PLAYING TO WIN

Strategy is serious business. The very origin of the term "strategy" as the task of ancient Greek army generals, or strategoi, underlies a view of strategy as rational, analytical, objective and top-down, involving comprehensive analysis and planning.

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However, innovative, ground-breaking strategies and ideas rarely result from such structured planning processes but rather tend to emerge from messy, ambiguous, subjective, and not fully rational activities and practices.

How can companies then foster innovative thinking and strategizing? There is one human activity, neglected so far by most strategists, that is messy, ambiguous, subjective and non-rational - play. Engaging senior managers in play to develop shared views of what the company is about, what the competitors might do, how the industry is evolving, and even to spark novel strategic directions has up till recently been unthinkable partly because most companies and their leaders have forgotten how to play.

One way to play strategically involves inviting participants to individually, and then collectively build representations or models of their organization, its competitive landscape including key stakeholders, and the perceived relations among these elements, using toy construction materials. The results are complex and imaginative structures that are arrived at after considerable, energetic, intellectually demanding, and often heated debate. The process is in effect what psychologists call a "projective technique" that capitalizes on the human capacity to experience the world at deeper levels than simply rational cognition, and then externalize this experience through creation of artifacts that can be explored, debated and decoded.

Executives find such sessions demanding, involving, energizing and almost invariably insightful. While the process is intended to be light-hearted and playful, their outcomes and consequences are both serious and relevant. The table below highlights the differences between traditional strategizing techniques and strategizing through play:
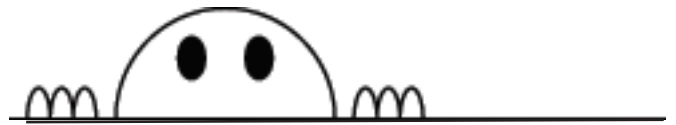
Traditional strategizing	Strategizing through Play
Planned, deductive, analytical, top down - oriented	Emergent, inductive, based on narrative, group -oriented
Analysis process aims to reduce complexity, sanitize, normalize	Construction process aims to highlight richness, inter-relationships and interactions, expansive
Strategist is detached, objective, distant	Strategist is attached, engaged, often emotionally involved
Output is plans, charts, figures and conventional statements	Output is 3-D constructions, "embodied metaphors", unique, visible and memorable

Benefits of Strategic Play

Firstly, play can deliver insights and potential shifts in managers' mind-sets that would have been difficult to gain in more conventional, board-meeting style sessions. After periodic play sessions participants' mindsets become more proficient in exploring out-of-the-box alternatives and simultaneously seeing multiple points of view, ultimately resulting in higher levels of organizational flexibility and adaptability. Once a concrete representation is developed, rather than an ethereal idea, one feels more inclined to face personal or organizational blind spots, consequently making possible a mindset shift. In a workshop with the strategist team of Telco, a leading European telecom services provider, participants zeroed in on the role of the lighthouse, representing the brand, as a crucial issue for their future development.

The critical inquiry engendered by the physical representation of the brand led to the realization that rather than guiding or driving the company, the brand might in fact have become a barrier to swiftly maneuvering in the right direction. This led to the playful but richly symbolic gesture of one strategist who lifted the brand from the top-end of the table and placed it at the back end instead, behind the flotilla of ships representing the company. In addition to enabling a critical discussion of the brand and its effects, the debate enabled by the collective construction led the strategy team in turn to reconsider the design and focus of a large-scale executive training and development program that had initially been designed around the brand.

Secondly, play provides a context where senior teams can surface and debate contentious or critical management issues when strategizing, by "concretizing" these issues into embodied metaphors. For example, the senior team of a leading food product packaging company, PackCo, were split about whether after-sales activities were of strategic relevance and a differentiating factor, or just an operational issue that was at best a hygiene factor, that could be outsourced to third parties. They engaged in a play based workshop where they constructed models of their organization and its environment, including key competitors and clients. Their own company was portrayed as a large, solid but inflexible castle while the competitors were portrayed as a fast moving, adaptive pirates' nest in the sea around the castle.

Within this construction, the customer's perspective was played out and the senior team started to appreciate the strategic relevance of after sales activities. While the initially contentious issue was not entirely resolved in terms of full agreement, the

acknowledgement of the strategic relevance of these activities for customer satisfaction and retention enabled the team to subsequently seriously explore potential strategic alliances that would help the company provide a world-wide after sales service.

