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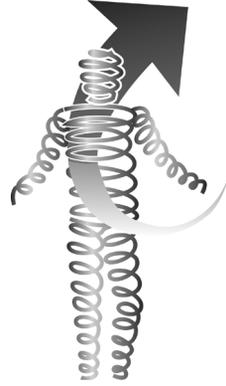
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1

Thinking from Within

Johan Roos



Introduction

In the mid 1990s I worked as an action researcher with several companies to find out more about what leaders were thinking and doing when they practised strategy. After a few leadership meetings in one of these firms, a newspaper, it was obvious that there was no passion for strategic issues and the editor consistently arrived late. In a world of 24-hour cycles, the whole group was noticeably uninterested in the long-term and abstract tasks of strategy, the editor being the most detached and impatient. During these meetings the group exercised and discussed a range of analytical tools similar and sometimes identical to the ones used in the previous year.

At one meeting midway through the strategy process, the editor arrived even later than usual, bursting in with the freshly printed edition of the newspaper squeezed into his hand. Red-faced he interrupted our conversation and called out 'Look, the margin on the front page is 1 mm to the left', followed by a series of unprintable expressions describing his sentiments about the people in production. Rather than dismissing this episode as 'daily and operational' and not relevant to the few precious hours set aside for strategy conversations, the rest of the group immediately latched onto the perceived problem.

At first, I was astonished to see the sudden passion, enthusiasm and activity (including strong swearwords) that followed and totally changed the dynamic of the meeting. Nobody remained seated, they moved around waving their hands, argued face-to-face, and took turns to grab hold of the newspaper issue. Suddenly they were subjective and close to the issues discussed, not distant and objective; they were emotionally engaged, not just intellectualizing; they were touching things and using their hands to express their views and feelings, not just engaged in abstract talk.

Taken aback by their enthusiasm and passion for an issue that was apparently close to their hearts, I wondered what was needed to make the strategic discussions equally interesting for them. It is only partly true that the 'missed margin' gave them an excuse to escape from a difficult and uncomfortable, and perhaps boring, conversation about 'strategy'. Perhaps newspaper managers have a particularly short time-horizon as they produce a new paper every day and, consequently, are prone to jump on an emerging discussion about an operational problem. Regardless whether this is myth or reality, on a deeper level the story says something about the way we think and do things when we practise strategy.

On a surface level this episode reminded me of what poet-consultant David Whyte said in his book *The Heart Aroused*: organizations today 'must also honor the souls of the individuals who work for them' (1994: 9). He defined soul in terms of belonging, 'the way human beings belong in their world, their work or their human community' (ibid. p. 13). His message is that unless there is a sense of belonging there is little sense of soul. When we do not feel this belonging, we not only feel that we are 'running on the spot', he argued, we also feel as if we are 'dying'. During the strategy meetings the managers in the example above did not show much sense of belonging and contributed accordingly. Some of them probably felt they were running on the spot, wasting their time. Perhaps some of them even felt they were dying of boredom. This contrasts with how they engaged after the interruption, now with their 'hearts aroused'. Yet, in strategy practice this is not heart of the matter.

The problem

Despite good intentions and decades of conceptual progress, strategy is often practised as if circumstances remain reasonably stable. The typical outcome of such practices is well-defined action plans suitable for dealing with the expected, rather than increasing the readiness of individuals, groups and the entire organization to seize fleeting opportunities and avoid emerging problems. When I confront senior executives with these observations and views, few disagree and most say they wish things were different in the way they practise strategy. They also seem to be at loss about how to remedy the situation.

The problem is not new. Leading scholars have discussed the problem of organizational strategy practices for decades. In their textbook on the topic Chakravarthy and Lorange (1991) noted that that a more formal, integrative approach to strategy practices is appropriate only when the business faces predictable situations and when it has several distinct

competencies. Few company leaders appear to heed their advice. Starbuck (1992) argued that to help firms operate more effectively, strategy practice must preserve uncertainty and allow for contingencies, which is typically not the case. Mintzberg (1994) argued that strategy practice even risks destroying commitment, discouraging change, and breeding a damaging political atmosphere. Strategy practice (in the guise of ‘planning’), he argued, should be about synthesis rather than analysis. Despite such observations and good advice, ‘dominant logic’ (Prahalad and Bettis 1986) or rather the way strategy is practised in organizations seems to evolve very slowly.

Insanity?

It has been said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over, and over, and over again, and, for some reason, expecting a different outcome. According to this definition we are perfectly sane when we keep repeating what we do and how we think, while expecting the same old outcome, regardless if we claim otherwise. Over the years I have met, taught, researched and consulted with quite a few managers who belong in this category. According to the same definition, however, we are ‘insane’ if we expect a *different* outcome from repeating the same old concepts, models, tools and techniques year after year. Frustrated by this situation some managers are eager to break this routine.

Over the past decade a growing community of researchers have argued that it is high time we knew more about what managers are actually *doing* when they engage in strategy practice (see for example Johanson et al. 2001; Whittington 2003 ; Wilson and Jarzabkowski 2004). The phenomenon of practice is a tricky one that has been conceptualized by grand sociologists in a variety of ways.¹ For our purposes in this book it suffices to conceptualize practice in terms of ‘thinking’ and ‘doing’.

The problem with strategy practice is in both its ‘thinking’ and its ‘doing’ aspects: *strategy practice remains biased in favour of deductive, unimaginative analytical thinking and routinized ways of doing*, what I call ‘prescribed thinking’. In this book we shall describe, illustrate and reflect on another way more suitable to enhance preparedness for the unexpected.

