



Win like Napoleon Think *Neuro-Strategy!*

By Dr Norman Chorn



WHY NAPOLEON?

We all know that Napoleon had magnificent victories at Toulon, Tivoli (perhaps his greatest of all time), The Pyramids and Austerlitz - but what can we learn about his approach to strategy and winning? And what's the connection with neuroscience?

Well, it turns out that Napoleon unknowingly used an understanding of neuroscience to craft his approach to strategy and strategic thinking. In essence he set up the optimum conditions for his brain to create powerful strategic insights.

Kenichi Ohmae tells us that good strategic thinking depends on our state of mind - he calls this the 'mind of the strategist'¹. He argues that good strategic thinking is only possible through a combination of traditional analytical thinking and insightful processes.

It seems as if this **combination** was key to Napoleon's mastery of strategic thinking - and also helps to explain some of the reasons for his opponents' failure.

AN EXAMPLE OF STRATEGIC THINKING

Let's examine some of the key elements of Napoleon's approach:

- 1. He was a diligent student:** Napoleon began his military education at the age of eight when he was awarded a scholarship to the military college at Brienne. At the tender age of 15, he moved onto the *Ecole Militaire* (French Military Academy) where he studied advanced military tactics and strategy. Upon graduating, he was awarded a commission into the French Army.

¹ Kenichi Ohmae, *The Mind of the Strategist: Business Planning for Competitive Advantage*, McGraw-Hill, 1987

At that stage, Napoleon had a comprehensive knowledge and understanding of military strategy, and was able to recount numerous case studies and examples of how battles had been won and lost in a variety of conditions, terrains and troop combinations. He was able to call on this vast knowledge base in all his thinking and planning.

2. He immersed himself in the battle: Napoleon was well known for spending time with his troops during preparations as well as in the thick of the battle. The French politician and writer, de Rémusat, reports that “...*Bonaparte's reception by the troops was nothing short of rapturous. It was well worth seeing how he talked to the soldiers...*”.

Napoleon was keen to smell the smells, taste the tastes and experience the emotions of his troops. He believed that their insights were invaluable in building a rich and comprehensive understanding of the battle.

3. He retired from the battle to reflect: Napoleon was also diligent in making time for reflection and to clear his mind. The time in his quarters was spent thinking about the ‘bigger picture’. Based on the nature of his many victories, we believe that he was displaying an important distinction in his strategic thinking. Instead of only focusing on the ‘**objective point**’ (what he needed to do in order to meet previously established objectives), Napoleon also focused on the ‘**decisive point**’ (what were the factors that could decisively change the current order of the battle). This is something we’ll return to later.

4. He waited for a flash of insight: Von Clausewitz’s² seminal treatise on strategy singles out one idea as being central to Napoleon’s success. The idea is expressed in French³ as ‘**coup d’oeil**’ - the flash of insight.

The flash of insight - sometimes called *strategic intuition* - was Napoleon’s approach of deconstructing a situation to look for different ways of understanding it. This occurred during his time of quiet reflection. During these times of reflection, Napoleon mulled over the information he had gathered from his research and first-hand experiences from the troops - and sought different ways of combining and recombining this information. He made a point of not jumping to conclusions by simply using approaches that had worked in similar situations in the past. This approach allowed Napoleon to develop the creative solutions that most often changed the course of the battle, and tipped the scales in his favour.

According to most observers⁴, this was a key key factor in Napoleon’s mastery of strategy - the creation of optimum conditions for his creative flashes of strategic insight.

5. He then acted with conviction: The final element in Napoleon’s approach was the ability to resolve the challenge by acting on this strategic intuition - the decisive insight that would alter the course of the battle and place him in a winning position.

² Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, 1832

³ von Clausewitz’s work was written in German, but he used French to explain this concept

⁴ William Duggan, *Strategic Intuition*, 2007

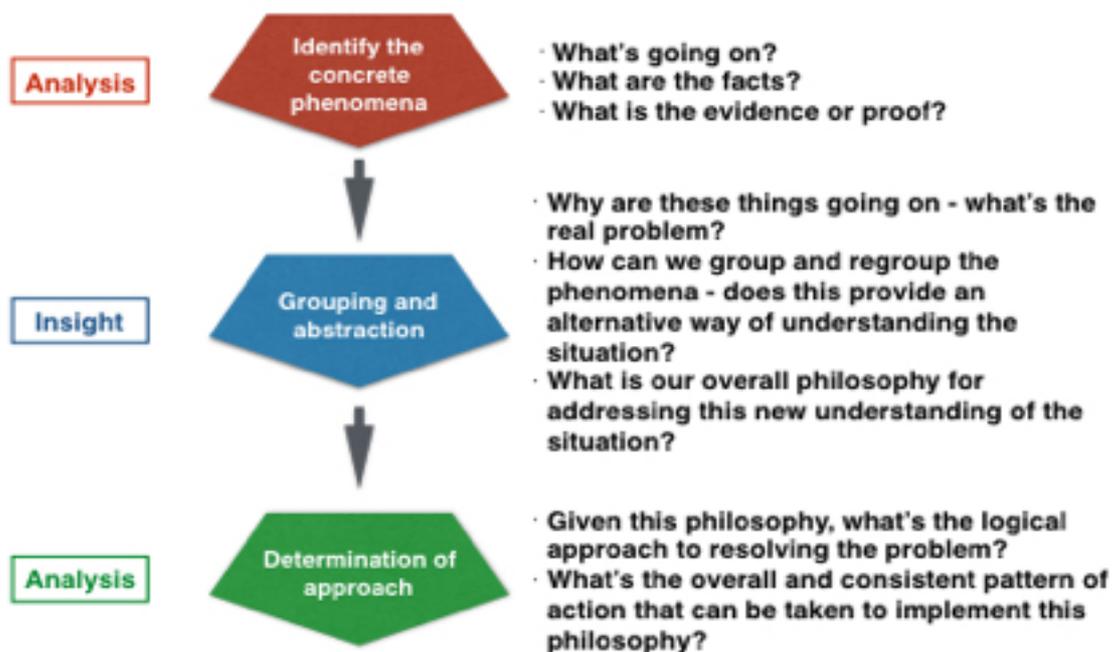
In his earlier career as a more junior officer, Napoleon's strategic insights were often treated with derision and resistance, but he had the courage to pursue them with resolve.

