



Can Strategic Thinking Be Taught?

Harold Henkel

Unlike modern textbooks, the authors of the Bible and the Greek classics understood that the study of strategy is not merely a rational exercise, but a difficult undertaking requiring full intellectual and moral development. History offers abundant examples of leaders who have brought catastrophe on their followers, either through one-dimensional thinking or faults of character. Go, the classic strategic board game of China, Japan, and Korea can teach modern managers and leaders to think strategically. Unlike chess, which is a symbol of decisive battle, Go is about achieving a comparative advantage over an opponent and emphasizes judgment over calculation. Go has played an important part in shaping business strategy in Japanese corporations, with executives learning to view international markets as Go boards. While Go can be an invaluable tool for teaching creativity and strategy, leaders should never forget that, in the end, character trumps intellect, talent, and preparation. Without wisdom and discernment, which are moral qualities, leaders who have undergone even the most rigorous intellectual training may lead their followers to disaster. As the Greeks taught, character is fate.

It follows that it was not a very wonderful action, or contrary to the common practice of mankind, if we did accept an empire that was offered to us, and refused to give it up under the pressure of three of the strongest motives, fear, honor, and interest.

– Thucydides 1.76.2

Devise your strategy, but it will be thwarted; propose your plan, but it will not stand, for God is with us.

– Isaiah 8:10 (NIV)

The Limits of Strategic Thinking

Before considering the benefits of strategic thinking, it is well to recall its limitations, and as with most human undertakings, we can do no better than to turn to the wisdom of the ancient Greeks and Hebrews. The modern study and practice of strategy is almost an entirely rational exercise, but only one of the three motives that Thucydides identified as governing the conduct of states—interest (or *self-interest*)—is the product of rational calculation. The other two

motives—fear and honor—are not the result of any deliberative process, and indeed, often work against self-interest. As for the verse from Isaiah, like a multitude of similar verses in the Bible, it is a reminder to us of the futility of all plans and strategies that go counter to God’s law.

Failure to heed the hard wisdom of Thucydides and Isaiah has led the best planners and formulators of strategy down the road to catastrophe. In 1914, the Germans launched their attack on France with a plan that may have been perfect but for one miscalculation: that weak and tiny Belgium, through whose territory the German army would pass, would react on the basis of self-interest and not fight. The ferocious yet futile resistance that the Belgians offered, made solely to preserve the national honor, caused just enough havoc with the German schedule to prevent the planned envelopment of the French army. According to historian Barbara Tuchman, defects of character were the source of Germany’s delusion that a war against France would be short:

Character is fate, the Greeks believed. A hundred years of German philosophy went into the making of this decision in which the seed of self-destruction lay embedded, waiting for its hour. The voice was Schlieffen’s [the German field marshal and strategist who designed the plan of attack], but the hand was the hand of Fichte who saw the German people chosen by Providence to occupy the supreme place in the history of the universe, of Hegel who saw them leading the world to a glorious destiny of compulsory Kultur, of Nietzsche who told them that Supermen were above ordinary controls, of Treitschke who set the increase of power as the highest moral duty of the state, of the whole German people, who called their temporal ruler the “All-Highest.” What made the Schlieffen plan was not Clausewitz and the Battle of Cannae, but the body of accumulated egoism which suckled the German people and created a nation fed on “the desperate delusion of the will that deems itself absolute.”¹

What makes *The Guns of August* an indispensable work for the study of leadership is the way Tuchman never lets the reader forget that, in the end, the character of a leader will trump intellectual preparation or ability. Unlike Thucydides, who foresaw that “war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians . . . would be a great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it,”² Germany’s leaders believed war against France could be decisive and short not because of faulty strategic planning, but because of a collective character blinded by envy and ambition.