The framework

The overall message of this book is: *To be prepared to deal effectively and responsibly with the unexpected our thinking should be more imaginative and our doing should be spontaneous*. This is easier said than done, especially within organizations.

Using more senses to fuel our imagination

Imagination is about what we think, what we do and what we use, and is intertwined with our senses. Research has demonstrated how our sensory-motor system stimulates our abstract thinking in general. What we think or understand is shaped by, made possible by, and limited by our bodies and our embodied interactions in the world:

There is no such fully autonomous faculty of reason separate from and independent of bodily capacities such as perception and movement. The evidence supports, instead, an evolutionary view, in which reason uses and grows out of bodily capacities. (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 17)

Just like black-and-white, colour and infrared are three different ways of presenting an image, our thinking can be stimulated by many rather than few senses. To imaginatively develop 'new outcomes', seeing and hearing may not be enough. Other senses can be used to both deliver existing knowledge to the table and generate entirely new insights.

Making way for the spontaneity of our wisdom

Routines are repetitive pattern of activities (Nelson and Winter 1982), which emerge when there are available cognitive schema, categorizable clues, action rules, minimal effort required and few sub-routines, interruptions and surprises (March and Simon 1958). The benefits of repeating the currently known best practices lie primarily in creating stability (Cyert and March 1993; Nelson and Winter 1982). *Routines are not supposed to result in new outcomes.*

Different from routines is the notion of spontaneity, a concept that has been treated by philosophers (for example Immanuel Kant), political observers (for example Rosa Luxemburg) and psychologists (for example Jacob Levy Moreno), who all refer to the *possibility of freedom*. Unlike routines, spontaneous actions are generated from natural inclinations and unconstrained feelings.² Spontaneity is unplanned and by definition of short duration.³

Thinking from Within

Exhibit 1.1 depicts the conceptual framework of this book. For analytical purposes, I have separated the thinking and doing aspects of 'practice'. The bottom left-hand corner of the model represents the routinized, deductive, unimaginative *analytical* thinking that I call 'prescribed thinking'. The upper right-hand corner represents the imaginative thinking

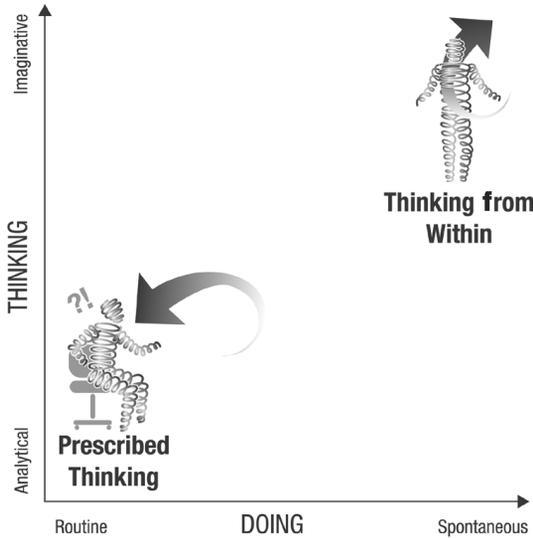


Exhibit 1.1 Conceptual framework

and *spontaneous* doing that come 'from within', which I simplify into the term *Thinking from Within*.

In subsequent chapters we will describe and illustrate how thinking from within helps managers escape the conventional flat papers and screens, develop organizational identity, up the ante for peak experiences and enhance authenticity in what they do. By thinking more from within they also nurture their (internally generated) wisdom, which makes them more prepared to deal with the unexpected. Rather than being threatened by new circumstances, they thrive on them. Rather than talking about new outcomes, they generate them.

Commencing this journey frequently seems difficult. Why? Perhaps due to the lack of vocabulary we use to describe what managers actually do when they practise strategy. Perhaps due to the dominant logic and tools of mainstream management practice. Perhaps because of invisible assumptions of people involved, shaped by education and ritualized through 'best' practices. Yes, yes, and yes. But there is more to it.

The human side

All people 'think from within', but management practices in general and strategy practices in particular (see Johnson et al. 2003) do not for various reasons encourage this sufficiently. Strategy practice is, or at least should

be, a *human* activity rather than like short-cycle assembly work following standard operating procedures. When it isn't, we have a deeper problem.

Rooted in the rationality of natural sciences, strategy theory and practice has for long admired objectivity and avoidance of personal views, which works contrary to *Thinking from Within*. By disregarding human qualities in strategy practice, both the theory and the practice risk becoming amoral.

The late Sumantra Goshal (2005) recently delivered a sweeping and harsh critique of the academic management discipline, which illustrates the consequences. The amoral theories professed by business schools profoundly shape managers' worldview. In his own words:

In courses on corporate governance grounded in agency theory ... we have taught our students that managers cannot be trusted to do their jobs – which, of course, is to maximize shareholder value ... In courses on organization design, grounded in transaction costs economics, we have preached the need for tight monitoring and control of people to prevent 'opportunistic behavior' ... In strategy courses, we have presented the 'five forces' framework ... to suggest that companies must compete not only with their competitors but also with their suppliers, customers, employees, and regulators. (ibid. p. 75)

Based on this Goshal argues that we have created a generation of managers who, left to themselves, will exhibit what society will deem to be unacceptable behaviours, for example excessive greed.

Grounded in many years of research under the auspice of Imagination Lab Foundation, the conceptual foundation of *Thinking from Within* rests firmly on the idea that strategy is inherently normative (Statler and Roos 2005). Our stance in this book is that it is *good* to encourage the inner human potential and qualities by using more of our senses and welcome the freedom of spontaneous action. Moreover, we suggest that *Thinking from Within* is appropriate to deal with and prepare for the unexpected.

