Strategic Thinking Principles:
Q & A Series with Move to End Violence
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Question #1

How can we tell when an opportunity is a strategic opportunity to act?

Answer

Take this recent scenario: You are still shaking off the all-to-familiar anger-grief associated with yet another mass killing, when an article catches your eye: “Why #YesAllWomen took off on Twitter”

#yesallwomen? The article begins: “No, not all men channel frustration over romantic rejection into a killing spree. But yes, all women experience harassment, discrimination or worse at some point in their lives.”

Impressively, in less than 72 hours, the hashtag is tweeted over one million times.

In figuring out whether an event presents itself as a strategic opportunity or not, it is useful to consider the question in its component parts:

(1) Is “this” an opportunity? If yes, then
(2) Is it a strategic opportunity? If yes, then
(3) Is it a strategic opportunity for me/us?

So, #1 - is this an opportunity? Yes! Why?

- It is a significant phenomenon (tweeted one million times)
- It is trending in the same/substantially similar direction as my/our point of view (all women experience harassment, discrimination or worse)
- Noting here that if something is trending in exactly the opposite direction it is also an opportunity, but not if it is “sideways”, meaning not related or too obtusely related

How about #2 - is this a strategic opportunity? Potentially. Why?

- The message, even more than the event, is resonating strongly (the vast majority of #yesallwomen tweets do not reference the event, but the repetition and amplification of the misogynistic, violent social condition echoes)
- While it is too early to tell whether this is the beginning of a broad-based societal mind shift, the energy and size of the wave may be able to be leveraged as if it is indeed a broad-based societal change. There is still #3 - the question of whether this is a strategic opportunity for me/us. We don’t know yet. But it is certainly enough of a possibility to be highlighted here. What would you/we need to consider?
- Like most strategic decisions/acts, will taking advantage of this particular opportunity better position our purpose, or our mission, or our organization… (in that order of importance)?
- Are there elements of what we are already doing/saying that could pivot in the direction of this energy/message?
- Is it possible to tap into the infrastructure that has formed up in this phenomenon? Going through these questions and inquiries for yourself when a situation presents itself will help you determine whether it is a strategic opportunity to act.
What are ways to broaden one’s awareness of things? And how can one understand the conditions and opportunities? PART 1 of 2: Awareness is all about lifting up one’s head, and taking a look at the horizon. Easier said than done!

Answer

So, the first task is to take a look at (i.e. become aware of) the habits* that conspire against lifting up one's head, and taking a look at the horizon.

Here are three common habits:

(1) Habitual dependency on electronic devices

Research suggests that the average person spends 66 hours per week on a computer, not counting the time spent at work. We have also just outstripped the amount of time spent on a computer in favor of a mobile device. So, that’s a lot of time with our eyes, focus, and brain cells attached to a screen.

Why would this matter? Doesn’t more of the world’s knowledge and experience enter through the world wide web? True. And, let’s take a look at some of the behaviors that come along with this attachment:

- We keep our head down glued to the device, and shut out what is around us.
- We are drawn into lots of words which keep us in our heads, and the habit of responding to whatever is in front of us.
- Research suggests that we understand at a shallower level and retain less of the electronic word than we do with the printed word.

Practices to Interrupt This Habit

Okay, here we are, reading this on an electronic device. See something interesting? Increase the font size, and print it out!

- If tracking illuminates things for you, take a typical 24-hour period and track the amount of time you are not on an electronic device. This is your baseline. Construct a very simple, three-point plan to spend 10-15% less time on an electronic device, and give it a try!
- Instead of having your head down, raise the mobile device so that at least your head is facing up and out.
- For fun reading or deep thinking reading, consider the tactile nature of the printed word rather than the kindle, nook, or iPad.

(2) The habit of being attracted to/by and paying more attention to our own point of view

Our tendency is to seek even more information to support our own point of view. In fact, the “other” point of view revolts us. (i.e. I’d rather change the cat’s litter than spend 10 minutes on FoxNews.)
Why should we care?

- Our strategies don’t exist in a vacuum. They live and shrivel in the midst of the opposition’s strategies, major upheavals that have seemingly nothing to do with what we are interested in, societal points of view, and economic/demographic/cultural trends.
- Immersing ourselves only in voices that support our own can result in strategies that appeal more to the choir than to those we need to convince.
- The unknown doesn’t have to be oppositional – the unknown can offer opportunities. The known isn’t necessarily our friend – the known can keep us in a rut.

