

## *other people's words*

There's nothing right in my left brain, and nothing left in my right brain.  
– A bumper sticker seen on a taxicab in Los Angeles, California

## *strategic and creative thinking*

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A client once asked me what tools they might use to be creative when they're working alone. In terms of random stimulus, nothing – and I mean nothing – beats broad-band Internet access and Google. It's the electronic version of cheese and crackers. With just a few clicks of the mouse, literally gazillions of unusual, odd and strange things are instantly available to help you brainstorm ideas when you don't have the luxury of a group of people.

Surfing around for a project not long ago, I came across the website of a comedian who listed his favourite 'business buzzwords.' If you haven't heard of buzzwords, you've surely used one in a business meeting. They are classic over-used words or phrases, used so frequently, that they begin to lose their meaning and impact. Common examples are clichés ('shifting paradigms' or 'garbage in - garbage out'), or phrases which are fancy descriptions of ordinary tasks ('data mining' is nothing more than doing research), or simply nonsensical ('future proof' or 'process re-engineering'). My particular favorite is 'out of the box' to describe being creative, and one which I would like to never hear again in my natural lifetime.

Business buzzwords are easy to laugh at, uncomfortably so if you think you use them a bit too often. I'm not suggesting they're bad to use – when used properly of course – which means you know its real definition as well as use it in the appropriate context and situation. An example of how NOT to use the phrase is a friend who recently told her husband that he needed to shift his paradigm about which sofa to purchase for the lounge. I imagine his response was something which one could best describe as process re-engineering.

Two buzzwords gave me pause: 'strategic' and 'creative.' It never occurred to me that they'd be considered buzzwords, included in the same category as 'synergy' and '24/7.' But in reality, they certainly fit the definition. Strategy and creative are arguably the most common words used by people in business, marketing and communications, and often they're used to describe ordinary tasks. But do people know what the words truly mean?

Over several days, I asked colleagues and clients to define the words as concisely as possible, and many intelligent and experienced people found they simply couldn't, at least not without a lot of rambling and then becoming frustrated because they *were* rambling. Even turning to the dictionary didn't help because the definitions there were more likely to describe strategy in terms of war, and creative in terms of art.

So, one rainy Sunday afternoon, I decided to try and create my own definitions. The first thing I learnt was how difficult it is to create a useable definition. To paraphrase Simon Winchester in his brilliant book *The Surgeon of Crowthorne* (about the history of the first Oxford English dictionary), the only acceptable definition is one which doesn't require the reader to look up another word to understand its meaning. This meant I would not only have to define strategy and creative, but also find useable definitions for all of the related aspects to being strategic and creative, such as information, insight and ideas. In short, what I thought would be a bit of investigative work on a wintry day grew into a fairly complex assignment. Interestingly, the result turned out to be somewhat surprising too.

## *strategic thinking*

Imagine the last time you were trying to be strategic or creative, or hopefully both. No doubt you were working on a specific project or assignment, and in all likelihood, you were surrounded by research, which is nothing more than a large gathering of information.

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It's probably not a surprise to learn that information is a vital part of being strategic or creative. In reality, 'information' is more complicated than a few pages of notes or photocopies from a book. To understand what I mean, let me start at the beginning of the thought process of being strategic, which in turn, becomes a thought process of being creative.

This is going to sound basic, but there's an unlimited volume of information in the world. All of this information is more accurately known as ...

**data** – or, static information. Some data is already known to you, but there's a lot of data you don't know about, which is where research becomes useful. As you find, discover and gather data, some of it will be important to helping you in your assignment; other data you will decide is not important. This process of deciding which data to select means that you have turned this chosen data into ...

**information** – which begs the question: what criteria did you use to select this as information? Consciously or not, you chose this information because you believe it will help you achieve the goal or objective of your assignment. In other words, some information is 'right' while other information is 'wrong.' When you put all of this information into your head – that is, you 'learn' the information, it becomes ...

**knowledge** – which we all know has power, but it doesn't necessarily have value. To create value out of knowledge, you have to decide how and why to use knowledge. It's easy to see how 'right' knowledge helps you, but 'wrong' knowledge also helps you as it tells you to do *something else*. When you take a piece of knowledge and create action (either an actual step or a mental thought such as an opinion), you convert knowledge into its most valuable state, known as ...