To illustrate how the practice we call *Thinking from Within* may appear in a strategy setting I will use two contrasting tales. The first is the tale of OilCo and the second is the tale of RedCo.

Case: Generating commitment in OilCo⁴

OilCo distributes petrol and associated products in a large country in the world. Over the past few years OilCo acquired and integrated into its growing organization several competitors distributing petroleum-based

products in adjacent geographical areas. In addition to its traditional focus on large customers, such as truck fleets and large farms, the CEO had recently taken the initiative to acquire several retail outlets for consumers, that is, gas stations. In mid 2005 the CEO summarized the situation:

Over the last two years we got our act together after the acquisitions, and today we are a reasonably unified organization. We have no more territory to develop so our strategic challenge is to create more value from our existing business.

To this end, six months earlier the CEO had initiated and launched a new initiative to make his organization more customer oriented. Labelled a 'customer service programme' his idea was to gradually transform the culture of the organization from its traditional product-orientation, to become more aware of the needs of consumers and what must be done to be successful in the retail business. Within this programme, the key concept was 'Customer Service Champion,' which was to define a new, customer-oriented *role* for each senior leader, and eventually for others throughout the organization. The underlying idea was to respect local customers much more than was the case today, thereby creating better relationships, as well as customer satisfaction in general. The CEO said: 'We know the production process by heart, but we really do not know so much about our customers.' Despite the talk, not much happened in practice. He continued: 'We just talked about the concept a few times, and I haven't really pushed it since everybody has been too busy.' He also said he had not pushed for a specific definition beyond vague notions of customer focus.

When I met him, the CEO was somewhat ambivalent vis-à-vis the entire Champion idea: Was this really what they should be doing, he asked me, and if yes, how could they gain momentum in this transformation process? He elaborated:

Phase 1 was about integrating and extracting value from our acquisitions. Phase 2 is about getting more out of who we are now and this ought to require customer focus: we need to know what they want, what we can do and then close the gap.

Through our initial conversations I learnt that the leadership team was a relatively homogenous group of people, who also knew each other well socially. The group consisted of three geographical business managers, the CFO, the officer responsible for health, safety and environmental issues, the business development manager and the CEO. As a group

they met once a month. Three times a year they met at overnight strategy retreats, dedicated to specific business issues.

The ways of working in the company were relatively informal. The CEO summarized: 'We are not big on written things. I ask my managers what they need in order to do what they need to do. Then, we simply agree on resources, recognition and authority.' Despite this aversion to written plans and strategies, the CEO had nevertheless formulated a written set of corporate 'objectives'.

The CEO and I agreed to stage a one-day strategy retreat to encourage his leadership team of seven people to share more of their inner thoughts and feelings about the concept and take a stance about what it implied. Our joint expectation was that anything could happen during this retreat, including total chaos. The CEO was prepared to go ahead with this uncertainty.

The retreat

During the first few hours I spent time ensuring that the leaders were comfortable constructing things out of hard and soft physical construction materials as well as capable of using such objects to mediate communication (both practices are explained in subsequent chapters). Encouraging them to articulate and share their unique individual views of the concept, I first asked them to create their own personal models of Customer Service Champion. These individual models were rather rudimentary and consisted of only a few hard and soft pieces combined. As Chapter 12 will expand on, I subsequently asked them to take on the role of their creations and present their understandings in the first person which would answer the question 'who am I?' (that is, 'I am a Customer Service Champion):

Geographical business manager 1: 'I am different from other managers, but they think they are as good as I am in customer service. I am part of creating a complete cultural change in the company, but I do not understand where the company wants to go, and my role in it. I think I am a one to two year story.'

Geographical business manager 2: 'I am a hard job. Customers are not happy and I have to deal with it. Others are dropping obstacles in my way, and I must smooth the path out. I need to kill attitudes and even people who have the wrong attitude, like the bottom line is most important.'

Geographical business manager 3: 'I am on a constant journey filled with barriers and rewards. I am A Better Offer of goods and services. [Then he slipped out of the first person mode when he continued:] We do not offer anything different from competition so we simply need to do things better.'

CFO: 'It is about barriers ... I think the concept is about attitudes of mind' [despite several attempts, the CFO was unable to express his construction in the first person].

Safety officer: 'I am a culture; the missing edge on a five-edged star. I am about adopting standards. I must be precise. I must be communicated. I must be measurable. I must be transparent. I must not let the staff be in any doubt about what I am.'

CEO: 'I am a frightening journey on a tightrope into the future, and I am struggling to keep the right balance. I am engaging my customers and ask them about today and tomorrow to try to get more balance and security into my journey. Both office and field people support me and I want to engage more with them. I am halfway through the journey ... no, in fact I am just starting out. I get energy from feeling what I do is risky. Although I want to mitigate the risk I do not want to lose sight about where I am going.'

Business development manager: 'I am a set of processes to deliver to customers. I might be talking with them, gathering information. I communicate to meet customers' needs.'

Following this initial exercise I asked them to try to construct together a new model that captured what each one of them considered an important aspect of the Customer Service Champion concept, manifested but not constrained by their previous narratives and models. This process took considerable time but resulted in a new construction to which all of them had contributed. As they revisited each of the hard and soft objects included in their model they added, removed and connected things as they saw fit. Throughout this sharing exercise all of them, the business manager included, seemed to enjoy themselves, evidenced by their relaxed body language, use of humour, and frequent laughter. One of them said: 'I could have kept going constructing, only time prevented me.' (Compare this with the story about the newspaper managers above.)

