Distinguishing Levels and Patterns of Strategic Obsolescence

Introduction

The intention here is to present a sequence of governance strategies, which continue to be widely used but reflect various forms of inadequacy in response to recognized challenges. The sequence is ordered from those most frequently used and understood through to subtler and more complex strategic patterns. The approach is designed to highlight the need to move beyond cognitive detachment from strategies to one requiring a higher order of cognitive engagement in strategies (as explored in Annex 2: Creative Cognitive Engagement: beyond the limitations of descriptive patterning).

Strategy 1: Denial and positive thinking

The most obvious strategy is that of denial. Many see the leadership of different institutions, from which leadership is expected, as being in denial. This takes a variety of forms:

- news management may simply be used to suppress problematic information and to highlight information indicative of progress
- emphasis may be placed on the degree of incremental achievement, of marginal improvement, and on the selective presentation of information to note genuine examples of improvement however unrepresentative they may be
- so-called "positive thinking" may be used to legitimate the case for seeing "the glass as half-full" rather than seeing "the glass as half-empty" (cf Being Positive and Avoiding Negativity: management challenge of positive vs negative, 2005 ). It has been argued that an extreme example of this has been Donald Rumsfeld:

  Rumsfeld had become one of the chief engines of the notion that insisting on a particular version of reality in Iraq would somehow cause that version to be manifested. It was the power of positive thinking, as applied to geopolitics, and by 2005 it had gone too far for a slew of retired generals, who joined the call for Rumsfeld to resign (Oliver Burkeman, Rumsfeld's Progress, Guardian, 10 November 2006)

Essentially positive thinking avoids situations to which it may not be able to claim to be successful, obliging others to deal with them when they reach crisis proportions. As an example of dualistic thinking, positive-negative makes the point that in order to be positive, the negative must be held at bay, preferably by denying its very existence or framing it as totally inappropriate. It effectively becomes dependent on negativity elsewhere (***)

These approaches effectively make of my world a Potemkin society (cf Globalization within a Global Potemkin Society, 2000 ). They:

- encourage those in conditions of deprivation and pain to see the positive side of their lives rather than empowering them to act to remedy their condition,
- encourage those responsible for withholding remedial action to view their action as appropriate in providing learning opportunities,
- make me dependent on secretive agencies and secret services to expend unaccounted funds on keeping the "scenery" in place,
- allow me to believe that my attitude is appropriate to the condition of my planet.
Strategy 2: Polarization and demonization

The challenge of polarization and dualistic thinking has long been widely acknowledged (cf Documents relating to Polarization, Dilemmas and Duality). It has been central to the mode of operation of religions down the centuries. The recent consequence has been the incorporation of this thinking into the emerging strategies of faith-based governance (Future Challenge of Faith-based Governance, 2003). "Our" religion is always that of the "good" people (whatever the human vulnerability to "sin"), whereas "their" religion is always that of the "evil" people (whether or not this is simply framed as "misguided"). Demonization readily prevails in the organizations of crusades and jihads against the unbelievers.

Such polarization acquired an acute form in the justification for the "war on terror". The dimensionality of civilized discourse has been reduced to the binary limitations of "Us-or-Them" logic -- even for the best and the brightest (Colin Powell, Hillary Clinton, etc.), from whom more might have been expected (cf Being Bushed: multiple personality disorder in a globalized religious flatland, 2001). It is possible that this strategy has been deliberately adopted by them in order to simplify the challenges of controlling a complex society -- widely acknowledged to be unmanageable.

Identifying "terrorists" as demonic simplifies the governance challenge of prioritizing resources (cf Promoting a Singular Global Threat -- Terrorism: Strategy of choice for world governance, 2002). There is no question of recognizing the much-cited wisdom of the Walt Kelly Pogo cartoon: 'We have met the enemy and he is us'.

Strategy 3: Pre-emptive / Defensive appeals

There are explicit calls for "new ideas", "new thinking" and "new paradigms". Many are on offer as proprietary models or under the patronage of their originators (perhaps to be heroically and humorously caricatured by the movie "Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines") -- or even within secretive societies of elites. For some it is only a question of learning appropriately from such sources -- and overcoming misguided resistance to the dissemination of their insights.