Thirdly, play helps to surface previously politically sensitive or previously un-discussable issues. A typical example of such a taboo brought out in the open would be how participants view the CEO or senior management. We found that often CEOs are represented in these playful constructions as figures that are positioned much higher and physically detached from the representation of the organization itself. They are often portrayed as wearing symbols of power such as a crown or a sword and shown as leading the way, whereby the figure representing them turns its back on the organization. Sometimes

even more challenging constructions are made, with participants not immediately able to explain the reasons they represented their CEO in a certain way. All these elements invite a safe, yet critical inquiry into how the CEO and senior managers are viewed by the rest of the organization. Even though sometimes CEOs portrayed in certain ways may be irritated, most are surprised, but all realize that such an exploration of their image, role and behavior prompts a much richer and honest discussion than other feedback mechanisms such as 360 degree feedback, that is often biased by the selection mechanisms of who is giving the feedback and then rationalized away. A striking and unexpected representation of their role offers an occasion for not only shared sensemaking, but also for individual, personal reflection and development for senior leaders.

Fourthly, group-oriented, interactive play develops and draws on rich imagery and metaphors rather than dry statistics and figures, and thus helps to develop a memorable shared language that the group can draw on in future strategizing. Participants report that the insights gained at such play sessions, and the embodied metaphors constructed, continue to inform their thinking and debates for a long time to come, not only helping to improve their strategizing process, but also helping to break down walls of inter-functional or inter-divisional separation.

When members of the strategy department of a global leading cellphone production company, CellCo, gathered to review their strategizing processes and practices, they constructed a model of their organization as a set of loosely connected physical structures clustered around a central tower. A porous, dotted line represented the brand as the integrative force of the firm. The core of the construction was then surrounded by a set of gates representing portals for the future, ranging from adversarial options such as hostile acquisitions by competitors, to potentially beneficial options such as strategic alliances. The dominant, unifying metaphorical image of the gates to the future enriched the strategists' awareness of several potential futures and provided them with a shared linguistic repertoire for subsequent strategic conversations.

Fifth, playing seriously also enhances the sense of involvement and ownership of participants and contributes to team building. For example, the European senior management group of a leading US-based software company, SoftCo, gathered to encourage the construction of a common identity and to foster lateral collaboration in their recently formed and very diverse team. They constructed a diverse urban landscape, with structures primarily connected to each other not directly, but through "antennae relationships" with the managing director or

other centrally located senior individuals. This construction highlighted the real difficulty of achieving a common identity and organizational collaboration among diverse country operations, providing an initial understanding of the issues involved and providing a forum for debate on appropriate actions to address the collaboration and identity issues.

The table below summarizes the four examples discussed above:

Company	Strategic goal of intervention	Embodied metaphors	Insights gained
TelCo	Reviewing strategy after acquisition by competitor	Flotilla of ships and lighthouse	Recognizing impending competitive threats; Critical reflection on brand
PackCo	Dissonance of views on strategic relevance of after-sales activities	Inflexible castle vs. fast-moving pirates' nest	Appreciation of after sales activities as strategic issue and exploration of alternatives to operationalize insight
CellCo	Review of strategizing processes and practices	Central tower within loose structures, Gates of the future	Appreciating different future options, Creation of shared metaphorical repertoire for strategic conversation
SoftCo	Identity formation and collaboration in newly formed strategist team	Loosely connected, diverse urban landscape	First step to creation of shared identity, form for debate on how to improve lateral collaboration

Playing seriously does not substitute or supplant rational, conventional strategy-making, but rather complements it. After the creative sessions that deliver important insights through divergent and generative thought, there still remains the task of operationalization and implementation of the directions that emerged, were debated and decided upon, through more convergent and analytical thinking. However the process injects much needed energy and creativity and can deliver insights that would be almost impossible to obtain within the regular, analytical strategy cycle. It is particularly suited to addressing vexed strategic issues where multiple points of view are involved, when there is a need for out-of-the-box and big-picture thinking, or in the early stages of the strategizing process where divergent, generative thinking is crucial.

Further reading

Heracleous, L. and Jacobs, C. 2005. The serious business of play. MIT Sloan Management Review, Fall: 19-20.

Jacobs, C. and Heracleous, L. 2006. Constructing shared understanding – the role of embodied metaphors in organization development. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 24 (2): 207-226.

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