Metaphors in strategy

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> ''I must emend an observation I once made. Long ago, I told you we must all choose our metaphors. I was wrong. We do not choose our metaphors.'' He stopped to give the reworked epigram a little bit of drama. ''Our metaphors choose us'' (Allen Kurzweil, *A Case of Curiosities*).

To get back the richness of strategy, we must liberate it from the toolbox approach we find in so many management books and give it back the general approach it deserves – that is, helping companies to achieve and sustain competitive advantage in a constantly moving environment. Strategy is a combination of bold (and unexpected) moves and flawless execution.

One way of broadening the way one thinks about strategy is to bridge the gap between business and other disciplines. Ideas from the world outside business can be made useful for the strategist via metaphorical associations. In today's ever faster changing global environment, business leaders should use insights from every field that is at hand – whether they derive from business or from history, philosophy, anthropology, dance, or any other academic field. Stimuli that are external to business can replenish ''strategy'' with the richness, freedom, and creativity it needs, so that managers can perceive trends the competition does not see.

How metaphors work

Although many have drawn business lessons from other disciplines, often from the military or biology, most managers do it badly. They merely use rhetorical metaphors like ''business is war'' for reference to the competitive element in business or ''viral marketing'' to depict the spreading of information toward a certain group of customers.

Rhetorical metaphors are stale; everyone knows what they mean. They create recognition, but do not encourage further thinking. Cognitive metaphors, however, foster creativity. They are not immediately obvious and need an intellectual push to uncover potential insights.

There are two primary uses of a cognitive metaphor. First, as they are not directly connected to the business topic, they can create an artificial environment where concerns are raised and issues addressed more freely than in a board meeting dealing with the ''hard facts''. Shakespeare used his Italian comedies as a satire of Elizabethan England and gave the characters in the plays British traits but Italian names and Italian settings. Similarly, a metaphor about trust and gift giving among the native Americans of the Pacific Northwest can encourage management to talk more openly of challenges to be found, for example, in a post merger integration.

Well-chosen, fresh metaphors offer new access to business examples, offering new associations previously unthought-of. They make important issues easier to discuss by masking the direct topic. As Oscar Wilde similarly put it: ''Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth.''

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Second, a metaphor can only be pushed so far, then the comparison tends to collapse. Tiha von Ghyczy, in ‘‘The Fruitful Flaws of Strategy Metaphors’’ (von Ghyczy, 2003), calls this point the fault line. If the parallel were perfect, it would be a model, not a metaphor. To unpack the value of a cognitive metaphor, the fault line needs to be crossed. Then the unusual, the creative, has a chance to emerge.

For example, some comparisons between a business and the singer-actress Madonna are easy to make. She is adaptable and companies should be adaptable. She knows her market and how to reach them, as companies should. But it might seem unclear at first glimpse what Madonna might have to do with product life cycles. In addition, Madonna is an individual, not an organization. There might be no immediately apparent connection and that might puzzle us. And it is in such unsettled states of mind that we are most open to new ways of thinking.

An additional benefit to a cognitive metaphor is that it shows the originality and depth of thought of the person offering it and, when explored effectively in a group, encourages similar thinking in others. As Allen Kurzweil says in our epigraph, ‘‘Our metaphors choose us.’’ They reflect the unique connections that only we, at the outset, can see.

In the following, we will examine two cognitive metaphors and their relevance to business strategy.

William the Conqueror and post-merger integration

In 1066 William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, invaded England with an army of armored knights and defeated the Anglo-Saxons and their king Harold in the battle of Hastings. On Christmas Eve 1066, William was crowned king of England in Westminster Abbey. He was the only person ever to invade England to have a long term impact, lasting for nearly 1,000 years. Feudalism, chivalry and the foundations of the house of Windsor and the British monarchy can be traced back to William.

His success in conquering England and also maintaining power in his Norman dukedom is based on three principles that are equally important in every takeover or post-merger integration. Although the medieval world has nearly nothing in common with our world, pushing beyond the fault line of the metaphor and discovering the secrets of William’s success may give you surprising insights into today’s business challenges.