There is a belief in the capacity of "creative intelligence", notably of the "cultural creatives" or even of the "indigo children". Networks and centres of "excellence" are established to facilitate their activity. However, their remedial capacity in response to the conditions of the planet would appear to be marginal at best -- however much one may hope for the multiplier and synergy effects of their initiatives as they accumulate (Meta-challenges of the Future: For Networking through Think-tanks, 2005). On the other hand, many hope for divine intervention and welcome the deteriorating planetary conditions as more likely to evoke such intervention.

Curiously these appeals enable institutions to effectively "outsourcing" the creativity for which they are appealing. In particular they make those manifesting some degree of creativity responsible for proving (with their own resources) the relevance of their creativity to the mindset of the institution making such appeals. There is no question of the institution empowering itself to detect creativity, and "out-of-the-box" solutions, irrespective of whether it is in response to some such appeal. This process builds significant lags into the institutional response to change -- and legitimates the tardy rate at which it does so. It is a design for postponement and incrementalism -- with results evident in the track record of many institutions claiming to be at the forefront of change (as with the Vatican policy on contraceptives, notably in relation to AIDS).

The challenge has been well described by John Ralston Saul (Voltaire's Bastards: the dictatorship of reason in the West, 1992; The Unconscious Civilization, 1995), but most succinctly as a form of Le Chatelier's Principle by Stafford Beer (The Cybernetic Cytoblast: management itself. Chairman's Address to the International Cybernetics Congress, September 1969) in the following terms:

> Reformers, critics of institutions, consultants in innovation, people in sort who "want to get something done", often fail to see this point. They cannot understand why their strictures, advice or demands do not result in effective change. They expect either to achieve a measure of success in their own terms or to be flung off the premises. But an ultrastable system (like a social institution)... has no need to react in either of these ways. This tendency is notably exploited by the process of seeking endorsement. This is exploited in the marketing of products and people as a means of providing a form of guarantee and setting a fashion trend that it may be unwise to buck. What is this dependence on my prefigured authorities effectively preventing me from seeing?

In what secret forms of "equilibrial adjustment" do I indulge in order to ensure that I am affected by only a minimal need to change?

Strategy 4: Filtering and gatekeeping -- beyond denial

Once denial is no longer feasible, and appeals are eliciting a response, a variety of techniques may be employed to control the amount of problematic information which it is necessary to consider and on which it may be necessary to act. Many of these are catalogued elsewhere as constraints on critical thinking. They include:

- **Uncritical dependence on authority**: This means reliance on others, whether eminent in the academic, religious or political arenas -- or as celebrities. This tendency is notably exploited by the process of seeking endorsement. This is exploited in the marketing of products and people as a means of providing a form of guarantee and setting a fashion trend that it may be unwise to buck. What is this dependence on my prefigured authorities effectively preventing me from seeing?

- **Uncritical dependence on the "chosen"**: In this case the authority is provided as the consequence of some unusual process, typically selection to some elite body (freemasons, Club of Rome, Bilderberg, Davos, etc), acknowledgment of having been "born again" through some initiatory process, or recognition of unusual talent (eg Mensa)

- **Uncritical dependence on peers**: Here the reliance is on others of one's profession, "tribe" or community. Typically it takes the
form of dependence on "old boy networks" and ensuring that I do not move beyond what they hold to be credible. Again what is this dependence effectively preventing me from seeing?

- **Unquestioned interpretative criteria**: These may follow, or underlie, the previous points through which my sources of information are effectively "managed". It may encourage "tunnel vision" and "group think" on my part -- and discourage "lateral thinking", and "thinking outside the box".

- **Communication filtering**: The above circumstances encourage various forms of information filtering which I tolerate:
  - institutional gatekeeping, as a continuation of the historical pattern of "court chamberlains" and the need to cultivate secondary processes of access through "courtseans". This pattern is most clearly evident in the behaviour of lobbyists around governmental and intergovernmental decision-making bodies
  - e-mail filtering: This is the electronic variant of the previous point through which access is carefully managed, notably through the use of "blacklists" and "whitelists" -- effectively defining excluded communications as "spam", namely "unsolicited", irrespective of the urgency of their content.
  - surveillance and espionage: This is the interventionist approach to obstacles to access, typified by widespread electronic surveillance (purportedly for "security" reasons) as well as to ensure competitive advantage