When I asked for a volunteer to describe in words what they had cap-

tured in objects, one of the business managers eagerly jumped in (I asked him to continue to use first person):

I am a journey about delighting our customers in the future. I am knocking down barriers and involving lots of people. I am a universal approach and I demand that every manager join me. I begin by engaging customers in an open, knowledgeable and passionate way. I am ready to change and to knock down barriers [illustrates this by pushing aside and removing things in the model].

His story provoked much approval among the others, indicated by nods, 'yes' statements, and scattered applause. From here I engaged them in a process to extract the key or foundational ideas that the Customer Service Champion concepts rested on according to them, and manifested in the model. At this stage they were all stirred up. They moved around the room and pointed at the constructions and at the list of words. They did not so much reflect over which words to use, but rather seemed to offer their top-of-mind reactions: *journey, openness, engagement, knowledge, passion, universal, many people, diversity, customer delight, flexibility and knock down barriers.*

Following this exercise, we agreed that each one of them, individually, should try to write their own personal story about what the Customer Service Champion meant to them, still *by playing the role of the model*. The CEO encouraged them to be personal, to make it 'their own thing'. While he said this, the rest of the group searched for whatever pieces of paper were available (not much), borrowed pens from one another, and started writing. During this process most of them stood up, walked to the table and studied the model from different angles.

This exercise resulted in seven individual statements that all wove most of the words on the board together, but in different ways. Then they each took turns to read how they had given meaning to the concept of Customer Service Champion. Immediately following this sharing, one of the business managers exclaimed: 'These stories are different, and yet similar!' Although it was late in the afternoon, the ambience was cheerful and relaxed, manifested by smiles, handshakes to congratulate one another for what they had achieved, and laughter. The CEO concluded the workshop with these words:

I am happy we have captured what WE mean. I know now that any one of you can stand up in front of anyone in this organization and, using your OWN words, explain what Customer Service Champion means.

After the formal workshop we gathered in a local restaurant to relax over a drink. After a while the CEO came over to me, raised his glass, and said: 'I really struggled with this concept of ours. I didn't want to push it onto them and yet, I didn't take the time to invite them to co-own this idea with me – until today. This has really helped.'

The CEO of OilCo chose to involve others in making sense of the new customer-focus concept in their own personal way and share this among themselves. He did not push his own meaning onto the others and as a result their sense of belonging increased dramatically. Moreover, even as his group homed in on a handful of words they felt captured the essence of the concept, he did not push for a standardized statement to be inculcated into the rest of the organization. Instead, he explicitly invited his leaders to describe the concept to the people in their respective units *in their own words*, framed by their shared sense-making. Having gone through a process in which his leaders appeared to *authentically* bring forth their own ideas and interpretations of the concepts, he was confident they 'co-owned' the essential meaning of it. Every one of them was ready and committed to transform the organization from within.

In this book we will *step-by-step* describe and illustrate how the OilCo leaders came to this state of readiness. To make the point I will start with an anecdote that illustrates contra-practices, which are perhaps the 'prescribed' thinking and doing more common in organizations. Midway through the journey of the book we make a halt – to again remind you of such realities and the assumptions they rest on.

The anti-case

Driven by increased competition the CEO of the financial service company RedCo launched a new customer-focus concept (at about the same time as OilCo launched the concept of Customer Service Champion). To ensure immediate implementation of the new concept, the CEO recruited a well-known marketing professor to develop a standardized, two-hour, online 'worldwide implementation' workshop. Then he instructed his leadership team, ordering them to tell their staff to do the workshop within a month. To help his leadership team he authored a standardized e-mail, which he recommended they used in their own name. As was common practice in this firm, the initiative was linked to the bonus system, and doing the workshop was a must. Yet, to the CEO's frustration, despite these mechanisms people did not sign up for the workshop at the expected rate and in mid-2005 it looked inevitable that the whole project would be delayed.

One of the executives who was asked to help implement this initiative

in his region explained the problem: ‘The concept is owned by the CEO but he hasn’t found a way to spread it even to us on the next level.’ He continued, ‘some of my peers went as far as to warn me not to touch it.’ Reflecting over the history of such a corporate initiative he continued, ‘these initiatives often lack coherence; they do not go well.’ As far as I could tell a few months later this strategic (and expensive) initiative had met the same fate as previous ones: an important topic in meetings without deeper impact.

Quick reflection

There are striking similarities and differences between the two tales. The two organizations have a similar strategic need, that is, to become more customer oriented, which naturally means different things in their respective businesses. New circumstances called for a new outcome. In both cases the CEO initiated and launched a new concept to capture the essence of this need and, *in principle*, both of them decided to push this initiative further down the organization. Here is where the similarities end.

In RedCo the CEO chose to package his understanding and definition of the problem and enforce this meaning onto the next level managers, and, in turn, asked them to ‘cascade’ this approach further down the hierarchy. To efficiently and effectively steer the organization in the new direction, the leadership standardized both the meaning of the new concept (set definition), and the process for how to interpret it correctly (the ‘implementation’ workshop). The CEO’s prescription was experienced as prescribed by the people on the next level, who in turn pushed the prescription further down the ranks. Having followed RedCo over time and seen the failure of a major strategic initiative a few years ago, I was not surprised to hear about their continued habits of prescribing new practices just as if they were reprogramming computers. Yet, I could not help wondering why they expected it to work this time, but as the people I talked with appeared quite sane, perhaps few had expected a different outcome this time. This way of working is truly inefficient, seems to be a waste of resources and managerial time, and rarely provides the desired results. It is also an opportunity loss for the organization. Just imagine how much the initiative might be improved if the vast resources that lie *within* people could be aroused.