What Strategic Thinking is Not

In *The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning*, Henry Mintzberg delivered a devastating attack on the pretensions of formalized “strategic planning.”³ For Mintzberg, the archetypal strategic planner, exemplifying all the naiveté and arrogance of the activity, is Robert McNamara (U.S. Secretary of Defense, 1961-1968), whose inflexible planning, grounded in quantification and the assumption of stability, proved a disaster when confronted with what Clausewitz termed “an animate object that reacts.”⁴ So contemptuous is Mintzberg of much professional planning literature, that one suspects it is McNamara and the debacle in Vietnam that are on his mind when he writes that “a kind of *normative naiveté* has pervaded the literature of planning—confident beliefs in what is best, grounded in an ignorance of what really does work.”⁵ Regarding the reliability of forecasting, Mintzberg quotes political scientist Herman van

Gunsteren to the effect that “pseudo-scientific knowledge is much more dangerous than plain ignorance or common sense.”⁶

While Mintzberg is unsparing about the methods of formalized planning and forecasting (e.g., their emphasis on hard data), it is the blind pretensions of the practitioners that elicit his harshest criticism: “The claims by Steiner and people at the Stanford Research Institute that they were able to ‘duplicate’ or ‘replicate’ the intuitive processes of managers . . . were sheer nonsense.”⁷ Mintzberg’s multifront attack on strategic planning comes down to two over-arching conclusions:

1. “Strategic planning isn’t strategic thinking. One is analysis, and the other is synthesis.”⁸
2. “Because analysis is not synthesis, strategic planning is not strategy formation.”⁹

In the end, concludes the author, “the term ‘strategic planning’ has proved to be an oxymoron.”¹⁰

Synthesis vs. Analysis

Mintzberg’s key insight about strategic thinking is that while planning is an analytical process, “strategic thinking, in contrast, is about *synthesis*. It involves *intuition and creativity* [emphasis added]. . . . Such strategies often cannot be developed on schedule and immaculately conceived. They must be free to appear at any time and at any place in the organization.”¹¹ Creativity is essential for strategic formulation, but planning often acts as an impediment to creativity. Mintzberg’s emphasis on creativity and the threat posed to it by conventional organizational planning is almost an exact echo of Peter Drucker, who argued that “‘planning’ as the term is commonly understood is actually incompatible with an entrepreneurial society and economy” and that “innovation, almost by definition has to be decentralized, *ad hoc*, autonomous, and micro-economic.”¹² The ultimate advantage of synthesis (strategic thinking) over analysis (planning) is that it is synthesis that actually makes innovation possible. “Strategy making needs to function beyond the boxes, to encourage the informal learning that produces new perspectives and new combinations. . . . Planning’s failure to transcend the categories explains why it has discouraged serious organizational change.”¹³

Becoming a Strategic Thinker

When two tigers fight, what is left is one dead tiger and one wounded one.

– Chinese Proverb

Since strategic thinking depends on creativity, the same question arises that is often asked about creativity: Can strategic thinking be taught? If the answer is yes, than how can it be taught effectively to managers? I propose a somewhat unconventional, though not entirely novel, approach for learning to think strategically: Go. Go, the great strategic board game of China, Japan, and Korea, is often compared with chess, but apart from their origins as intellectual symbols of warfare, the two games could hardly be more different.

To give a thumbnail comparison of the two games, while the object of chess is to trap the opponent's king (the etymological origin of the word "checkmate"), the object of Go is to control more territory on the board. Chess is a game of aggression and domination; winning usually requires the destruction of the opposing army. Go is a game of patience and balance. Chess is about calculation; Go is about judgment.¹⁴ Winning consists not in destroying one's opponent, but in achieving a comparative advantage. Above all, chess is principally a game of tactics, while Go is a game of strategy.

Peter Shotwell demonstrates the influence of Go on Japanese business strategy by explaining how executives view the international market as a Go board. For example, Go strategy informs Japanese resource allocation, where companies seek to invest stones in certain areas, but not waste them in areas where their competitors are strong.¹⁵ Another area that Go strategy influences business in Japan is in competitive behavior. In Nissan's competition with Toyota, for example, Shotwell writes:

Nissan was content to take a 30-percent share of the market while conceding a 40-percent share to Toyota. In this way the "game" could continue with both sides surviving because neither side had to assume the cost of "killing" the other. Nissan could then direct its energies to improving its share on the "rest of the board" by selling to the luxury-car, sports, and minivan markets, and by the strategic placement of new models [stones].¹⁶

This example demonstrates how much more applicable Go is to business strategy than chess, which is a metaphor for decisive battle.