Understand the culture

William invaded Britain, but nevertheless respected the culture and traditions of the Anglo-Saxons. He allowed them to keep their traditions and had himself crowned as their king in Westminster Abbey according to their local customs and ceremonies. He abolished old structures and habits only when they were not useful and outdated. Replacing the old just because it is old was never an issue for him – a diplomatic move that won him many supporters among the Anglo-Saxon leaders.

In a post merger integration, often chest-beating prevails over mutual learning. The customs of the senior merger partner are considered superior, the culture of the junior partner inferior. Managers forget that every part of the merged companies has something to offer, some gifts and customs to give to the other partner that can create a win-win situation for both. Turning strangers into allies by understanding and respecting their customs and thus contributing to the common goal is an important cornerstone of a change management process in a post merger strategy.

Know how to manage in a crisis

A lot of deals are struck with no or very little apparent reason. Often there is a strategic legitimation formulated for the press after the deal has been closed. ‘‘Strategic opportunities’’, ‘‘growth beyond organic growth’’, and ‘‘merger of equals’’ sound fine, but investment bankers whispering in executives’ ears and manager’s thinking that bigger is always better might be the real reasons. William had a clear strategic goal for the takeover of England: broaden his base of power by being leader of two countries instead of one. His strategy was an early form of feudal portfolio theory, avoiding putting all his eggs (power) into one basket (realm). William knew what he wanted and he knew how to achieve it. He never directed his undertakings from a war room far away from England, but was always near when trouble or rebellion arose and his personal attendance was required.

William's conquering of Britain was no textbook merger, but it was founded on sound experience in dealing with challenging military and political situations. When he was appointed duke of Normandy earlier in his career, conspirators threatened to kill him because he was a bastard son of his father, Robert the Devil. During his reign in Normandy he had to beat down riots that flamed up anew for nearly 14 years – initiated by his own vassals and rebels from the court of the French king. So when he started his acquisition of England in 1066, he was an expert in crisis management and knew that every situation is unique and that there are no ''textbook examples.''

Make trust essential and mutual

William was a straightforward leader with no compromises, but he – contrary to Lenin centuries later – found trust more important than control. He chose the noblest men of England and gave them an advance in trust, knowing that former enemies he had dealt with mercifully could become the most trustworthy people. As he trusted them to care for England and his own interests while he was away in England (or Normandy respectively) he gave his leaders and generals a feeling of importance and responsibility. As they were treated with respect they would not quit and move over to the competition. And when they failed William's goals they also failed their own goals.

As a result of his experience in crisis management, however, William was not a man of good faith at all cost. If he observed subordinates misusing his trust and planning uproar and revolution while he was away, the consequences were harsh and quick. His reign over England was built on trust rather than control, but misuse of trust was a major offense and punished accordingly. People blocking the post merger process and just working for their own goals and not for the shared vision had no place in William's world.

You can have the best financial multiples calculated, the best synergy effects on the spreadsheet, but if you lose key people as a result of a poorly implemented merger or if whole divisions are occupied with themselves rather than with the client, it is just a matter of time till the marriage in heaven will turn into a wedlock in hell - and finally break apart.

Pushing past the fault line

There are many wonderful parallels between William the Conqueror's methods and those of corporate executives in post merger situations, but if the metaphor is pushed further, where does it break down? William would not have known today's definition of an acquisition. He dealt with power relations between kings, tribes, and warlords. Nevertheless he identified trust, networks, and proper communications as the key drivers of his successful conquest of England – the same drivers that are important for a smooth post merger integration.

Business and warfare are essentially different, but that is why this is a metaphor and not a model. Fault lines are found by closely examining the details, not the broader aspects.

If you look at the particular customs that William honored, they will not align with what's important in corporate culture, but pushing the metaphor may yield further insights. What, for example, might be a corporate parallel to a method and place of inaugurating a king? It may be selecting a president or a board. It may be establishing policies for promotions. By looking closely at what each company in a merger has done successfully in these areas *and* comparing with the not-quite-parallel source from the metaphor, a better policy may emerge. Choose details that are important to William's success and pursue the metaphor beyond obvious parallels – and be prepared for some surprising insights!