**Practices to Interrupt This Habit:**

- Simply stop at three. After three pieces of information representing your point of view, simply stop and you’ll create an opening for “something else.”
- Turn to the side. In other words, ask the question of whether there may be some other idea out there. Look for “different”, rather than “oppositional”
- Pay attention to and play with a loved one (human or otherwise). Huh? Well, we need only spend quality time with a loved one to understand that the issue that has us all wrapped up around ourselves isn’t the center of everyone’s universe. That is exactly the sense of perspective that helps to interrupt the habit of focusing all of our attention on our own point of view.

((3) The habit of crowding out spaciousness)

When we keep our plate too full and don’t have any structured spaciousness in our lives, then there is no room for anything except that which we have stuffed into each moment.

*Habit – an unconscious repetitive act. Because a habit is unconscious, it works at levels that are outside of our awareness, and, therefore, even a “good habit” cannot serve us.*
Question # 2B

What are ways to broaden one’s awareness of things? And how can one understand the conditions and opportunities? **PART 2 of 2: Awareness is about exercising our curiosity and paying attention to “other things”**.

**Answer**

Okay! We’ve lifted up our heads, in relief or reluctantly, and are looking at the horizon. What do we look at, and what are we looking for?

**(1) See relationships and patterns**

From a strategic thinking perspective, you should assume that there are connections between actions, beliefs, thoughts, ideas, and phenomena generally. Cautionary notes:

- A conspiracy need not be in effect for there to be a connection.
- A connection does not mean there is a direct cause and effect.

And yet, it is very useful to be able to take note and see relationships and patterns as they occur around you. You’ll become a better strategic thinker.

Where can we learn how to “see” in this way? Scientists, naturalists, and farmers are among the professionals that watch for relationships and patterns. “Which way are the ants marching?” gets asked before asking, “Why are the ants marching in that direction?” And as you know, “Is the weather becoming less predictable from year to year?” is the prime relationship and pattern question of the decade.

Artists also look for and create relationships and patterns. Impressionist paintings are among the famous images directly dependent on our mind’s eye being able to see in this way. Looking at impressionist art gives us clues as to how to “see” relationships and patterns.

For example: Stand too close and this is what you may see.

Rather than this, from a distance you can see:

*(One of Monet’s many water lily paintings; can you tell which water lily the first image is from?)*
(2) Pay attention to noteworthy actions outside of your field

There are exciting (and horrifying) things happening outside of your field, outside of what you are usually paying attention to, and outside of your understanding.

- First, pick a field that is outside of your usual sphere of influence or interest. Two areas for me are science, and technology. For you it may be art, or food, or world events, or architecture, etc.
- Second, periodically read, watch, or listen to what people in that field say is exciting, horrifying, or worth noting.
- Third, check your own sense of whether the “it” is exciting to you, horrifying to you, or worthy of attention.
- Fourth, ask the question: why may “this” be important in my own world?

Here is an example from my own scan — from the technology page of CNN, this item: Google Glass wearers can steal your password.

Yikes! Yes, horrifying to me. And why might this be important? The unintended consequences of consumer-level technology are making it widely accessible and possible for us to blur the lines of personal space and values.

What exciting or horrifying things have you become aware of that is happening outside of your field, and what does it mean to/for you?

(3) Notice trends that are growing, trends that are fading

All trends operate on some form of a bell curve. They start as little-noticed, seemingly disconnected actions. These single events join together and become a trend-line. Trend-lines can be steep, or grow gradually. All trends reach a peak, which becomes a plateau. And then there is a decline, which can be a sharp drop, or a gradual decline into obscurity.

Gaining experience in seeing and paying attention to trends, and seeing/understanding the phenomena of that trend before it plateaus (in the case of a trend you want to be a part of) or before it begins its upward climb (in the case of a trend you want to interrupt) is an important skill for a strategic thinker.

The best places to practice are reaching back to the recent past to describe the progression of popular trends in such areas as food, politics, advertising or other fields that have left a lot of evidence of the path of the trend.

**Awareness Exercise**

Name/describe a trend, and point to where that trend is now.
Question #3

If Vision is our preferred worldview, and Mission is the specific way that the vision may be achieved, then what is Purpose? And why is Purpose important to strategy?

Answer

The Purpose provides the strong directional reason. It is our “North Star” that can powerfully guide and align our decisions and actions.

As a strategist, I would argue that Purpose is frequently more important than Vision. (What?! Blasphemy!)

For example, as you prepare for an important, rarely done, multi-generational convening of community leaders and practitioners, which of these two questions might best guide a strategic outcome?

- What is our Vision?
- For what Purpose are we gathered?

As a strategist, I humbly suggest the vigorous mining of the second question will provide a much more satisfying result, and set up the conditions for a springboard to better fulfill your Mission and Vision.

