# Interdisciplinary communication for environmental effectiveness

Forward-looking lessons from leadership, followership, and strategic entrepreneurship

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**ABSTRACT:** This article contends that interdisciplinary interactions, and temporal factors, influence communications between environment and organisations in ways that are understudied. It tracks the evolution of one recent interface between strategy and entrepreneurship to illustrate the process in action and to suggest how that hybrid can, in turn, interface with new leadership research to improve organisational responses at a time of fast-moving change. In addition, it makes a case for integrating action learning, action research, and action inquiry, as a method for generating more relevant and forward-looking case material than retrospective studies of past practice.

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How disciplines interface is a neglected dimension of practice, research, and theory. Our article investigates the complex intersection of major fields with the contemporary global environment. It begins by acknowledging the usefulness of a particular interweaving of strategic management and entrepreneurial studies into an emerging field of strategic entrepreneurship as a response to changing environmental conditions. We find that recent communication perspectives from the leadership literature both confirm and broaden the analysis of environmental conditions that catalysed that shift toward combining strategy and entrepreneurship. We also illustrate how some leadership responses

are more developed in further identifying key environmental factors, and in preparing individuals and organisations to take appropriate action. In addition, we suggest how certain leadership material, especially that engaging with emotional aspects, supplements strategic entrepreneurship thinking. We also suggest how future projections, as well as contemporary assessments, reinforce the need for such thinking. We conclude that not only do strategy and entrepreneurship need to come together, but that both need to interface with advances in leadership.

The second section of the article makes a case for researching the more forward-looking strategy/entrepreneurship/leadership interface in a different way from traditional retrospective models. Deployed extensively over the past twenty years, such models extract lessons for the future from the collection and analysis of existing (see Collins, 2001; Peters & Waterman, 1984), and/or past (Kim & Mauborgne, 2004; Kim & Mauborgne, 2005) exemplary organisations. We contend that this retrospective perspective can be a misleading guide to effective forward-looking practice and that this has been illustrated through the relatively quick downfall of many seemingly 'excellent' companies since Peters and Waterman (1984) identified them as such. Instead, it proposes how a mindful and anticipatory action research- and action-inquiry-based approach might generate more usable contemporaneous insight and enable working effectively with the new interfaces in practice.

## Strategic entrepreneurship: A brief history of the path to integration/interface

Hitt, Ireland, Camp, and Sexton's (2002a) edited collection, *Strategic Entrepreneurship: Creating a New Mindset*, positions the change of conditions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries as the key environmental catalyst to what they term the integration of the two fields. Their opening chapter (Hitt, Ireland, Camp, & Sexton, 2002b) describes how a 'new competitive landscape developed in the 1990s' (p. 1) and sets out a description of that landscape as full of 'threats to existing patterns of successful competition as well as opportunities to form competitive advantages through innovations' (p. 1). They also consider this hypercompetitive landscape as identifiable by

> substantial and often frame-breaking change, a series of temporary, rather than sustainable competitive advantages for individual firms, the criticality of speed in making and implementing strategic decisions, shortened product life cycles, and new forms of competition among global companies. (Hitt et al., 2002b, p. 1)

To accommodate the new landscape, Hitt et al. (2002b) advocate that strategists become 'entrepreneurial actors' (p. 1) in order to create new markets, to capture a larger market share from less aggressive and innovative competitors, and 'to take the customers, assets, and even the employees of staid existing firms' (p. 1). Such strategic entrepreneurship integrates 'entrepreneurial (i.e., opportunity-seeking actions) and strategic (i.e. advantage-seeking actions) perspectives to design and implement entrepreneurial strategies that create wealth' (p. 2).

## Learning from leadership (1): Context

This article argues that, to better tackle a shifting environment, the strategist-entrepreneur interface needs to be augmented by recent perspectives on leadership. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) address similar calls for 'creation' and 'performance' by suggesting the emotional resources that new leaders need 'to thrive amidst chaos and turbulent change' (p. xi) and to 'foster creative innovations, all-out performance, or warm and lasting customer relations?' (p. xi). These suggestions engage explicitly with emotional concerns that remain implicit in strategic entrepreneurship.

