed as a process of cognition that drives strategic knowledge, learning and of knowing all the variables that develop the cognitive maps of the minds of strategists at both group and individual level and also getting an understanding of the strategic environment at local and international levels. Employees at team and individual level use cognitive maps for getting understanding of their environment through developing knowledge structures (McCauley 2012).

Strategic thinking can be developed and exercised as it is a continuous learning process. So to meet the needs of unpredictable modern market events, senior leaders and subordinates must learn to have a good strategic thinking capability by developing competencies (Sanders 1998).By developing the following competencies among employees, senior leaders can facilitate strategic thinking process.

Ecosystem understanding power is very much important for the leaders and subordinates to have an insight of the strategic environment properly. To analyze the system effectively, leaders and subordinates must have an explicit know how of relationships between different sectors of ecosystem like governmental, fiscal, social, information, armed and infrastructure. For the creation of a realistic future, **Visioning** allows leaders to shift a paradigm when new ideas are needed to incorporate. Senior leaders could play a vital role in developing the capability of visioning among employees by allowing them to participate in vision setting process, to share previous personal professional ambitions and to obtain as many standpoints as possible (Beatty and Hughes 2005). Good strategic thinkers act as **good scanners** who focus on continuous updating of situational awareness, identification of natural tracks and trends in an operational environment that will lead to change (Weick and Sutcliffe 2007).

Scenario planning is a method by which reasonable alternative futures are constructed and the effects of various uncontrollable variables are analyzed (De Kluyver and Pearce). Scenario planning allows strategists to capture the range of possible solutions to a problem which they would otherwise ignore during decision making (Schoemaker 1995). To solve strategic problems, strategists must think by taking into account strengths and weaknesses of organization and opportunities and threats to be faced by environment, getting detailed know how of environment and industry trends, in depth study of markets and customers preferences, thorough study of strategies adopted by competitors, comprehensive details of substitutes of your product and complete information of buyers and suppliers.

Strategic thinkers have different natural thinking capacities depending upon their inborn brain capabilities as explained by left-right brain dominance theory.

2. LEFT BRAIN-RIGHT BRAIN DOMINANCE THEORY:

This theory was proposed by Roger W. Sperry (American Psycho-biologist) in late 1962. The theorist highlighted that brain has been naturally divided into two parts as left and right brain, each playing its own dominating role in thinking process. Each side controls different types of thinking and functions. Although both sides of brain work simultaneously in thinking process but dominating side plays more explicit role than the suppressed one. The person with left brain dominance shows following behavior.

Their thinking is analytical which is driven by logics. They are rational decision makers who make unemotional decisions. As leaders they are straight forward and blunt not afraid of saying what is right to do and how to do that right thing. Left side of brain is verbal that emphasize on words, symbols and numbers having good capability of understanding scientific laws and mathematical calculations. Trying out for creativity or innovation seems to be wastage of energy and time to them. They can work well in structured environment. They are highly organized people who follow instructions carefully for solving a problem which makes them well focused on minute details. So they enjoy good managerial and organizational skills which give them success to meet deadlines. This side of brain follows linear thinking focusing on “what” things are expressed. Information processing speed is fast by this side. Left brained dominance person respond quickly to a problem. They look at parts of a problem and arrange the solutions of that problem in a sequential and orderly manner. They show risk aversion. They are fast learners and this quality makes them good future planners. They use fewer gestures while communicating. In career making they prove to be competent as accountants, lawyers, mathematicians, computer technicians etc.

The person with right brain dominance shows these behaviors. Their thinking is random driven by intuitive feelings. This side is visual emphasizing on images and patterns. These people show more interest in philosophy, religion and literature but bad at calculus work like mathematics, accounting etc. They like experimentation for trying to be creative to bring new ideas. They are bad in following instructions for solving a problem and cannot focus on minute details properly. So they prove to be good subordinates but bad managers. They lack managerial and organizational skills and fail to meet deadlines. This side of brain follows Mosaic thinking focusing on “how” things are expressed. Right side of brain shows slow processing of information. The people with right brain dominance slowly respond to a problem. They enjoy exploring different angles of a problem. They are slow learners which makes them bad future planners. However, they are very intelligent dreamers and deep thinkers who like to think “out of box” which makes them creative. They are risk takers. They use more gestures while communicating. In career making, they prove to be better towards creative and artistic fields like entrepreneurship, actors, musicians, writers etc. They are more holistic, looking at big pictures and ignoring minute details.

3. DEVELOPERS VS DESIGNERS

During an organization’s life in such a volatile environment as of today, business strategists come across so many intricate and varied strategic problems frequently. The way that strategists think to solve these strategic problems involve major questions i.e. how people perceive these strategic problems? How their minds filter the meaning of information received is important to understand? How they actually solve these problems? We are going to deal with multiple cognitive styles of people defined as “consistency in an individual’s way of cognitive working, principally with respect to gain and dispensation of information” (Ausburn ; Messick, S. Messick (Ed.) et al. ; Kozhevnikov 2007) that will lead to a successful strategic thinking process.