In developing your Purpose, it is very important to be both specific and aspirational. Take the example of Mandela’s life purpose – freedom. Although expressed in a single word, he writes eloquently in “A Walk to Freedom” about how his life’s purpose evolved.

It started with just his own freedom, to do what he wanted to do without restraint or constraint. It evolved to freedom for his people. And it did not end until it encompassed the realization that his own freedom and the freedom of his people could not occur until even his oppressors were free. You can see how the strategies, choices, and actions would differ widely depending on the specificity and aspiration of Mandela’s purpose. It would change history itself.

Vision Exercise

It is an interesting and useful exercise to see if you can determine what a person’s or group’s purpose is after you’ve heard their words or seen their actions (a sort of strategist’s Jeopardy). Take a look at this clip of Kacy on American Nina Warrior, and see if you can determine:

- What is Kacy’s Purpose?
- How did it inform how she may have trained and how she implemented?
- How might it have looked different given a different Purpose?
- What strategic elements are evident?
Question #4

What is the relationship between purpose and values? How do these elements interact in strategy?

Answer

If **Purpose** is the “north star”, what role do **Values** play?

Values provide the moral compass for our actions and decisions. Without values, it is quite possible for strategy to become “all or nothing”, “anything goes”, or “winning at all cost”. Knowing what your values are, and those of your team, your community, your organization, and your movement – can be a powerful grounding and human force.

A common misperception is that people whom you identify with have the same values as you do. We make this assumption all of the time, why not? We assume that if someone shares a mission, an identity, a point of view, a political position, an ideology – if someone is “like me” then that person must or is more likely to share my values. Yes, sometimes; frequently, not so.

I once facilitated an exercise for a company that was developing its corporate values. As a starting point, the extended leadership team identified their individual, personal values. Then they formed into groups, bringing their expressed personal values, and talked about the values that would be necessary and desirable as a group.

A big surprise – a first for me – was that one of the executive vice-presidents had a value that no one in the 36-member group shared. Not a single person! Once known, much became apparent. The fact that this person valued “Loyalty” as one of his top three values, and that no one else had this as a top value, illuminated past decisions and disagreements.

In a campaign, or action, it is important to know what the values of your group are, and to figure out what the values are of allies, and the opposition.

**Example:**

Let’s take the situation as it played out in Ferguson, Missouri after the tragic shooting death of Michael Brown. As the action unfolded over days, it became apparent – from a strategic viewpoint – that there were multiple parties who had overlapping agendas and different values.

For those determined to bring maximum civic attention while containing violence, it was critical to figure out how to align strategies with the people who shared values. A state trooper, Captain Ron Johnson, becomes a key figure – a human presence that can be respected.

From what you have seen or heard in the media accounts, can you name 4-5 groups in the Ferguson drama, their purpose(s) and values?
Simple Values Exercises

Individual Exercise

1. Taking a look at the values in the chart below, in whatever meaning these words may mean to you. With a pen, put a line through any value that is not your value.

2. Taking a look at the values that are remaining, add any value that you have that is not yet in the list.

3. If you had to have only five values, which five would those be? Identify those five and put a line through all of the other values.

4. Of the five values that you have, which three are the most important to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Achievement</th>
<th>Courage</th>
<th>Compassion</th>
<th>Freedom</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Justice</td>
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<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Life</td>
<td>Love</td>
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<td>Performance</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Tolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obedience</td>
<td>Unity</td>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>Winning</td>
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Group Exercise

1. Write each values word on small cards. Make a “Values Pack” for each person in the group, adding 4-5 blank cards to each pack.

2. Arrange the cards in front of you. In whatever meaning these words may mean to you, take out the cards with words that are not your values.

3. Going around the group, say the values that are not your values – without explanation. Pay attention to what each person is saying and make a quick mental note of any reaction you may have.

4. Put your “not my values pack” aside and look at the remaining values. Are there any values you have that are not represented? If so, write them down on the blank cards, one value per card.

5. Okay – these are your values! Take a look at the values pack for the person on your right and on your left, without talking.

6. Although we may have many values, only a handful of the most important values to us will play roles in our decisions and actions. Identify your most important five values and further identify which three of the five are the most important to you by drawing a star on them. Turn over all of the other cards.

7. With a partner, share your five values – what they are and why you chose them. (If there is enough time, choose one of the “star” values and share a story of how that value played into a decision you made.)

8. Form groups, ideally 5-6 people. Bringing your five values into the group, choose your group values. Assuming you are a community, what should the five values of your community be? (Note: sometimes a group needs to go back and retrieve one or more values that they had “left behind”. That’s okay.)

9. Have each group post their community’s values.

10. Debrief the exercise.