Recent leadership research findings indicate that answers to such questions involve awareness (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001), activating energy for ethical values (such as trust and integrity) (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002), empathy and ethics (or their absence) (Lipman-Blumen, 2005), and emotional resilience and resonance (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005). As with the strategic entrepreneurship convergence, contemporary realities have acted as the catalyst. Unlike strategic entrepreneurship, however, the new leadership literature focuses more on the individual, and their relationships, and less on the business context in isolation, in favour of considering business as part of a wider social transformation that surfaced powerfully in the late 20th and early 21st centuries but had deep roots in ecology and history:

> Our world is a new world, and it requires a new kind of leadership...virtually everything we have taken for granted for hundreds, if not thousands, of years is in the midst of profound transformation. Our planet's climate is changing, and we are experiencing extreme, unpredictable weather and temperature changes that affect indigenous plants, farming, animals, and sea life. There is a rise in the number and severity of natural disasters—hurricanes, floods, and droughts. New diseases are

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*on the rise, and HIV and AIDS continue to decimate populations of entire countries and all of sub-Saharan Africa. (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005, p. 1)*

Typically, as with Boyatzis and McKee (2005), the new leadership literature goes on to address substantial social changes where 'social systems in place for ages no longer meet the needs of families, communities, or nations?' (p. 1) and the concomitant increase in conflict that has global dimensions feeds into 'a world that is more unstable, more dangerous' with terrorism and responses to terrorism leading 'to generalised anxiety that touches all of us' (p. 2). It also observes how similar 'seismic shifts have shaken the business landscape as well' (Boyatzis & McKee, 2005, p. 2) with 'the sheer complexity' (p. 2) of organisations increasing 'geometrically, making predictability and stability elusive if not impossible' (p. 2).

We now summarise three significant leadership trends that have evolved to cope with this uncertainty. The first is an emerging trend to foreground bad leadership as worth study, and involves discussing leadership from the perspective of followers (Lipman-Blumen, 2005). The trend acknowledges some of the factors highlighted by the new leadership, such as instability and anxiety. In particular, it offers ways to appreciate the drivers of followers' needs. Secondly, while contextualising these individual drivers, we argue for their further development through perspectives from action learning (Marquardt, 2004), action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), and action inquiry (Torbert & Associates, 2004). These three have been tending to merge in order to address pressures of time, demonstrating that entrepreneurs should never aim to learn without acting on the lessons, or act without learning from the action, or miss the chance to achieve outcomes while developing reflective skills. Action learning and action research have gained a substantial number of adherents as powerful means to expand organisational knowledge while increasing positive outcomes and individual expertise. Torbert and Associates (2004) and Rooke and Torbert (2005) have distilled similar lessons into individual leadership awareness practices.

### Learning from leadership (2): Mindfulness and emotional intelligence

In pulling these diverse aspects together, we foreground the relevance of the second trend. This we identify as a brand of 'mindful' leadership, which is worth cultivating for itself, and because it can assist in

deploying appropriate entrepreneurial, strategic, and leadership aspects at appropriate times as part of a coherent and conscious interfacing process. Our particular brand of 'mindful' leadership draws from new leadership responses to what the Bennis, Spreitzer, and Cummings (2001) collection of leading leadership theorists characterises as an unknowable and unpredictable world.

In addition to those theorists already mentioned above, our concept of mindfulness synthesises material from a number of other notable sources including Silsbee's (2004) work on coaching, which offers guidance on how to embed self-aware, and socially-aware, empathetic behaviour that spurs leaders, their people, and their organisations to succeed in a world of uncertainty and change (Clarke, 2004, p. 27); Weick and Sutcliffe's (2001) *Managing the Unexpected: Assuring High Performance in an Age of Complexity*, which examines such 'high reliability or organizations' as 'power grid dispatching centers, air traffic control systems, nuclear aircraft carriers, nuclear power engineering plants, hospital emergency departments, and hostage negotiation teams' (p. 3) and serves to illustrate the grounded insights possible even under extreme pressure and uncertainty; and Mintzberg's (2004) work on executive education, which does not appear much in the strategic management literature despite his stature as a strategic theorist, gives articulate expression to the insight, which we as consultants and academics share, that the most useful education we can give practising leaders and managers is reflective practices that will help them to understand and modify their own behaviour.