Madonna and product life cycles

Madonna has done it yet again: *Hard Candy*, her new studio album hit the stores in April and she has hit the headlines, as she has done so many times before. Madonna has been *the* unrivalled superstar of the pop music scene for 25 years now and we may well ask, ''How does she do it?'' Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone (her full name) is not an extremely talented singer, actress, dancer, or composer. She does not have the voice of a Whitney Houston or an Anastacia nor does she dance like a Janet Jackson. She is undoubtedly attractive, but is no breathtaking beauty either.

In the following we will analyze the key success factors that have secured Madonna astounding popularity and the fanatical loyalty of her fans. There are four pillars to her easy-sounding but hard-to-implement goal. And that goal is: become a superstar – and stay a superstar! In the following we will examine her strategy how to achieve this goal in the four subheads below.

Understand your market

Few stars have understood the mechanisms of the music market and how to market oneself as well as Madonna. She understands her competitive environment perfectly, knows exactly what the market wants and what she needs to give. She is also critical in her assessment of her own resources and can reinvent herself repeatedly, helping her to surprise customers time and again with ''product innovations''. She set about this tactical maneuvering, utilizing the media to boost her success when, for example, she won the MTV Video Awards at just 26 years of age and when in 1984 her hit *Like a Virgin* made heavy rotation in what was then a relatively new music video channel. This made Madonna one of the first to recognize the importance of music TV as a marketing multiplier.

One important aspect of her strategy is the balance between provocation and commerce, without bending the conventions more or less accepted by respectable society so far as to endanger her own success. In addition to MTV, Madonna could always count on two other loyal multipliers: the Vatican and the Pope. The reproachful words that the Holy Father Pope John Paul II had for various blasphemous and lascivious scenes in the video *Like a Prayer* rang out as clearly as the criticism that Benedict XVI had 20 years later for the staged crucifixion scene in her *Confessions on a Dance Floor* Tour in 2006.

Develop strategic (and unexpected) alliances

Not even superstars are expected to be able to do everything. But they do have to know someone else who can. We have already mentioned that there are others with greater talents in each of the arenas in which Madonna performs (song, dance, acting, composition). But instead of becoming vexed by these apparent deficits, she does what she can do really well: inspiring other talented people and securing their loyalty. Instead of pretending she is supernaturally talented, she aggressively channels the abilities she does have: the ambition to be the best, determination, intelligence, vitality, and the willingness to work very hard, get little sleep, and have little vacation time. Madonna seems to work an average of 36 hours a day.

And then she is also an expert at forming strategic alliances. Madonna obviously has the ability to milk personal relationships for economically useful synergies. Some examples would be her marriage to Sean Penn and her relationship with Warren Beatty, allowing her to gain a foothold in the movie business. Furthermore, she does not shy away from marketing her content in diverse channels (books, DVDs, videos, films, and clothing) and transferring her image to advertisers who hope to convey a similar image (BMW, H&M). Economists would speak of multichannel marketing. Here, too, the goal is quite simple: become a superstar – and stay a superstar. But it is often the simple things that prove the hardest.

Brand wisely

Simply stated: ''If Madonna's on it, Madonna's in it.'' Successful branding distinguishes a product. Through all the flexibility Madonna has shown in over 25 years in the music business, her focused branding strategy is hard to miss. (When we say ''her'' we are of course often referring to her network and her team.) Madonna does not adapt to the market to the extent that she becomes invisible or replaceable. Her trademarks such as coolness, sex appeal, subtle provocation, and innovation are to be found in every new Madonna album. She is not a product of a global recording company, neither is she a product of a TV superstar competition, here one day, gone the next. Her success is the success of her own efforts and her own planning. The fact that she produces her albums with Maverick Records, her own record label, a joint venture with Warner Music, is one proof of this. The *femme fatale* she plays in films like *Evita* or *Dick Tracy* is the film projection of the Madonna we know from her music albums. The more we see, the more we want to know who Madonna really is. But this is the well-kept secret. ''You'll never know the real me'', she once said in an interview. This mystery element is also part of a successful branding strategy.

