The Heart of Strategic Leadership and Strategic Management:
Conundrums, Ambidextrous Agility, and Relationships

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INTRODUCTION

When asked to contribute this concluding article to the *Encyclopedia of Strategic Leadership and Management*, the authors were confronted with two options. The first was attempting to provide a succinct retrospective overview of the diverse and exceptions article that have been included in this work. The attempt would have been to summarize and integrate these entries, identifying and highlighting their core issues and weaving these into a short but comprehensive narrative. However, we concluded that any process of distillation would do a significant disservice to the unique value of the individual entries and that the resulting narration would provide little additional benefit for the reader.

The second option was to consider all of the entries holistically and to reflect on the connectedness of the themes and tensions that each, in its different way, explores. Here, the effort would be to consider, from multiple perspectives, some of the central assumptions and qualities about strategic management and strategic leadership reflected in these entries. The attempt would be to arrive at what we consider to be the core of strategic thinking and of strategic enactments. This is what we decided to do.

In this article, we want to explore the heart of strategic work, recognizing that to do so we must examine the relationships and tensions between, and within, strategic management and strategic leadership – tensions that occur, sometimes conspicuously and sometimes subtlety, in so many of the entries in this encyclopedia. We begin with a conundrum, which some might categorize as the underlying paradox that pervades all strategy work. We then explore the ways in which agility and ambidexterity have contributed to the central strategy paradox and have, in a somewhat paradoxical way, helped to reduce it if not quite resolve it. We then explore the dimensions of strategic leadership and strategic management, considering their contrasting emphases and the ways in which both might be integrated into a synergistic whole.

COMMITMENT, AGILITY, AND AMBIDEXTERITY

The conundrum inevitably materializes when organizations and their leaders engage in strategical considerations; it also features predominantly in the histories of corporations that have experienced spectacular downturns and failures, such as Nokia and Kodak (Doz & Kosonen, 2008; Raynor, 2007).

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By definition, a strategic perspective "evokes peering far into the future, making strong choices and holding firm commitments, unwaveringly deploying resources to implement them, and having every senior executive single-mindedly and individually dedicated to achieving them" (Doz & Kosonen, 2008, p. 95). Strategic considerations require the making of clear and irrevocable decisions, a decisive commitment to those choices, and an equally determined commitment to their implementation. However, in the complex organizational world in which strategic decisions have to be implemented, any strategic realignment requires a significant degree of *agility*, a terms that "evokes staying nimble and flexible, open to new evidence, always ready to reassess past choices and change direction in light of new developments, and willing and able to turn on a dime" (p. 95).

Others have framed the strategy conundrum in terms of *ambidexterity*, which is the organization's ability to simultaneously pursue and balance two disparate objectives:

1. Manufacturing *efficiency*, in which the firm exploits and consumes historic and current resources, advantages, and opportunities; and
2. Strategic *flexibility*, in which the firm explores and seeks out new resources, advantages, and opportunities (Adler, Goldoftas, & Levine, 1999; Blarr, 2012; Gibson & Birkinshaw, 2004).

Ambidextrous organizations are adept at continuously shifting their gaze from what they are doing presently to consideration of what they might be doing. They have the ability "to simultaneously pursue both incremental and discontinuous innovation … from hosting multiple contradictory structures, processes, and cultures within the same firm" (Tushman & O'Reilly, 1996, p. 24). These organizations do not place inordinate faith in the success of their existing production or strategic realignments, because they appreciate that external circumstances and contexts inevitably change and that these changes will necessitate a new strategic realignment that represents a disruptive discontinuity from the past. Further, we see ambidexterity as encompassing more than simply production efficiency and strategic flexibility. We understand it as a broader organizational ability to simultaneously consider the present and the future; to recognize the necessity for continuous change, growth, and evolution within what may appear to be the changeless stability of the present.

In a highly complex and competitive world, all organizations – whether centered on the production of electronic widgets or the delivery of educational services – can readily appreciate the need to be agile and ambidextrous. Yet, despite appreciating the necessity of remaining strategically nimble, many organizations act quite differently. Either (a) they focus their attention exclusively on doing what has succeeded in the past and, in doing so, fail to explore the future; or (b) they focus exclusively on being so open to future opportunities that they ignore efficiency in their current operations. In prioritizing either present over future, or future over present, there is an ever-present danger of succumbing to the paralyzing strategy conundrum and of ultimately moving towards organizationally irrelevancy, stagnation, and decline.

The strategy conundrum comes about because *all* strategic work is faced with implementing *decided upon change* in an environment that is constantly shifting. Strategic work requires a solid commitment to, and an incremental improvement on, past performance; however, it also requires a fluid openness to change-recognition and to the unpredictable discontinuities and breaks from the past that inevitably exist in the future. As Raynor (2007) puts it, the *strategy paradox* comes about because strategies are normally constructed around specific beliefs about the future; however, "this is a problem because the future is deeply unpredictable. Worse, the requirements of breakthrough success demand implementing strategy in ways that make it impossible to adapt should the future turn out differently than planned" (p. 1). From a rational standpoint, it might seem obvious that both commitment and fluid openness must

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