Andrew Watson and Sangit Chatterjee advocate Go as a tool for management learning specifically in three areas: (a) formulation of international strategy, (b) entry into foreign markets, and (c) resource allocation.¹⁷ The aspect of Go that the authors find particularly compelling as it relates to business strategy is the way players must balance the competing claims of local tactics with global strategy. In contrast to the 64 squares of a chess board, a Go board has 361 potential points of play. The ability to see how local areas on the Go board relate to the whole is one of the main challenges for Westerners brought up on chess. Watson and Chatterjee conclude their paper by emphasizing that it is through playing that managers can learn from Go, which the authors consider the best game for learning about international management.¹⁸

Conclusion

This short paper has covered a wide range of territory, from Thucydides and the Bible to contemporary strategic theory and an introduction to Go as a suggestion for learning to think strategically. The reason for covering these disparate topics in such a short space is to emphasize that becoming a strategic thinker is a long and challenging process, requiring development of a leader's intellectual and moral faculties.

If Mintzberg is correct and strategic thinking is a creative act, then clearly leaders must learn to think creatively. Intellectual laziness is an omnipresent consequence of the Fall, therefore a

method is needed for training the mind to think hard and avoid easy solutions. Go, as a method for teaching strategic thinking, has several qualities to commend it:

- It is intellectually rigorous, requiring more originality and creativity than chess.
- It has been used for centuries in China, Japan, and Korea to teach judgment and strategic thinking.
- Even a modest acquaintance with the game can impart valuable insights into East Asian philosophy and psychology.

At the same time, as Isaiah and Thucydides teach us, strategic thinking requires more than intellectual prowess. Without wisdom and discernment, which are moral qualities, leaders who have undergone even the most rigorous intellectual training may lead their followers to disaster, as Robert McNamara and others have learned at an incalculable cost.

About the Author

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Endnotes

¹ Tuchman, B. W. (1994). *The guns of August*. Random House: New York, NY. pp. 21-22. Original work published in 1962.

² Thucydides, Strassler, R. B., & Crawley, R. (1998). *The landmark Thucydides: A comprehensive guide to the Peloponnesian War*. Simon & Schuster: New York, NY. p. 3.

³ Mintzberg, H. (2000). *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. Prentice Hall: New York, NY. Original work published in 1994.

⁴ Mintzberg (2000). p. 120.

⁵ Mintzberg (2000). p. 226.

⁶ Van Gunsteren, H. R. (1976). *The quest for control: A critique of the rational-central-rule approach in public affairs*. Wiley: London, England. p. 235.

⁷ Mintzberg (2000). p. 226.

⁸ Mintzberg, H. (1994). The fall and rise of strategic planning. *Harvard Business Review*, 72(1), 107.

⁹ Mintzberg (2000). p. 321.

¹⁰ Mintzberg (2000). p. 321.

¹¹ Mintzberg (1994). p. 108.

¹² Drucker, P. F. (1993). *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. HarperBusiness: New York, NY. p. 255. Original work published in 1985.

¹³ Mintzberg (1994). p. 109.

¹⁴ GoshawkHeron. (2007). Video tutorial for the game of Go—Part I, overview.[Video file]. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gECcsSeRcNo>

¹⁵ Shotwell, P. (2003). *Go!: More than a game*. Tuttle: Boston, MA. p. xi.

¹⁶ Shotwell (2003). p. 166.

¹⁷ Watson, A., & Chatterjee, S. (2006). Going international: What we can learn about international strategy, market entry, and resource allocation from the game of Go. *Journal of Teaching in International Business*, 17(4), 5.

¹⁸ Watson & Chatterjee (2006). p. 18.