In the world of prescribed thinking, we need to conform to what others think and suppress our own thoughts and feelings. When we are engaged in a necessary routine work to create value in stable circumstances this make sense. But, this is not the best way to prepare our minds for the new outcomes needed to meet new circumstances. The upcoming delay

described in the RedCo anecdote exemplifies this failure. Until the CEO invited his leaders to think from within he faced this same risk, and we saw that nothing happened for quite some time after he first tried (but not very hard) to prescribe the new concept.

The OilCo tale illustrates the idea and practice of *Thinking from Within*, which I seek to convey throughout this book, and the RedCo tale illustrates what it is not. The OilCo tale illustrates how in a safe and secure environment it is possible to create the conditions to engage people's senses in ways that stir conventional thinking. It shows us what can happen when we let strategy emerge from within our thinking, how we can migrate from relying solely on routine and deductive analytical thinking towards nurturing our incredible imagination and making way for the spontaneity of our wisdom.

Objective facts and figures about the world are of course also important, for both strategy and other managerial practices. But only when we let the external information in to meet and merge with the inner world can we make any new meaning of it. This is what differentiates humans from expert systems. When we seek different outcomes to *also* meet new circumstances, strategy practices should become an opportunity to reflect on the world as we subjectively see it, just like the people in OilCo did. When we embrace spontaneity and imagination in our doing and thinking, strategy becomes a practice that helps organizations not only to efficiently adapt to given circumstances, but also to imaginatively shape their worlds. The distinction is clearly visible in the difference between the two tales above. When we grow our strategy practices from prescribed to 'from within', we delve into the world as we subjectively see it here and now. Conversations can focus on how to shape the world of which we are already an integral part, like they did in OilCo. Achievements of the strategy practice are manifested in wiser people, prepared to spontaneously seize fleeting opportunities and cope with emerging problems called for by changing circumstances.

Before we describe and further illustrate in more detail what the OilCo managers went through let's dig a bit deeper into the roots of the prescribed practices manifested in the RedCo anecdote and strategy practices in many other companies around the globe. After all, in order to change something we must first understand and acknowledge what it is we want to change.

Intellectual heritage

Prescribed strategy practices are rooted in an intellectual tradition that

views leaders as cold-minded intellectuals, ‘heads’, separated from the ‘body’ of the organization. Knowledge is best acquired through deductive, analytical reasoning free from the fallibilities of our senses, and the specificity of the situation. When defending his 1641 treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes famously coined *cogito ergo sum* (‘I am thinking therefore I exist’) to capture his thesis about the dualism of mind and body. Anyone who has meditated knows that it is indeed possible to pretend not to have a body, but not for too long. Eventually we need a bio-break. For the past centuries, Descartes has come to symbolize the paradigmatic separation between mind and body that underlies much of western organizational practices (as I will discuss below, this portrayal is unfair), such as strategy. For many leaders strategy practice is nothing but an austere exercise of passionless and pure reasoning, often conceptually and physically detached from the body of the organizations.

The Cartesian ideas developed further during the 18th century in the European philosophy we call the Age of Enlightenment. In principle, this philosophical movement advocated rationality as a means of establishing an authoritative system of ethics, aesthetics and knowledge. By objective study of nature and the physical universe, the intellectual leaders of this movement, Blaise Pascal, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Galileo Galilei, Carl von Linnæus, Denis Diderot and Isaac Newton among others, regarded themselves as courageously leading the world out of a long period of irrationality, superstition, and tyranny (from the church and sovereigns). In the Age of Enlightenment scientists were convinced strict laws could grasp Nature in full. It was the dream that man finally could be in control, to master the world rather than be left to the whims of a potentially dangerous Nature.

The coherent system of verifiable predictions, based on axiomatic proof and physical observation, in Newton’s *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (1687) and Linnaeus’s *Systema Natura* (1735) are perhaps the most visible and famous example of the ideal of the Enlightenment. The idea of uncovering uniform laws for natural phenomena mirrored the greater systematization in a variety of studies by these scholars. Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772) evidenced that in his fight against the unpredictable Nature, man had finally put his fist around all available knowledge centred on ‘reason’.

This intellectual heritage is visible in much academic research in the field of organization. It is also the root of the term ‘physics envy’, which is used derogatively to describe social science’s dream of emulating the paradigms of the natural sciences. It is particularly visible also in the field of strategy and this is a problem.⁵ When strategy practice is seen as pure

intellectual reasoning based on the ideals of rationality and prediction, we risk engaging only parts of the human potential and what people can contribute. When we eliminate from strategy practice what makes us human, it risks becoming as lacklustre, trivial and empty as many texts describing it. In David Whyte's terms, there is no sense of belonging. This practice may be good enough for those increasingly rare stable, predictable circumstances that do not call for new outcomes, but not for the rest of life.

The embodied mind

In the face of changing circumstances calling for new outcomes, how can we activate more of the human potential in an important organizational practice such as strategy? The mature Descartes lets us see a way. Towards the end of his life Descartes abandoned his early views and wrote in *Les Passions de l'Ame* (1649) how emotions are intricately intertwined with thinking. Descartes' refined ideas fundamentally challenged the 'tripartite soul' doctrine of Plato (impulses and reason mediated by emotions – Gr. *thumos*).

He came to this conclusion by pondering how feelings like passion, pleasure, hunger and pain were not disembodied, but rather appeared to have a lot to do with our body. There is indeed something intrinsically opaque about the sensory data we receive when the body is stimulated by, for instance, touching something or when we recklessly fall in love. Feelings are vivid and intense, often dramatically influencing our bodies in unpredictable ways and do not lend themselves to be analysed with the transparent rationality of the Enlightenment, but carry their own much deeper logic that is based on a wider and richer well of inputs. This suggests that knowledge, or rather 'knowing', involves not only 'pure' reasoning but also intuitive and embodied practice.