Different opinions exist regarding this matter and we are discussing them in context of Sperry’s left-right brain dominance theory. According to his theory, there are the people whom we have named as developer strategists and they use logics, analytical reasoning, facts & figures, numbers, statistical tools, mathematical calculations etc to solve a strategic problem. Proponents of this school of thought are called as left brain thinkers here. In contrast to developers are the designer strategists who use intuition, innovation, creativity, imagination etc to deal with a strategic problem. The advocates of this school of thought are denoted here as right brained thinkers. Now at

the same time both the extremes seem to be valuable indulging us into a paradoxical situation that which type of strategic thinking is fruitful. Through a dialectical inquiry we are discussing the two schools of thought.

4. LEFT BRAIN THINKERS

Strategists with left brain dominance believe that strategic thinking is purely a “logical action” involving reasoning, conscious intention and attention towards a problem situation. These people frequently analyze the market situation, ups and downs of business world and internal environment of organization to grab any strategic problem as soon as it crops up. Once the problem is identified, a meticulous and comprehensive work is carried on to gather all sort of relevant data to both external and internal market advancements around and within organization. Once the data has been brought into basket, strategists process it logically by following proper rules and regulations defined, through in-depth study of raw facts and figures and identify ingredients of swot analysis (opportunities, threats, weaknesses and strengths) to get alternative problem solutions by matching opportunities to strengths. This work of processing data is not a piece of cake and left brained strategist believe that this work requires an exhaustive scholarly exertion and highly sensitive diagnostic proficiency to get an explicit and absolute picture of problem and then solution. They prove to be rational thinkers having much more realistic and practical approach, not liking distraction of mind from available solutions. They do not question the wisdom of organization.

Left brained strategists are *convergent thinkers* (Kraft 2005; Carlo, Khoshnevis et al. 2009; Puccio, Cabra et al. 2010). So they screen and filter manifold available solutions by assessing them on numerous standards to reach up to one best optimal solution. Convergent thinking allows them to use traditional thought patterns. They believe what is logically proved to be right is right.

As managers left brained strategists prefer to work with team members having the same wavelength of opinions as their own. But unfortunately they forget that such teammates will not help them in getting new spark of ideas to interpret a problem and reach up to an innovative solution. So is the reason such organizations fall a prey to *comfortable clone syndrome* i.e. people share similar thinking styles as all minds use similar cognitive filters to screen ideas (Leonard and Straus 1997). Left brained strategists often throw up the visionary solutions of right brained subordinates. However, left brained managers are stable persons not getting panic and good in crises management as they are rational thinkers and do not allow emotions to resist their thought powers and patterns, rather their thought process speeds up in crises. They are also good in meeting time dead lines. They adopt *L-mode* of thinking which is an orderly, sequenced and systematic way of thinking by looking at minute details and parts of problem and then using available statistical information to solve a problem (Edwards 1979; Dew 1996)

The proponents of Left brained thinking believe that strategic thinking is like solving a mathematical problem or conducting a scientific experiment in which they must have to be rational, logical, analytical, following well defined rules & regulations, thinking “within the box” not allowing themselves to be creative or do experimentation. They are risk averse people.

5. RIGHT BRAIN THINKERS

Strategists with right brain dominance believe that strategic thinking is an intuitive and creative action. They do not deny the importance of logic but emphasize that logical reasoning should be up to a level so that it does not prove to be a hurdle in way of creativity and innovation. Creativity is very much necessary for deep insights of markets and organization, defining problems in new different ways and getting innovative solutions (Stopford and Baden - Fuller 1994)

Right brained strategists believe that strategic problems are that much complex that it is hard to objectively define them. They can be interpreted through variety of dimensions. So is the case with possible solutions to them. The advocates of right brain thinking believe that solving a strategic problem is more than a logical activity. It is a creative action that starts with ambiguous, unconnected, random and vague ideas requiring brainstorming, experimentation and intuition (Carlo, Khoshnevis et al. 2009)

Intuition is defined as “gut feeling that comes out from within a person based on his past experiences, feelings and emotions” (Klein 2002). It is also defined as “the aptitude to see ahead of the data and comprehend the

unfathomable sense of the whole” (Mintzberg and Lampel). Intuitive feelings are considered as the basic factor of right brained strategists in defining complex strategic problems and searching for their possible solutions. Proponents of right brained thinking believe that creative analysts do not wait for the opportunities and threats to come to sight. Their creative thinking allows them to look beyond the horizons and take any situation as an opportunity or threat and then dealing with it.