- **Controlled public consultation**: Acknowledgement of the previous processes, sensitivity to criticism of institutional non-transparency, and the challenge of the democratic deficit, leads to a variety of consultative processes which are however handicapped by the unexamined consequences of the following:
  - criteria whereby the process is designed to include and exclude certain categories of communication -- namely who gets to talk and who gets to be heard
  - tokenism in the presentation of the process as participative, notably at the highest level ("fireside chats")
  - process of selective filtration of question and/or answer (as in many emerging institutional blogs)
  - avoiding consideration of any feedback, despite emphatic assurances to the contrary

- **Pattern of excuses (credible denial of culpability)**: Various excuses may be deployed to avoid responsibility for problematic filtration of information that later proves to have been relevant:
  - claims of information overload and lack of resources to process it, without considering alternative means of handling the phenomenon
  - claims of not having been informed, despite an "open door" policy
  - claims that meeting rooms were not available in the foreseeable future for any adequate consultation (a specialty of the European Commission)

- **Recovery and appropriation procedures**: These are deployed after external circumstances have forced institutional recognition of a challenge or a possibility. They take the form of awarding prizes, accolades, positions and funding to those who have pioneered the innovation, making it clear that this has always reflected the insight of the awarding institution. This is effectively a form of endorsement primarily to safeguard the role and image of the endorser -- as a "catup" device to claim a position at the forefront of change.

The consequence of the above is to create a pattern of communities "gated" by communication processes (cf *Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities*, 2004 ). In the light of any concerns about a democratic deficit, or the exclusion of information on new challenges or opportunities, this raises the question of the collective value of what gets filtered out (cf *Practicalities of Participatory Democracy with International Institutions: attitudinal, quantitative and qualitative challenges*, 2003):

- when and where does such gating occur? Who are those "left behind" by this process?
- why do they avoid buying into such processes?
- how might the processes be redesigned to increase their involvement and benefit from their contribution?
- what unforeseen perspectives may they represent -- including first warning of imminent disaster (*** canaries vs whistleblowers)***
- treatment of all warnings as unsolicited communications ("spam") inappropriately referred (or "peer reviewed")?

**How do I adjust my filters -- to what end?** To what should I be "open" and to what should I be "closed" (Orrin E Klapp, *Opening and Closing: strategies of information adaptation in society*, 1978). By what modes of interaction am I currently overwhelmed?

### Strategy 5: Project Logic

As highlighted by Stafford Beer's recognition of *Le Chatelier's Principle* (above), once an institution acknowledges an issue or the possibility of a programme of action, a number of processes may be deployed to minimize the effectiveness of any response:

- **Constrained framework**: Projects within institutions are typically undertaken according to the "in-the-box" logical framework of procedures established over decades, and inherited from other institutions. Such procedures are typically designed in conformity with a certain unquestioned mindset whose relevance to other cultures and circumstances is considered obvious -- despite the poor track records in such settings.

- **Focus on projects defined as feasible by precedent**: Appropriate expertise can readily be called upon to determine the inefficacy of proposals for new initiatives or research in the light of past experience. In the absence of precedents, new initiatives are necessarily framed as unfeasible -- especially those that are "out-of-the-box". This process notably favours the controlled development of "closed-system" technology as an extension of previous innovations (as in the case of aerospace or fundamental science spectacles), where uncontrollable parameters and negative feedback can be ignored or designed out. It precludes investment in the more complex "open system" challenges of deprived communities, religious conflict, sustainable development and environmental conservation

- **Game-playing**: Careers in institutions are readily advanced or handicapped through management of projects irrespective of their
efficacy. The art (as in tennis) is to oblige the innovator or change agent to do as much of the "footwork" as possible. Proposers with limited resources are effectively forced to "jump" through as many "hoops" as possible in promoting their project and soliciting (public) funds for assistance -- hopefully to the point of exhaustion. Thereafter, as is well-recognized, reporting procedures provide every opportunity to give project participants the "run-around" -- justified by the claimed need for transparency (typically resulting from past abuses in the funding institution).