Like Descartes, who eventually questioned his famous distinction between mind and body, we should consider strategy practice to be more than pure and emotionless reasoning. As we gradually include more of our senses into the picture, we must also question the assumptions of rationality and prediction that underlie much of contemporary strategy practice (and research). When we *do* strategy, not just *think* strategy, we engage internal resources that otherwise would never be triggered. This 'doing' is not about mindless execution of, for instance, an 'implementation workshop' for the sake of just doing something; it is about the kinds of doing that describe, create and challenge what we know in ways pure intellectual reasoning cannot. *Through inclusion of our senses and personal thoughts, we engage more of the uniqueness and potential of our minds –*

we think 'from within'. This way we can avoid the apparent insanity by both expecting and getting a different outcome.

As a picture is said to convey more than a thousands words I will illustrate the difference between prescribed thinking and 'from within' with two pictures (Exhibits 1.2 and 1.3 in plate section), which depict the same group of people practising strategy in two very different ways. As an observer I took these pictures during a strategy session with the divisional leadership team of a multinational service company.

When I show such illustrations to managers and ask what they see their first reaction is typically 'what a mess'. They see the scattered documents, the projector, the laptop, the flipchart and the whiteboard, as well as the coffee, water and fruits. Focusing on the people they see a group of managers sitting around a table. One of them is using his hands to make a point, others watch him, a facilitator is standing in front and one guy is, yes, peacefully asleep. Following the laughs about the extremeness of the fleeting moment captured in this photo, I have enjoyed many serious conversations with managers about what they actually do when they practise strategy.

Of course, Exhibit 1.2 captures a brief moment of thinking and doing. Although we cannot see what they think, we can see what these managers do, at least then and there: talk, read papers, watch slide presentations, write text on the whiteboard and so on. As an observer I can report that they also used the occasion to regularly check their e-mails. As captured in this photo they spent most of the time listening, talking and reading – while sitting. From my recollection they were quite bored and detached.

What is not visible is their thinking, which for all except one seems to occur consciously. As an observer I noted how most of the time was spent reacting in a politically correct way to facts and figures. In my experience this photo reflects what managers do when they practise strategy, regardless whether they gather in an off-site retreat setting, as in this case, or work at the office. It may also represent the practice during just another meeting, on just about anything.

Managers often like to view themselves as hands-on, execution oriented and sometimes even passionate about what they do. Yet, when they practise important things like strategy they tend to become 'hands-off', emotionless intellectuals who thrive on abstract models. Perhaps they are too inspired by the notion of the thoughtful, superior, but passionless philosopher of ancient Greece, who also was an inspiration for the early Descartes? During this cerebral activity personal, subjective views are not welcome because they risk polluting the pure reasoning

centred on objective facts about how things ‘really are’. Noting a gender difference, former US secretary of state Madeleine Albright said the inclusion of feelings into serious conversations may sometimes make a man look ‘strong’, but typically makes women be described with the less positive term ‘emotional’.⁶

Now look at Exhibit 1.3 (in plate section), and remember that it is the same group of people practising the same thing: strategy. The paradigmatic differences are that they have now allowed their senses to be engaged in service of creative expression from within, which in turn engaged their minds in new ways. Their knowing about the issues discussed did not just come from pure intellectual reasoning, but was also influenced by signals from their bodies in general and their hands in particular. These managers were freely engaging their ability to describe, create and challenge what they saw, and they took a stance about what they worked on. What comes from within becomes a part of us that we naturally commit to and take responsibility for. Just like the leaders of OilCo did, that day these managers were *Thinking from Within*.

By engaging more of our senses and emotions, as exemplified in Exhibit 1.3 and the OilCo story, we fuel our minds in ways that have tremendous benefits. We learn new things, we interact in new ways and we can more easily reach the deeper emotional levels of ourselves, which we believe are an important source for new ideas. When we think from within, as individuals and in groups, we can reduce the inefficiency, ineffectiveness and opportunity loss of contemporary organizational practices, such as strategy, and we can more easily belong to the thinking and doing involved. Instead of imposing the thinking on the next level of the organizational hierarchy in terms of a standardized and readymade training package attached to a bonus system, the CEO of OilCo invited his leaders to think from within. They left the meeting room ready and eager to execute: engaging others in something they both understood and agreed with. None of them used the occasion for a micro-nap and potential bonuses were not discussed.

Roadmap

Thinking from Within is grounded in the human practice called ‘play’. By transforming important work such as strategy to become more play-like and play-ful, as illustrated in Exhibits 1.2 and 1.3 (in the plate section), we have to go beyond the deeply rooted folk conception that ‘leisure play’ has nothing to do with ‘serious work’. Chapter 2 describes the possibilities of play for expressing deep and important thoughts, through the

quality of ambiguity, from a range of perspectives, including philosophy, anthropology, sociology and, in particular, psychology. Seen as an important and inherent human practice, particularly important when dealing with changing circumstances where a new outcome is required, play serves as the overall conceptual foundation for *Thinking from Within*.

Practices

Grounded in this ambiguity of play *Thinking from Within* consists of three separate but interrelated practices, to be expanded in Chapters 3, 4 and 5: imagining, constructing together and object-mediated communication. Exhibit 1.4 depicts how these practices, grounded in the notion of play, make up *Thinking from Within*.

When we play we engage our imagination to describe, create and challenge the dynamic world as we see it. As described in Chapter 3 imagination has a conceptual, behavioural and an often neglected material dimension. To nurture and practice our full imagination we need to take on different symbolic roles, like being handymen, storytellers and architects. The story of ChemCo and other cases in this book illustrate how managers can do this in practice. Chapter 3 is devoted to how we can engage more of our imagination.