Another component of this success strategy and her branding is her innovative streak that can be seen, for example, in her ability to turn seemingly adverse circumstances to her advantage. In 1992 when MTV stopped airing the video of *Justify my Love* because of offensive, sadomasochistic scenes, Madonna immediately turned the ban into the allure of the forbidden. *Justify my Love* became the very first video single in music history, stormed its way to the top of the US charts and sold 400,000 copies – and MTV, by contrast, was accused by fans and press alike of old-fashioned prudery.

Adjust to an ever-changing environment

Madonna possesses the ability to continually reinvent herself, to assume an image that is cool, successful, sexy, and exciting. The path Madonna has taken as a constantly developing and flexible ''work of art'' or ''product'' can be traced by the metamorphosis of her appearance alone over the last 25 years. She has gone from street look to glam rock, from Marilyn Monroe look-alike to retro, to S&M, to *grande dame*, to nonchalance, to the military look, and finally to the H&M collection.

Madonna's fans will never be bored and Madonna will never be redundant. Many rock bands are accused of nothing less than treason if they modify their style or allow anything else to influence their music, thus ''watering down their branding''. Always sticking to the old stuff, however, is also no guarantee for success. Think of how many recording artists have followed their initial hits with weak adaptations of that hit and have soon faded away. Not Madonna.

Her versatility is not an attempt to correct the brand, but rather it is the most integral part, which is why this versatility is not perceived as change for the sake of change, nor as the necessity to run after the latest trends whatever the cost. Rather, Madonna's strategy is more a case of quickly picking up on the weak signals of emerging trends and riding these trends so that we think Madonna herself *is* the trend.

Products come and products go. In business we speak of product life cycles that trace the rise and fall of a product. For example, the Walkman with the cassette enjoyed great popularity in the Eighties before it was displaced by the Discman. This was then displaced by the MP3 player, which in turn was displaced by the Apple iPod. And it is highly probable that the iPod will be displaced too one day by yet another product.

But that sort of thing does not seem to happen to Madonna. The new product cycle that displaces the old Madonna product cycle is also of Madonna origin. Madonna anticipates and counters this displacement within herself, thus ensuring she never becomes obsolete or surplus to requirements. Her strategy is to become a superstar and stay a superstar. And the path towards that goal is, once again, something in which Madonna excels – use of the media to stage continuity in change.

Pushing past the fault line

Madonna is a commercially oriented artist, and thus very much closer to business than William the Conqueror. Whereas William's example is about wisdom, Madonna's is about re-invention and networks. Madonna's alliances easily send the message to think in original ways, but what possible learnings exist to finding unexpected benefits in a marriage? Should this be where the metaphor ends? Of course not. By examining Madonna's marriage with Sean Penn in detail and forcing its comparison with a company being acquired, or merged, or with a vendor, new ways of thinking may open up, not in the basic comparison, say, of a vendor relationship to a marriage because that's at the high level, but in the details of the relationship and how each one profited[1].

Metaphors are a powerful tool in business to understand partners, customers, and market participants. Executives should not, however, narrow their use to dinner speeches and golf-course conversations. Metaphors are especially useful in tough conversations where participants' opinions differ from each other, where there are several concerns but no solution at hand. Awkward situations with coworkers, with unions, with bosses sometimes cannot be approached directly without stirring immediate animosity. The increasing number of programs now being offered by companies about how to hold difficult conversations demonstrates recognition of this problem. Using well-chosen metaphors is one way to approach a contentious issue.

Metaphors do not answer questions, they rather pose new questions that business has to answer. But answering these questions will grant management a fresh look on their business surroundings and depict strengths and weaknesses of their business model from a different angle.

When managers are able to see the connection between the fresh metaphor and the business topic, then aspects of the business topic may be illuminated in a way that expands the vision of the business problem. And when the metaphor is pushed beyond its obvious parallel, beyond its fault line, then truly innovative ideas and solutions may be found.

Note

1. We have intentionally avoided citing specific business examples of where our sample metaphors may apply. At The Strategy Institute of The Boston Consulting Group, we believe in providing stimulating ideas and letting the readers make the specific connections. Encouraging readers to seek applications for new ideas themselves accomplishes more than making connections for them.

References

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