Right brained strategists are *divergent thinkers* (Kraft 2005; Carlo, Khoshnevis et al. 2009; Puccio, Cabra et al. 2010). Divergent thinking leads them to so many imaginative options for solving a problem because such type of thinking allows them to discard traditional thought patterns and follow new thinking styles. They believe what “feels” to be right is right based on their internal intuitive voices. They frequently question the wisdom of organization.

Right brained thinking is supported by *The Geneplore Model* which states that creative thinkers engage in cyclical process of generation and exploration unless their required refinement is achieved (Finke, Ward et al. 1992; Lubart 2001; Ward 2004). Exploration results when one discovers something that is unknown to him and relates it to his own experiences and knowledge whereas Searching is the process where one knows for what he is looking for. Right brained thinkers do not fear of risk taking and they pursue their ideas diligently in order to resolve a problem. They are the dreamers who think “out of box” to envision varied scenarios of problem and generate possible solutions.

As managers they prefer to work with teammates alike them because they often face the delay in acceptance of their ideas by left brained subordinates who need additional time to build logical approaches from intuitively driven ideas of their employers’.

To be successful they understand the importance of *creative abrasion* which is “bringing intellectual diversities of Team members together in a productive way” that promotes innovation within an organization (Brunarski ; Leonard and Straus 1997; Carlile 2004).

Right brained strategist adopt *R-mode* of thinking which is an integrative, non systematic way of thinking and is holistic that ignores minute details and look at bigger picture of problem and use creative and imaginative solutions to solve it (Edwards 1979; Carlo, Khoshnevis et al. 2009). They are rational thinkers, so their emotions and feelings prove to be hurdle in crises management; moreover, they are not good in meeting time deadlines.

For right brained strategists, strategic thinking is like drawing a free hand painting in which there is vast canvass for strategist to use his creative & imaginative powers without having rigid rules & regulations to follow and thus finally reaching to an innovative solution.

Now strategists should adopt which style of thinking is still an unanswered question for most of the intellectuals as both types have supporters and opponents. So for the organizations to cope with continuously changing technologies, highly elastic consumer preferences, unpredictable economic, political and governmental transformations, highly demanding market trends, dynamic competition etc. a blended strategic thinking is badly needed which could result from only a continuum of both left brained & right brained thinking.

6. HYBRID STRATEGIC THINKERS

People have different cognitive maps. They understand data and resolve problems by remaining within their Paradigms which are greatly influenced by their dominating side of brain. An organization having complete homogeneous cognitive approach proves to be efficient but limited to problem solving. So to solve strategic problems in current rapid modern market, heterogeneous strategic team is required having *cognitive disparity* resulting in cross fertilization of thoughts and approaches. Such a team is named here as Hybrid strategic team. Hybrid strategic teams are those having a productive ratio of both left brained and right brained dominant people. Hybrid teams have members with diversified cognitive styles, communication patterns which result in difference of opinions among them leading to their dysfunctional behavior. Unfortunately “*Marginalization*” (a process in which people push others having different thinking styles away from their comfort zone to avoid disturbance) is a common practice seen among managers (Dew 1996). Managers who do not value the cognitive approaches of others get failed in resolving these differences and their organization fall a prey to *comfortable clone syndrome* (Leonard and Straus 1997). So successful managers must allow the team members to sit together, depersonalize their conflicts and

acknowledge their differences through healthy and positive debate and devise a guideline before working on problem ahead. For the hybrid teams to be efficient, *creative abrasion* is inevitable.

Hybrid strategic teams could prove to be more triumphant in having their strategies approved from top management as their reports would be a mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data satisfying directors of both types i.e. left and right brained. For the managers of Hybrid teams, it is mandatory not to treat the teammates as they themselves like to treat them. Rather treat teammates according to their diversified cognitive behavior as some members interpret managers' message easily if it is in statistical form. Others may be better in swallowing pictorial and graphic presentation.

Now is the era of "*The creativity Economy*" (Adler 2005). In this world of global competition where Chinese products have saturated international markets & consumer preferences are rapidly changing, only those companies will gain a competitive edge that would analyze the market trends thoroughly (left brain feature) and use creativity and innovation in designing their products and services (right brain feature). So companies hiring hybrid strategic teams could make the soil of the creative economy fertile for their growth and survival.

7. CONCLUSION

Left brained thinking based on "logic & reasoning" and right brained thinking supported by "creativity & innovation" are the two ideal forms of strategic thinking styles that cannot purely fulfill the challenging demands of an organization to gain a competitive edge in today's extremely tumultuous market. But coordination of both forms of thinkers optimally together could be the success element for an organization to have better leadership in market because when both kinds of thinking styles participate learning is enhanced. However, managerial skills of an individual are unconsciously shaped by their cognitive preferences that often lead organizations suffer with comfortable clone syndrome. So for an organization to be the market leader, necessity of hybrid strategic team is unavoidable and to ensure a productive work from such team, importance of creative abrasion cannot be denied as it will suppress conflicts among team members and will allow them to form strategies emerging out of brains of both logisticians and visionaries.

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