Delving further into the concept of *Thinking from Within* the material dimension of imagination deserves more attention. The very act of constructing things with our hands, and doing this together, is particularly beneficial for our imagination. Chapter 4 describes the concept behind and the practice of *constructing together* as an important element of *Thinking from Within*. The case of PrintCo illustrates the discussion.

But *Thinking from Within* is yet more imaginative than constructing together; it is about using what we co-construct to mediate communication about matters that concern us. Working with objects makes us think,

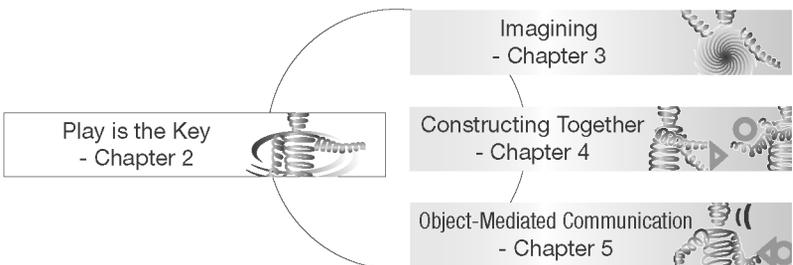


Exhibit 1.4 Thinking from Within practices

agree and cope differently, which will be evident in the cases provided throughout this book and already indicated in the tale of OilCo. Chapter 5 describes the third practice of *Thinking from Within*, *object-mediated communication*, and the case of TelCo illustrates what we mean.

Assumptions

On a deeper level *Thinking from Within* rests on two philosophical assumptions, which we need to grasp: how we view the world (ontology) and how we can know about it (epistemology). As esoteric as this may seem at first glance, such deeply formed assumptions influence our thinking and actions every day and are manifested also in how we practise strategy. To make this discussion more tangible Chapter 6 provides two longer case stories of conventional strategy practices, which did not include any of the thinking and doing described in this book. These two cases, framed in Chapter 6 as *a reminder of realities*, also serve as a comparison against all of the ideas presented in the book.

As depicted in Exhibit 1.5, Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the stance we must take when we think from within. Specifically, Chapter 7 claims we should view the world as inherently dynamic and always expect things to suddenly happen: the required ontology for *Thinking from Within* must be *intending emergence*. The BrassCo and TechCo cases presented in Chapter 6 and ChemCo of Chapter 3 serve to illustrate the necessary shift of ontology. In addition the tale of PackCo illuminates the key points made in this chapter.

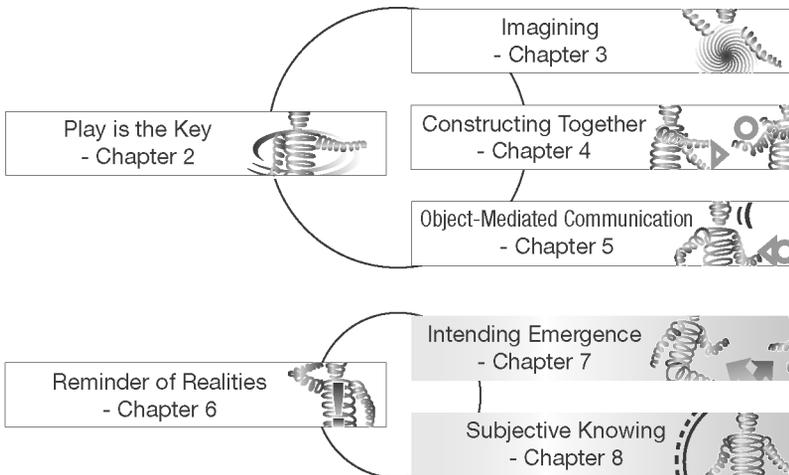


Exhibit 1.5 Assumptions of *Thinking from Within*

Chapter 8 describes and illustrates that what we perceive depends on who we are. *Thinking from Within* requires an epistemology of the *subjective way of knowing*. The BrassCo and TechCo cases presented in Chapter 6 and ChemCo of Chapter 3 serve to illustrate the necessary shift in ways of knowing (epistemology) for *Thinking from Within*.

The emergent benefits from *Thinking from Within* are manifold. Recall that this not an idea about better philosophizing, or abstract reasoning for the sake of thinking, nor is it about mindless execution for the sake of just getting things done. The next few chapters are devoted to describe and illustrate the emergent, potential benefits of *Thinking from Within*, which is described in Exhibit 1.6.

Chapter 9 suggests that the content of our thinking becomes influential and enduring when we escape from the 'flatland' of text and pictures so often used in strategy practices. *Thinking from Within* encourages us to develop three-dimensional imagery that, when co-constructed with our hands, remain with us. The focus of this chapter is on the three-dimensional imagery our imagination and hands produce and the narratives these images both capture and give rise to. Yet another case of strategy practice, that of HandyCo, illustrates the benefits of escaping the flatland in strategy practice.

Another emergent benefit of this practice stems from the very foundation of play: developing organizational identity. In Chapter 10 we focus on organizational identity, describe what it is and how it is socially constructed and, in our case, also physically constructed. We use two additional case stories, InfCo and DiscCo, to illustrate these emergent benefits. Using these cases, we go on to discuss the intrinsic benefits that all play activities have in shaping our identities.

Chapter 11 makes the case that *Thinking from Within* increases chances of peak experiences among the people involved. The literature on such phenomena in other fields indicates the tremendous benefits when it happens, but also that we cannot just make them happen. An additional tale of a management group, ConglomerateCo, as well as the case of TalkCo, illustrate peak experiences and what they are good for.

