

Prescriptive versus emergent

[Business](#), [Strategy](#)



When described with historical perspective since it arrived in the mid 1960s, strategic or prescriptive planning has been embraced as a way of “outflanking competitors with big plays that yield long term rent from a sustainable advantage” (Bhide, 1986).

Although it faltered in the 1980s and 1990s mainly due to the unstable economy in that period and the rise of emergent strategy, it is still being practised today (John A Pearce II, 1987). Emergent strategy is the view that “strategy emerges as intentions collide with a changing reality” (Moore, 2011). This literature review places the article ‘Crafting strategy’ (Mintzberg, 1987) in the wider context of prescriptive and emergent debate followed by strengths and weakness of the article. Placing the article in wider literature debate

In ‘Crafting strategy’ Mintzberg distinguishes between planning strategy and crafting strategy. Mintzberg view on strategic planning is clear. “Strategic planning isn’t strategic thinking. One is the analysis and the other is synthesis” (Mintzberg, 1994). According to Mintzberg the current practise of strategic planning ‘separates thinking from doing’. He claims the current implementation of strategic planning can be best described as strategic programming, “the articulation and elaboration of strategies, or visions that already exists” (Mintzberg, 1994)

Thereby limiting intuition and creativity. Mintzberg idea on strategic planning is further emphasised by Brian Boyd who suggest prescriptive strategy limits organisation creativity and innovative skills (Boyd, 1991). Psychologist on prescriptive planning says “Articulation of strategy locks it into place, thereby impeding willingness to change it” (Kiesler, 1971). The fact is that

organisations who implement prescriptive strategy plan not to be flexible but to realize detailed intentions.

According to Mintzberg the key to crafting strategy is the ‘ intimate connection between thought and action’. [p68]. John Oliver emphasised in his book the importance of effective use of the action learning process hence emergent strategy in developing a future business strategy. (Oliver, 2006) The inflexible nature of deliberate strategy greatly reduces its liveness for the creative and reactive process. The emergent strategy, therefore, possesses much greater adaptability, particularly in tentative times and more difficult business environmental conditions.

However, Michael Porter argues that Industry structure drives competition and profitability. Success is not determined by whether an industry is mature or emerging (Porter, 1979). This is a typically prescriptive view on strategy, as it suggests breaking down intentions into communicated steps and formulating those steps into the structure of the organisation. This premise is contradicted by various perspectives, as they believe accumulated learning and experience provide the rare advantage that is difficult for other competitors to copy (Gerry Johnson, 2008).

This suggests that strategy can be crafted as organisations learn from previous success and failures. Mintzberg in ‘ Crafting strategy’ promotes the idea that prescriptive strategy ‘ misguides organisations that embrace it unreservedly.’[p66]. He pushes the idea that crafting strategy is a more effective representation of strategy. ‘ Craft evokes traditional skills perfection through the mastery of detail.... developed through experience and commitment.’[p66]. This is essentially emergent strategy as it describes

“ patterns realized despite or in the absence of intentions” (Henry Mintzberg, 1985) James Moncrieff (Moncrieff, 1999) states in his article “ deliberate responses to issues emerging within the competitive environment can still usually be labelled emergent strategy as it is based on response to emerging opportunities and threat.”

Mintzberg supports Moncrieff idea by using the National Film Board of Canada as an example ‘ Strategies like the NFB’ that appear without clear intentions-or in spite of them-emergent strategies’ [p69]. This shows when actions are taken in response to new challenge patterns eventually forms. However, it would be ignorant and inaccurate to place the article solely as emergent. In this article, Mintzberg states there is no such thing as ‘ Purely deliberate strategy or a purely emergent one’. [p69] Emergent strategy as an extreme is essentially the absence of strategy (Andrew Inkpen, 1995).

The crafting of strategy is definitely far from deliberate strategy but would be implausible to be classified as a purely emergent strategy. In Mintzberg words ‘ Strategy making walks on two feet, one deliberate and the other emergent’ In other words learning must be used in conjunction with control. Mintzberg expands on this idea when he said “ We think in order to act..... but we also act in order to think.” (Mintzberg, 1994) This in turn converges into a practical pattern that becomes the strategy. This article best supports ‘ deliberately emergent approach’ or umbrella approach as Mintzberg conveyed the idea that processes should be consciously managed to ‘ allow strategies to emerge en route.’ In this case senior management provides broad guidance and leaves the detail to those lower down in the organisation.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A key strength in this article is Mintzberg's ability to utilize pathos, logos and ethos effectively to appeal to his readers. The article is brilliantly written and well structured thereby appealing to readers from all intellectual levels. In addition, Mintzberg paints a vivid picture of the ideal form of strategy in the readers' mind with the use of crafting as a metaphor. He intertwines the quality of a good porter to that of a manager, consequently illustrating the role of a manager in crafting strategy 'Managers are craftsmen and strategy is their clay.' Mintzberg deliberately uses the metaphor to differentiate his concept of strategy from the mechanized models of deliberate planning that is void of creativity.

A key element emphasised in 'Crafting strategy' is the ability for businesses to learn from experiences and 'allow strategies to emerge en route.' However, what is not clearly indicated is if such type of approach is applicable to all sectors. McKiernan (McKiernan, 1997) argues that Mintzberg's theory places too much emphasis on established businesses as new entrants won't have the available experience to learn from. Furthermore, Burgelman (Robert A. Burgelman 1991, Andres S. Grove, 2007) believes such approach can only be applicable to businesses without an existing strategy, as a strategy is embedded with experience and learning, thereby making it harder for management to implement constant incremental changes in response to the environment.

In this article, Mintzberg fails to discuss on the weakness of emergent strategy. He proposes that businesses should learn from mistakes that occur, however he neglects the consequences of mistakes such as the cost and

wasted time due to trials and errors. These unrealistic expectations of emergent strategies are identified by Lynch. (Lynch, 2006) Mintzberg's failing to discuss on the weakness of emergent strategy limits the usefulness of emergent strategy in practice. However, authors such as Snyder and Cummings (William Snyder, 1998) carried out empirical study and designed models which aimed to align organisational learning with performance. Adcrof (Adcroft, 2009) also emphasises purely emergent strategy would be "a trial and error-driven activity where intuition is wrong as often as it is right, which gives rise to levels of risk that may be unacceptable" Conclusion

In conclusion, initially, Mintzberg favoured emergent strategy over-prescriptive strategy. However, he stated both strategy are needed in order to successfully implement strategy and advised the used of deliberately emergent and umbrella approach to strategy. Overall Mintzberg idea of strategy is still relevant to the world today as they reflect the fact that plans do fail and the age of five years plans are slowly fading away as businesses are becoming more responsive to the ever-changing environment.