Finally, in relation to mindfulness, but also important in its own right and of relevance to strategy and entrepreneurship and their intersection, we argue for drawing extensively from writings influenced by emotional intelligence. The virtual absence of considerations of emotional intelligence in strategy we see as a cause for concern. Taking textbooks as a guide to what is considered as mainstream, we discovered that neither emotion, nor emotional intelligence, nor its most prominent published exponent, Daniel Goleman, feature much if at all. None of the three are referenced in the index of a variety of multiple edition textbooks such as European-based authors De Witt and Meyer's (2004) *Strategy: Process, Content, Context: An International Perspective*; or US-based authors Pitts and Lei's (2006) *Strategic Management: Building and Sustaining Competitive Advantage*; or, the sixth and latest edition of Hitt, Ireland, and Hoskisson's (2005) *Strategic Management: Competitiveness and Globalization Concepts*, which includes a whole final chapter devoted to strategic entrepreneurship. Interestingly, in

the one textbook in which Goleman appears, Hill and Jones's (2004) *Strategic Management Theory: An Integrated Approach*, they consistently misspell his name as Goldman in all four pages that refer to him (pp. 27-28; pp. 483-484).

Yet some strategy literature does acknowledge the importance of emotions: 'what people 'see', 'say', and 'feel', is tied up with what they 'do' and this has major implications for strategic management' (Brocklesby & Cummings, 2003, p. 294):

> *In some firms, for example, there is a view that if not looking for opportunities and threats is not enshrined in daily practices and infused through the whole organization, then no amount of search and analysis at the 'head' of the firm will compensate for this. As one chief executive put it to us recently, 'some people seize opportunities, other people do not even notice them, when you have 250 people always looking for and talking about new ideas, now that is a creative force'. (p. 294)*

Accordingly, as a major movement in engaging effectively with emotional material, and with precisely the kind of conditions described by Brocklesby and Cummings's (2003) chief executive, the absence of emotional intelligence in strategy is surprising. The surprise is increased because, since its emergence, first in psychology (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), and then more widely through the popularisation of Goleman's (1995) education-based bestseller *Emotional Intelligence*, it has spread through general management with Goleman's (1998) *Working With Emotional Intelligence* and into leadership through Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee's (2002) *The New Leaders: Transforming the Art of Leadership Into the Science of Results* and standard leadership textbooks (see, for example, the chapters in Hackman and Johnson, 2004, and DuBrin and Dalglish, 2003). If strategic entrepreneurship is designed to cope with rapid change and uncertainty, then it would make sense to learn from the development of emotionally intelligent leaders, managers, and workers who have found it beneficial in other fields.

## Learning from leadership (3): Credibility and followership

From the leadership field, but also vital to strategic management, research over more than two decades has consistently found that followers seek four major leadership characteristics: honesty, forward-looking thinking, competence, and inspiration (Kouzes & Posner,

2002, pp. 25-26). These well-known findings have been followed by explanatory theories that the followers' search is fuelled by psychological and existential needs overlaid with external uncertainties and compounded by psychosocial forces in an unfinished and unfinishable world (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

Our synthesis of the core concepts in recent literature suggests that leadership credibility is predicated on optimism, self-knowledge, authenticity, and an interest in shouldering responsibility. Successful leaders underwrite such ongoing development by demonstrating behaviour and skills that may often run counter to the populist personae of charismatic leaders. Much post-2000 leadership research clusters around core concepts that often run counter to popular images of charismatic or larger-than-life leaders. The literature promotes different images such as quiet leadership—underpinned by mixed motives of altruism, acknowledged selfishness, and perceptions anchored by hard realism (Badaracco, 2001, 2002); authentic leadership—demonstrated by building followers' perception by getting to know oneself, others, and the organisational context better (Goffee & Jones, 2005); tempered radicalism—executed by challenging both existing mental models and prevailing orthodoxy to achieve cultural transformation in organisations (Meyerson, 2001); level 5 leadership—a paradoxical blending of personal humility and professional will to build great enterprises (Collins, 2001); fundamental states of leadership—entered by tapping one's deepest values and instincts for excellence (Quinn, 2005); connecting leadership—enacted through a framework that perceives and relates to those who differ from us on a continuum ranging from compassion through structural change and humility to the final anchor point of solidarity and reciprocity with the other (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).

