

Strategy: Are you flying blind?

 By [Sid Peimer](#)

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There were six men from Indostan, the most learned of gentlemen, who wanted to expand their knowledge by getting to know elephants more intimately. So...They excitedly headed out to investigate the elephant up close, irrespective of the fact that they had a most inconvenient handicap: they were all blind. So goes the story as told in the poem by John Godfrey Saxe based on the Indian parable of the blind men and the elephant.

Strategy is not science

There are a number of strategic schools of thought, all proffering a model that, should one copy it, will provide the strategic direction one seeks. We are a creative industry, and often have no hesitation in constructing our very own proprietary model - the secret sauce that will provide for superior outcomes. But strategy is not science. A model can work in one situation, but fall desperately short in another. It is not uncommon to feel one is drowning (usually in data) or treading water (due to lack of data), so one can understand our desire to grab a life preserver... Anything that will actually keep us afloat. Although strategic models (or frameworks if you prefer) do allow us to overcome vacansopapurosophobia (fear of the blank page), they are nothing more than a flotation device to keep us on the surface.

Religion and politics

Although I am loathe to talk about religion or politics, the birth of strategic theories bears an uncanny resemblance to how religions permeate society. It starts with a prophet (academic) with an insight. They apply it to a situation and see that it works - the revelation stage. It gets published as a book or an article in Harvard Business Review and people get hooked who subsequently become evangelists to that school of thought. People become converted *en masse*. People start arguing about it and then we reach the final stage - the braai disintegrates into a tense afternoon of bitter acrimony where the hot coals of opinion should rather have waited until all the lefties (or the righties) had left. Even Malcolm Gladwell's much-vaunted 10000-hour rule is now going through that period of disapproval (or apostasy if you want to keep to the analogy).

For example, the BCG matrix was 'it' in the '70s, which illustrated quite nicely the difference between a gap in the market and a market in the gap. Michael Porter's Five Forces was huge in the '80s (and still is). And then came the Balanced Scorecard, Blue Oceans etc etc etc. Or, if you prefer, bla, bla, bla.

As Gary Hamel and CK Prahalad caution us: "It is not very comforting to think that the essence of Western strategic thought can be reduced to 8 rules for excellence, 7s's, 5 competitive forces, 4 product life-cycle stages and innumerable 2-by-2 matrices."

The elephant in the room

So where do these six blind learned men of Indostan fit into the story? Well, they see the elephant from their unique perspective. The man who touches the tail 'sees' the elephant as rope; the leg and it's a trunk of a tree; the body and it's a wall; the tusk and it's a spear; the ear and it's a fan. So, as John Godfrey Saxe's poem sums it up:

*And so these men of Indostan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Though each was partly in the right,
And all were in the wrong!*

Strategic models or frameworks emerge from a certain perspective. Strategy, I feel, is more closely aligned to 'story' than it is to process or methodology. Starting every story with 'once upon a time' is fairly open, but who says that it has to be a forest, or a castle for that matter? The only thing these additions to the framework do is to literally narrow our perspective. The payoff of using prescriptive frameworks is that you just have to connect the dots, but then a paint by numbers strategy, besides being so awfully boring, can have disastrous consequences, as you may just 'miss a spot' (with subsequent loss of market share) or miss the G-spot altogether. The best way to avoid these unhappy endings is a wide perspective. Or as Dr Seuss would say: 'It's opener there, in the wide open air'.

The upcoming 'Strategy Unplugged' is a one-day experience hosted by Sid Peimer. It is ideal for anyone wanting to get a better 'handle' on strategy. Visit www.stratplanning.com for details.

Sid Peimer provides freelance strategy, training and consulting. Details on the website www.stratplanning.com

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