**insight** – which is another way to define your personal understanding of the essential element of any piece of knowledge. It now gives you momentum to lead you toward your objective. You are putting your knowledge to work, to help you achieve your objective.

This step-by-step process from data to insight is what I call 'analytical thinking.' More important, this process of understanding, selecting and analyzing information and knowledge is as important as the insight. Why? Because your selection of information will lead you to an outcome: if you don't select information, you essentially wallow in information which can paralyze you from achieving action. As important, if you don't have a goal or objective stated at the beginning of the thought process, you can't decide whether the information is right or wrong. In fact, all of us have probably at one time selected wrong information (but thinking that it's right information), and we can appreciate what happens when a plan of action is based on wrong information. You can neither be efficient or effective toward reaching your goal, which means you cannot be strategic – and in turn – creative.

To me, that's why I believe the most accurate definition is this: **strategic thinking is one's ability to determine right from wrong in any (business) situation leading toward a specific business outcome.**

If I may, this definition and description of strategic thinking warrants a few additional comments.

- Turning data into insight sounds easy in theory, but in reality, it's a very complex and difficult skill to learn and do. I cannot over-emphasize the importance to people who want to be (more) strategic: learn how to properly do research, learn how to select and analyse information based on a clear understanding of the business goals, remember to continually learn new information, and most of all, learn how to identify and articulate a proper insight. In fact, this ability to turn data into insight is an ideal way to describe how analytical a person is, and the ability to create insights from knowledge and information is an ideal way to describe how strategic a person is.
- Strategic thinking is obviously based on a rational thought process, which in turn is based on the essence of rational thought: facts. That means intuition (making a decision without a thought process) or assumptions (an educated guess) have no real value in strategic thinking for two reasons: intuition is something you cannot repeat from assignment to assignment, and more so, you cannot teach it to colleagues or junior staff. And, if you can't repeat it or teach it, it makes it impossible to improve one's performance. True intuition has value only from extremely experienced professionals, but even in these situations, it should be used as a guide or an element to consider in the overall strategic thought process – not be or primarily influence the strategy itself. This includes how loud one protests them in a business meeting or forces them upon others in the work team.

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- Insights are based on knowledge, which means you need to 'learn' during any strategic or creative process. How often do we rush through the 'learning' process because we don't have time? Clients and colleagues who demand timeliness over real substance will find themselves the victim of 'garbage in, garbage out.'
- We often show someone an article photocopied from this morning's newspaper, and try to pretend this piece of information is 'insight.' That's not insight: the only thing you're demonstrating is your skills at a photocopier. Instead, real insight comes from suggesting a plan of action from a real piece of knowledge, so you or someone else can determine if this recommended action is right or wrong.

Before I leave this section, there are characteristics of being strategic which don't fit neatly into its definition. Some of these are obvious from the discussion above. A strategic person 1) knows the exact goal or purpose at the beginning of the project, 2) gathers quality information to read and ponder, 3) has the ability to express themselves – that is, he or she can articulate the insight from their knowledge in a way which others can understand, 4) can develop a focused plan of action which allows them to take steps toward a defined problem or need to achieve the objective, 5) can measure their steps to ensure the chosen ideas achieve the goal, and 6) knows how to be creative – even if that means finding someone else to help them be creative.

### *creative thinking*

Earlier issues of creative@work have already discussed how good ideas always come from an insight to address a problem or issue preventing you from achieving your goal or objective. Moreover, an idea is simply any single solution to a given need or problem. Therefore, how many ideas you can generate from any particular insight defines creative thinking. To be more specific, **creative thinking is your ability to turn any insight into as many ideas or solutions as possible.**

If you're a creative thinker, you can generate ideas easily when someone gives you a problem or need to solve – something called "fluency" in creative philosophy. You'd be highly creative if you developed a lot of ideas. If you only come up with one or two ideas, or have the same answer to every problem or need – well, you will probably be called something else which may not have anything to do with creativity.

Once you come up with as many ideas as you can, my '90-10 rule' kicks in. Ninety percent of your ideas go away: they were generated in a brainstorm but ultimately won't help you achieve your goal. Ten percent of your ideas are worthy of more discussion and thought, and eventually – through more research and prototype development – you'll narrow the ten percent of the ideas down to 2-3 useable ideas. The process of selecting a few ideas from the 10 percent, and then transforming those ideas into practical application is called Innovation. I hope from this point forward you no longer confuse creativity and innovation.