When we think from within we become aware of our inner self and how to bring those important qualities forth into practice. Without such authenticity, imagination and spontaneity remain hidden within. Chapter 12 describes and illustrates how we can enhance authenticity when *Thinking from Within*, especially by learning from theories and practices of drama. In this chapter we revisit PackCo, continue the TalkCo case and provide two new stories to illustrate our point, GadgetCo and UtilityCo.

Thinking from Within paves the way for the spontaneity of our practical

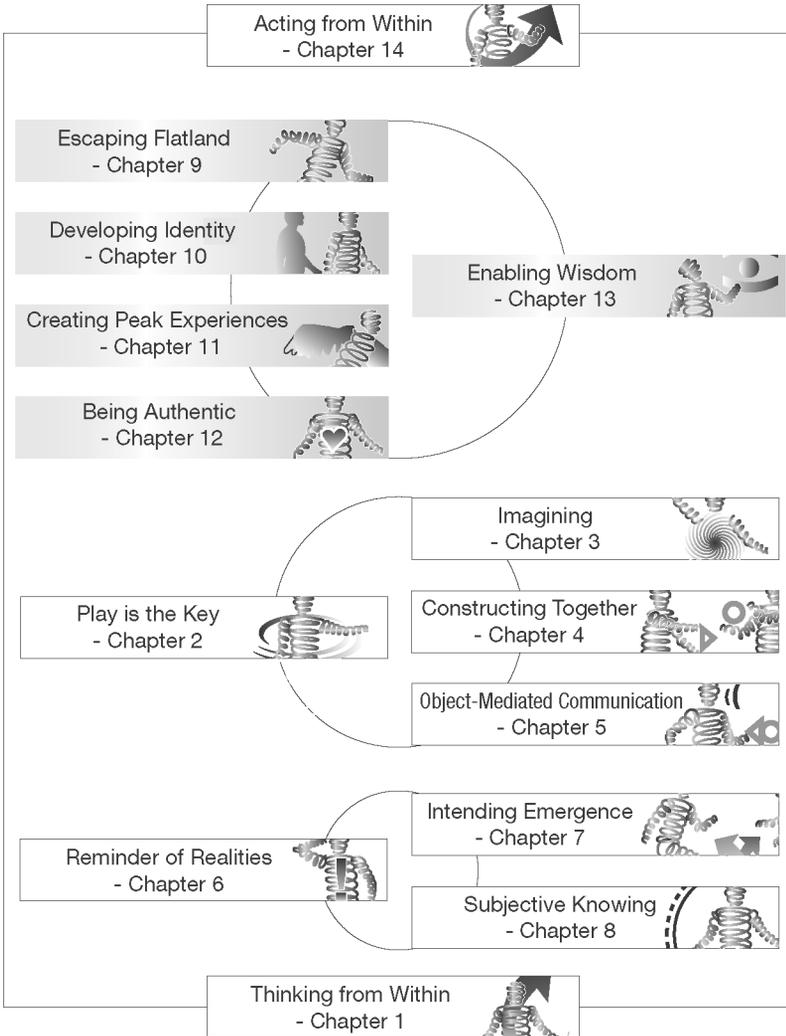


Exhibit 1.6 Emergent benefits of *Thinking from Within*

wisdom. When we are wise we use our inner potential of imagination and spontaneity to size up novel situations, make decisions and take action that promotes not only ourselves but also the community that sustains us. *Thinking from Within* cultivates our split-second swiftness to do the right thing when real-life situations call for it. With increased wisdom we

reduce the risk of doing the same thing over, and over, and over again, while, for some reason, expecting a different outcome. Cutting across the previous discussions, Chapter 13 is devoted to enabling wisdom. To illustrate our points we extend the ChemCo story and add the story of BankCo.

As illustrated in Exhibit 1.6 *Thinking from Within* is a practice that can be used to intentionally frame and deal with opportunities and challenges perceived as real and important. We may indeed apply *Thinking from Within* to an already identified and specified problem. Yet, as subsequent chapters will make increasingly apparent that is perhaps the least appropriate use for this practice. When *Thinking from Within*, we must expect things to emerge from the interactions of people involved. When we think from within we make sense of and change our interpretations of the world and we perceive things in ways pure reasoning does not. By definition, *Thinking from Within* is most pertinent for situations where we need new ways of thinking and acting, that is, for *unstable circumstances calling for new outcomes* (upper right-hand side of Exhibit 1.1). Therefore, when we think from within, over and over again, we can and should expect a different emergent, outcome (and remain sane).

The final chapter summarizes the argument of this book in its entirety, relating it to management practices in general and normative ones in particular.

Conclusion

To be prepared to deal effectively and responsibly with new circumstances, while seeking new outcomes, our strategic thinking should be imaginative, not only deductively analytical and our actions should come from the spontaneity of our wisdom, not just from established routines. *Thinking from Within* is a play-like practice that enables this transformation. By engaging more and different senses we create the conditions for new and different ideas and actions. When we think from within we migrate our thinking and doing towards the imaginative and the spontaneous, which has tremendous potential benefits on the individual, social and organizational levels. *Thinking from Within* complements existing strategy practices in organizations with ways of working more astute for meeting new circumstances in new ways.

Because of my own background this book focuses on strategy practices, but that should not be seen as a constraint, just a starting point. *Thinking from Within* is a way of thinking *and* doing that can and should be applied in whatever fields that make sense to you. The only limitation is your own imagination, spontaneity and perhaps how well you play.

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The letter *n* following a page number refers to an item in the notes; for example *n1/2* refers to note number 2 relating to Chapter 1

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