This representative repertoire of leadership styles is laudable both for its pragmatism in some instances (quiet leadership) and its almost uniform moral high-ground. At its core it underscores its protagonists' acute self-awareness and their sharp insight into external events and people. It reiterates Kouzes and Posner's (2002) assertion that leadership is about developing oneself to be an instrument for making a difference. The literature supports the assertion that a critical variable in the progressive transformation of an organisation to industry leadership is the ego development level of its leadership (Rooke & Torbert, 1998, p. 11). Having already mastered the personal skills of organisational effectiveness, the new leaders create the frameworks of discipline, commitment, and an ongoing practice of collaborative

enquiry that make them and their corporations successful (Rooke & Torbert, 2005, p. 75).

Complementarily, the thesis is in complete agreement with Weick's (2001) assertion that effective leaders in the new millennium search for better questions, accept inexperience, stay in motion, channel decisions to those with the best knowledge, craft big stories with dynamic plots, are obsessed with updating and plausibility, encourage improvisation in themselves and others, and demonstrate great personal humility and vulnerability (p. 94). They generate organisational and personal transformation through the exercise of the powers of mutual inquiry, vigilance, and vulnerability in the short and long term (Dotlich & Noel, 1998).

## Projecting futures and questioning the relevance of past success

Part of responding intelligently to conditions of massive change will entail considering projections of future possibilities. Over twenty years ago, Huber's (1984) article on 'The Nature and Design of Post-Industrial Organizations' won awards for claiming that the then-current conditions of fast change and turbulence were not the transition to the future but, in fact, were the future. As Huber (2004) himself observes retrospectively: 'That message created a bit of a stir, because *at the time*—strange as it now seems—many people viewed those conditions as a temporary disequilibrium' (p. 3). We argue that, in shaping itself in relation mainly to contemporary conditions, strategic entrepreneurship runs similar risks, this time in relation to the environmental and social breadth and the impact on individuals, to those in 1984 who were surprised to consider disequilibrium as more than a temporary phenomenon. Significantly, Bennis (2001) goes so far as to title his own chapter 'The future has no shelf life' (p. 3)

As a result, we seek to inform the present with insights from future projections and review work by leading figures in the fields of leadership and futures. A variety of practitioner and academic viewpoints align with the leadership literature in emphasising how the drivers of existential and environmental angst, which followers register as feeling and look to their leaders to allay, are likely to continue. Well-established futurists (Toffler & Toffler, 1999, pp. 185) and megatrend analysts have been pointing to the meta-convergence of technology with culture—including religion, epistemology, and the rest of intellectual life—to produce the restructuring and convergence of entire civilisations. More

recently, contemporary corporate strategists have detected congruent aspects in a business world that is becoming invisibly cyber-connected with porous borders, weakened nation states, and more powerful regions (Ohmae, 2005).

These tendencies have been tracked into more specific entrepreneurial challenges. In *The Handbook of Research on International Entrepreneurship* (Dana, 2004), Dana and Wright (2004) collate them into 'Emerging Paradigms' (p. 3), which simultaneously require entrepreneurs to be mindful of contradictory movements such as *'The trend towards supranational powers'* (p. 4) and *'The trend towards localization of powers'* (p. 4), and the need to renegotiate not only the borders between nations, and the related diminution of distinctions between citizens and managers (Vigoda-Gadot & Golembiewski, 2005), but the lines of demarcation within and between firms. Outsourcing as a business strategy is not a new concept, but the conventional wisdom, to retain core competencies and outsource marginal activities has lost strength (Linder, 2004) because it restricts entrepreneurial enterprise. In contemporary cases, competitive advantage is now being leveraged by outsourcing 'core functions like engineering, R & D, manufacturing and marketing' (Gottfredson, Puryear, & Phillips, 2005, p. 132). In the wake of such shifting alliances between firms who were formerly competitors, employees have to handle the stresses and uncertainty of making swift changes from foe to friend to maintain loyalty to their own organisations. Simultaneously, workforces have also to come to terms with demands that they take a wider environmental and social responsibility. In the words of one successful internationalist: 'As a global entrepreneur, you must always seek to improve yourself, your product, your business, and your world' (Delaney, 2004, p. 63).

