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Executive Briefings on Key Business & Management Issues



Playing to Win

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One activity neglected by strategists is play. Playing seriously does not supplant conventional strategy making but complements it

Playing to Win

Strategy is serious business. The very origin of the term 'strategy' as the task of ancient Greek army generals, or *strategoï*, underlies a view of strategy as rational, analytical, objective and top-down, involving comprehensive analysis and planning. As history shows, however, innovative, groundbreaking, differentiating strategies and businesses that create new markets and expand the size of the pie, rarely result from such conventional, structured planning processes but often emerge from messy, ambiguous, subjective, emotional, socially embedded, and not fully rational activities and practices. Does this mean that we have no other option but to rely on luck or coincidence to foster innovative thinking and strategising? There is one human activity, neglected so far by most strategists, that is itself messy, ambiguous, subjective and non-rational; play.

Developmental psychology and anthropology have shown that in every phase of human development, play facilitates the development of cognitive, interpretive skills, engenders an emotional sense of fulfillment, and contributes to the development of a shared language, identity, and social practices.

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, how to address current dilemmas, and even to spark novel strategic directions has up till recently been unthinkable. Yet, enlightened organisations and strategic leaders are beginning to understand the value of playing with serious intent, an apparently paradoxical concept we ultimately owe to the Greek philosopher Plato.

We have been exploring a process of play that involves inviting senior managers to use toy construction materials to develop shared representations of their company and its competitive landscape, or to represent their strategic challenges. This results in sophisticated and imaginative structures, arrived at after considerable, energetic, intellectually demanding, and often heated debate. These 'embodied metaphors' as we call them are earnestly constructed, debated, and decoded by the participants.

This process is in effect what psychologists call a projective technique. Long used in psychotherapy, projective techniques aim to bypass the conscious, rational self to draw on sub-conscious, pre-reflexive thoughts, emotions, assumptions and perspectives that can then be surfaced, shared and debated in a conscious manner. Almost all participants find such sessions demanding, involving, energising and almost invariably insightful, in the process fostering highly effective teambuilding. While these sessions are intended to be light-hearted and playful, their outcomes and consequences are both serious and relevant.

To the Lighthouse

One key benefit of strategising through play is that it fosters insights and potential shifts in managers' mind-sets that would have been difficult to attain in more conventional, board-meeting style sessions. For example, having been recently acquired by a major competitor, the senior strategy team of TelCo, a leading European mobile phone service provider, gathered to review and reconsider their strategy. In the process of construction they portrayed their organisation as a flotilla of ships, each representing specific country operations, moving towards a lighthouse representing the brand. At some point one participant suggested that a so far neglected, powerful competitor from another part of the world might be 'coming in from left field', placing a large, bulky model of the competitor near the table to illustrate that the competitor had not been on their landscape yet but was ominously facing towards their market. The competitor model's sheer size, location and posture sparked a debate that helped the strategists not only consider potential responses and scenarios for this previously blind spot, but to do so with an urgency and focus that would have been difficult to attain otherwise. In the same workshop, participants zeroed in on the role of the lighthouse, representing the brand, as a crucial issue for their company's future development. The critical inquiry engendered by the physical representation of the brand led to the realisation that rather than guiding or driving the company, the brand might in fact have become a barrier or sunk cost to swiftly maneuvering in the right direction. This realisation 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. This session thus enabled participants to focus attention on a large potential competitor, fostered a critical, uncomfortable but productive discussion of their brand and its effects, and led them to reconsider the design and focus of a large-scale executive development programme that had initially been designed around the brand.

How can a company play seriously? Paradoxically, play with serious intent cannot simply be spontaneous. It must be organised and resourced adequately, simultaneously allowing for enough 'foolishness' to emerge, within a frame that aims to explore and deliver insights on pressing strategic issues. If the CEO is present, they should take care to not dominate the process, and try to act as just one of the players. A skilled facilitator is useful in helping to bring about a healthy and productive generation, debate and integration of ideas. Finally, the organisation should take play seriously, endeavoring to capture insights from the session, and act on them.

Beyond the Battlements

Secondly, play also provides a context where senior teams can surface and debate contentious or critical management issues when strategising, by ‘concretising’ 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 organisation and its environment, including key competitors and clients. They portrayed their company 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; reflecting the company’s dominant position in its market, as well as the dangers of ever-present cutthroat competition. Within this construction, the customer’s perspective was played out and the senior team started to appreciate the strategic relevance of after sales activities for customer satisfaction and retention. This acknowledgement enabled the team to subsequently seriously explore potential strategic alliances that would help the company provide a world-wide after sales service.

Kill the King?

Thirdly, play helps to surface politically sensitive or un-discussable issues. A typical example 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, are physically detached from the organisation itself, are wearing symbols of power such as a crown or a sword, are often portrayed in a controlling pose and interestingly sometimes in a pose suggesting detachment or readiness to escape. 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 organisation. CEOs portrayed in such ways are sometimes annoyed, often surprised, but mostly realise that such a safe exploration of their image, role and behaviour prompts a much richer, developmental, and honest discussion than other feedback mechanisms such as 360 degree feedback, that tends to be highly selective and rationalised away.

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



Opening the Gates

When members of the strategy department of a global leading cellphone production company, CellCo, gathered to review their strategising processes and practices, they constructed a model of their organisation 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.

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 operationalisation and implementation of the directions that emerged, were debated and decided upon, through more convergent and analytical thought. Playing seriously is more than a creativity technique such as brainstorming. It provides a forum for structured and thoughtful interaction, and lasting images and metaphors that participants will draw on long after the play has ended.

Further Reading

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

Jacobs, C and Heracleous, L 2005. Constructing shared understanding: The role of embodied metaphors in organization development. Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, forthcoming.

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