Like strategic thinking, there are characteristics of creative thinking which describe the person but don't fit into its definition. A creative person: 1) is someone who is fluent in ideas; 2) knows how to use their memory, imagination and humour to create ideas (they are 'intellectually playful'); 3) is non-conformist because they treat the status quo with scepticism or as another piece of information rather than a restriction; 4) is curious, and by default, has a wide range of interests and experiences; 5) seeks ambiguity, uncertainty and disorder because this creates new and different explorations, explanations and experiences to create a possible answer; 6) is not judgemental prematurely; and 7) uses defined criteria in advance of the brainstorm to select the best idea – if by no other virtue than it solves the problem or need.

Finally, there are important characteristics of both strategic and creative thinkers: they are relentless and self-disciplined to work beyond the natural difficulties in problem solving, and they are highly aware and sensitive to problems, issues and needs surrounding either the client, the situation or environment, or the actual assignment.



The surprising part occurred when I found myself leading a workshop in Asia, and the definitions themselves were putting the students to sleep. Instantly I found myself – as I do – going to a flipchart and drawing pictures. My grandmother has a unique way of saying the obvious truism: don't use words to draw me a picture.

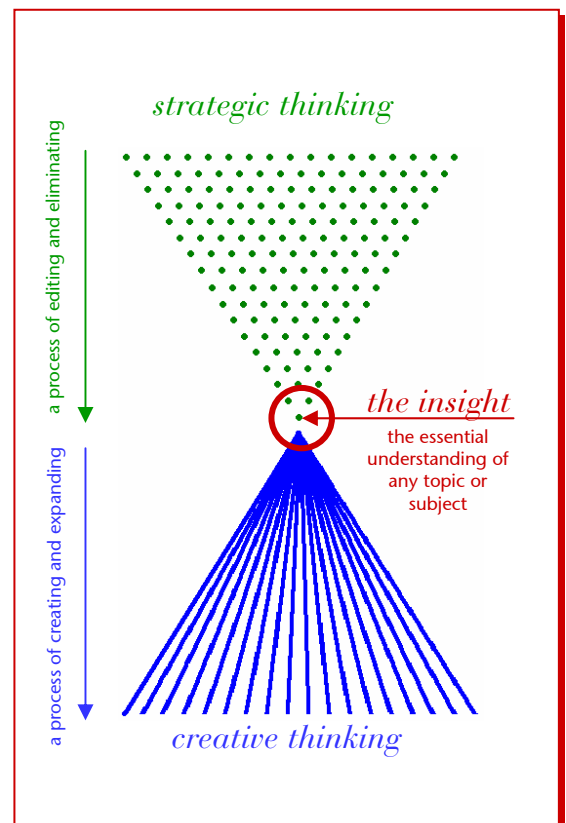
To me, strategic thinking is gathering information, thinking about it, and then editing. I drew this initial 'information' as a long series of green dots. As you begin to be strategic, you reduce the information (the dots), and over time, you simply have less dots. As I drew this process on the flipchart, it created a cone with its point going down. Of course, the final dot or point of the cone was the insight. (See the example on the next page.)

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Once you have a true insight, you turn this insight into action through an idea. Hopefully you're very creative at this point, so you create one idea – and then another, and another, and another, and so on. I drew these ideas as a blue line radiating from the insight (the final green dot) downward. This eventually created the shape of a right-side-up cone.

When I stood back to look at my artwork, I realized that the basic shapes of strategic thinking and creative thinking were exactly opposite – they're exact opposite ways of thinking. Strategic thinking is about reducing and creative thinking is about increasing.

Here's two more buzzwords which may now make more sense to you. 'Left brain thinking' is essentially strategic thinking, and 'right brain thinking' is creative thinking. You may know or remember that the left brain governs judgment activities such as analysing, comparing and sorting objective facts. The left side likes lists, logic, lines, words, numbers. It likes analysis and categories — anything that creates order. It asks how can we organize? Right brain activity is about visualizing and generating ideas. This part of your brain likes to see space, rhythm, colour, pictures. It controls your daydreaming and your imagination. It asks what else can we do? There's an ancient Chinese proverb somewhere that states this more beautifully than I, but it essentially translates to 'the left side sees trees, and the right side sees the forest.'