Many of these future predictions coalesce into a consensus that, as technologies converge not just with another, but with elements of society and culture, there will be painful social, cultural, institutional, moral, and political dislocations. Moreover, these dislocations will accompany the restructuring of organisations and civilisations, notwithstanding contemporaneous business successes (Toffler & Toffler, 1999, pp. 185). Futures research signals that the education, health, justice, political, and family systems face crises as civilisations transform. Former president Clinton (2005) observes how, in a parallel social dimension, world democratisation, economic development, and global security are at risk unless there is a credible and urgent response to the HIV pandemic, debilitating world poverty, and racial, religious, and ethnic divides. On the global economic stage, the opportunities

and collateral effects of the inevitable and transformational change on nation-states, people, and organisations will be dramatic and visible (Ohmae, 2005).

Across all the leading economies of the developed world, which are likely to be in much better business, environmental, and fiscal shape than the developing world, these forces of flux will leave people desperate for connection, empathy, and open communication (Goleman, 1998, pp. 9-10). In the context of tidal waves of transformation, we contend that cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, and leadership competencies will be joined with continuous learning to cope with creating responses to continuous change and sustaining high performance. In the future, a refined and discerning ear for the moral and ethical consequences of actions, an understanding of the purposes of work and human organisations, and a new kind of emotional leadership will inform organisational effectiveness (Bennis et al., 2001; Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2001, p. 51). Strategic entrepreneurship needs to connect with these ideas in the aforementioned range of post-2000 leadership research that includes Badaracco (2002), Buckingham (2005), Collins (2001), Goffee and Jones (2005), Meyerson (2001), Quinn (2005), and Rooke and Torbert (2005).

However, questions remain. How would researchers test this consensus in action? Before outlining our conclusions, let us first identify problems in looking forward by looking backward. Even though it has led to some phenomenal success in the management publishing and consulting field, the bad object of our focus is the seminal work, *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1984). In their book, the two former McKinsey consultants used case studies to chart future directions for businesses to attain excellence. Peters and Waterman's (1984) work continues to sell, but the graph of criticism of the bestseller rose steeply and, within six years, Ghosh's (1990) book-length retrospective appraisal was substantially negative. Nine years later, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997) calculated that two-thirds of the forty-three US exemplars of excellence had, within five years, 'ceased to be excellent' (p. 17). Micklethwait and Wooldridge (1997) extrapolate from this shortcoming to make the charge of 'faddishness' (p. 17) and to assert that the 'fashion in theories is mirrored by a fashion in companies' (p. 17). However, we see the fault as deeper and linked to the very methodology of projecting recent and past performances forward and assuming that they will continue to provide navigational assistance to success in spite of the likelihood that future conditions will differ substantially.

## Conclusions

Instead of following a rear view mirror, we propose that, while strategic entrepreneurs may set out on a journey of ongoing improvement using past evidence, they must also navigate using the interface of strategy/ entrepreneurship/new leadership skills. That way, they can reflect mindfully on what is happening as they travel and be ready for fast changes of course in the face of unexpected events in the environment. Considerable evidence shows that action learning (Marquardt, 2004), action research (Reason & Bradbury, 2001), and action inquiry (Rooke & Torbert, 2005), independently, or in collaboration, deliver outcomes in three key dimensions: in the individual, they increase each participant's informed contribution; in the group, they increase productive and thoughtful teamwork; and in the organisation, they solve intractable problems or open unknown opportunities.

That integrated foundation, in delivering tangible results while developing difficult-to-measure, but tangible in effect, soft skills, provides a process for embedding the new skills in actual workforce tasks. In that way action learning, action research, and action inquiry can be combined to confirm their speed and efficacy in solving problems while building leadership competencies through shared group feedback in real organisational work. In that way, organisations can build strategic entrepreneurs with solid foundations in creation and in performance, informed by the new leadership skills, mindful of the need for emotionally-informed and continuously-mindful action, and prepared to meet a fast-changing and unknown future that extends beyond the conventional boundaries of business. In conclusion, therefore, we contend that interfacing dialogue between disciplines is far from an academic exercise but rather provides ways of establishing common ground for moving ahead in the light of credible future projects and of testing by going forward rather than looking back.

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