Strategy 6: Patterning capacity challenges

Innovation and leadership is obliged to operate beyond the constraining dynamics above. This is achieved by recognition of patterns of behaviour and constraint through which strategic opportunities can be detected. There are various approaches to this:

- **Intelligence tests:** These may be used as a means of selecting elites for policy positions, think tanks and intelligence services
- **Challenging group think:** Processes may be designed to challenge intellectual comfort zones and any tendency to buy into "group think" as the path of least resistance. Various kinds of "wild cards" may be introduced to challenge facile patterns of "connecting the dots" and avoiding recognition of emergent patterns (cf Magic Eye stereogram pictures; Edward de Bono, Atlas of Management Thinking, 1981)
- **Mathematical techniques:** These may be used to predict higher orders of communication (cf Ron Atkin, Multidimensional Man: can man live in three dimensional space?, 1981)
- **Folk tales:** Sets of folk tales and fables may be used as teaching stories to help recognize behavioural patterns and situations (Jataka, Sufi, Aesop, Ashby, etc ***)
- **Game patterns:** As an extension of techniques for analyzing board and other games, the set of behavioural games may lend themselves to analysis. An early example has been the work on transaction analysis (Eric Berne, Games People Play: the psychology of human relations, 1964).
- **Pattern language:** A complementary approach is the exploration of a language of patterns through which various kind of operational response can be designed. The is approach was developed by Christopher Alexander (A Pattern Language, 1977).
- **Sets of strategies:** The Chinese and Japanese cultures have devoted considerable attention to identifying and relating the many strategies forming comprehensible sets of strategies. Sun Tzu's Art of War, Miyamoto Musashi's The Book of Five Rings, or Gao Yuan's Lure the Tiger out of the Mountains; the thirty-six strategems of ancient China

Various conceptual initiatives can be seen as constituting a form of integrative pattern language highlighting strategic opportunities and vulnerabilities (cf Patterns of Conceptual Integration, 1984 ). Examples include:

- **Generalization of pattern language:** The above approach of Christopher Alexander has been applied to computer programming. It has also been used as a template to generate parallel sets of patterns (5-fold Pattern Language, 1984)
- **General systems theory:** This approach to systems theory focuses on the existence of models, principles, and laws that apply to generalized systems or their subclasses, irrespective of their particular kind, the nature of their component elements, and the relationships or "forces" between them. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (General System Theory, 1986) argued for a theory, not of systems of a more or less special kind, but of universal principles applying to systems in general.
- **Personality type coding:** Efforts have been made down the centuries to distinguish different personality types, whether through techniques like astrology, the enneagram, or the range of personality theories, types and tests, management-relevant personality styles (eg Myers-Briggs Type Indicator)
- **Chinese governance philosophy:** This has treated as fundamental the insights into patterns of change articulated in the I Ching (or Book of Changes). This has been complemented by the Tao Te Ching.*** Such approaches have also been associated with the early significance attached to "magic squares". Sudoku: The current interest in Sudoku can be seen as part of a continuing interest in numeric patterns of this kind (Gil Galanti, The History of Sudoku: from ancient Magic Squares to the Rubik's Cube of the 21st century, 2005)
- **Theory of correspondences:** This feature of symbolism is based on the assumption that all cosmic phenomena are limited and serial, appearing as scales or series on separate planes; with the components of one series linked with those of another in their ultimate significance, despite their apparently disparate nature. It is fundamental to a magical view of life [more]. One variant of this is Gematria. Correspondences are also a feature of isomorphism between systems in general systems theory (see above).

Such patterns may be understood as more descriptive "pigeon holes" for clusters of insight. Each pattern in a set may also be understood as a conduit for a distinct form of psycho-social energy most readily understood in terms of the type of "energy" a person brings when functioning in a particular pattern mode. This is increasingly recognized in management teams (cf Meredith Belbin, Management Teams: why they succeed or fail, 1981). Patterns can be used in exploring the interweaving energies in conferences (Energy Patterns in Conferences: weaving patterns of information as a context for higher levels of integration, 1988). Various kinds of patterns have long featured in ritual magic, especially in traditional societies, but notably as adapted to by religions and secretive cults.

One of the weaknesses of pattern detection is that, reinforced by any tendency to "group think", it encourages "profiling" -- as has been so evident in the case of "homeland security" and the "war on terror". In this sense, as a puzzle, every complex pattern has a quick and simple solution -- that is wrong.

Introduction, Conclusion and References in: Governance through Patterning Language: creative cognitive engagement contrasted with abdication of responsibility