Perhaps now you understand what happens in a brainstorm when someone says a certain idea was "bad," or says "that won't work," or another buzzword example – 'devil's advocate.' This person is being strategic when they should be creative. As a group, you aren't ready to decide the best idea in the middle of a brainstorm: you're editing when you should be creating. When you get to the end of the brainstorm – now, as a group – you can be strategic by selecting the best idea, choosing the right ideas from the wrong ideas. We all know people who keep generating ideas when a decision needs to be made. These people are being creative when they should be strategic.

Everyone has both skills of strategic and creative thinking, and some people actively or intuitively increase their proficiency at both – or either. It's hard to be both: it's like putting a car into drive, then suddenly throwing the car into reverse. You really have to have a good command of how your brain works, or can control your ability to suddenly be strategic or be creative at the wrong times.

Most people are taught throughout life to default to left brain thinking, primarily at school, where as a student you learn and excel because you know there is just one answer to each test question. In fact, one answer to every question is the antithesis of creative thinking, which demands you want as many answers as possible so you can select the best possible solution to the specific need or problem. Conversely, right brain thinkers often can have more difficulty creating positive action. The process of creating and discovering is more interesting than actively doing. The good news is that anyone can learn either or both types of thinking, and the famous exercise below demonstrates this point beautifully.

### instructions

When you read the list of colour words (at right), you are using left brain thinking. To demonstrate if you are comfortable using right brain thinking, try reading the colour of the word instead of the word itself. If you find it easy, you are comfortable switching between left and right brain thinking. If you find it difficult, do not despair. All it takes is practice. Try reading the color of the words a few times until you can do it, and typically after a few attempts, you can. When you've mastered it, try reading the list in reverse order. Very likely you will find you have a greater ability to read the colour of the word – which demonstrates that you can learn to switch. In other words, it gets easier with practice, like virtually every task or skill you learn in life.

BLUE YELLOW RED GREEN  
PURPLE BLUE GREEN YELLOW  
ORANGE RED BLUE GREEN  
BLACK YELLOW PURPLE BLUE

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In my empirical research, most of us are trained to be and are rewarded for being strategic. Hopefully, now you understand its definition and context. As for creativity, perhaps now you also realize that its more than a complement to strategic thinking – it is a mandatory next step if you're going to achieve your goal or objective through idea generation. Strategic thinking has nothing to do with the action: it's only the decision-making process which enables you to be creative. Creative thinking is only a decision-making process which enables you to transform strategy into positive, profitable action.

I used to tell people in my creative workshops that 'being creative' was the only time in your life where you were going to get paid to have a lot of fun. Now I realize neither being creative or being strategic is any fun unless you're able to do both efficiently and effectively – and know why.

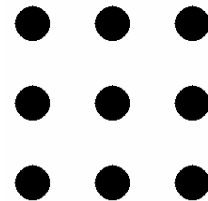
Best regards,



Andy Eklund  
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## out of the box?

Curious about where the phrase 'out of the box' comes from? The phrase was coined after the famous nine-dot puzzle created in the 1930s by the pioneering American industrial psychologist Norman R. Maier who developed it as part of his studies on problem solving. To solve the puzzle, Maier asked his students to draw four continuous lines (without lifting the pencil) so that each of the nine dots has at least one line running through it. Here's a clue: you have to draw outside of the (visual) box, which demonstrates Maier's point that people are often prevented from solving problems because of real or perceived assumptions, limitations or restrictions. If you're going to ask someone to think of 'out of the box' ideas then you have to think beyond your assumptions, restrictions and limitations as well. Otherwise, it's a pointless exercise. If you can solve this puzzle, try thinking 'out of the triangle.' Create four triangles from six lines of any length. (The lines don't have to be continuous.) Answers to both puzzles are in the next issue of creative@work. **Have fun!**



creative@work points-of-view are based on my work and training with clients and employees of Burson-Marsteller. Please don't hesitate to send me your comments to my e-mail address below, or if you'd like to be included in future mailings. All creative@work point of views are available at <http://www.burson-marsteller.com/pages/insights/povs>.

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