The flashes of insight carried with them the force of action that propelled him forward. Because he was then able to see the situation with such clarity, he could more readily muster the resolve to take decisive action.

SO, WHAT IS STRATEGIC THINKING?

If we examine the process of strategy and strategic thinking, we can identify the key elements used by Napoleon.

There are three key stages in strategic thinking that allows for the important **combination of traditional analytical thinking and insightful processes**.



We see that there is a suggested flow between the three phases, and very different questions and thinking processes required for each. In most cases, organisations are adept at the analytical phases, which are based on traditional, rigorous processes, and modelled on so-called 'best practice' approaches.

It is the insight phase that we often see neglected in strategic thinking - and often with dire consequences. **The classical error in strategic thinking is to proceed from identification of the concrete phenomena (what's happening?) directly to the determination of an approach (what should we do?) - skipping out the insight process altogether⁵.** This is one explanation offered for the failure of Napoleon's opponents in battle referred to in the introduction to this paper⁶.

⁵ Finkelstein, Whitehead and Campbell, *Why Good Leaders make Bad Decisions*, 2008

⁶ *Strategic Intuition*, op cit

HOW CAN WE ENHANCE THE INSIGHT PROCESS IN OUR STRATEGIC THINKING?

We know that the process of insight, or generating that 'aha' moment, is not a random occurrence in the brain. It is the result of a number of conditions generated by the brain in order to maximise our chances of a creative solution - what we named earlier as the '**decisive**' point in a challenge.

I have listed five of these critical conditions below:

- 1. Build historical and theoretical knowledge:** Studying the past case studies and history of the situation will allow you to consolidate a large list of 'options' from which to extrapolate an innovative approach when faced with a novel situation. Napoleon's deep knowledge of battlefield strategy provided him with a vast list of possibilities as he considered the context of a particular battle.

The brain regularly sifts through its memory centres to draw knowledge from the past in order to formulate an insightful solution. You may know that a particular approach has repeatedly failed in the past, so this option can potentially be discounted. In addition, insight often comes from combining experiences or knowledge that has not been previously combined. For example, you may combine an approach to customer service displayed by one of your suppliers to the particular problem you are experiencing with a dissatisfied customer.

- 2. Immerse yourself in the challenge:** By visiting a problem site or a difficult customer, you are able to engage all your senses in understanding and experiencing the challenge. An 'armchair general' approach may give you perspective and objectivity, but this must be complemented with some real experience of the situation. This is what Napoleon was doing when he spent time with his troops and experienced their views.

When generating a creative solution to a problem, the brain searches for faint signals of past successes and failures. This is a critical component of the insight process, and the more areas of the brain that can be associated with these experiences, the better the chance you have at sifting through these possible options quickly and selecting a viable course of action.

- 3. Take sufficient time to reflect:** It's not easy to 'hurry up and relax' as I'm sure many of you have found while taking a well-deserved but too-short holiday. Similarly, the brain needs the time to engage in meditative, quiet time to process what has been happening and to make sense of it all.

The trick is to recognise that there is an important distinction between working hard and thinking hard. The former requires long hours and relentless effort, while the latter needs rest and a break from the routine. This period of 'resting the brain' is a critical condition for preparing the brain to generate creative insights.

In the same way that Napoleon retired from the heat of the battle in order to have some restful and meditative time, busy executives can break their routine and deliberately de-focus by going for a walk outside or through the building. This period

away from the task allows the brain to begin its reflective process that can ultimately result in a creative insight.

- 4. Allow for 'sensory gating':** The time spent where we are resting the brain from its intense focus, allows the brain to begin its search for new connections and combinations of information that could provide an insight to the challenge.

Sensory gating is the process whereby we minimise the external visual stimulus to the brain so as to preserve neural space and energy for the higher brain to do its creative work. This occurs when we deliberately de-focus from the task and all its data - and turn 'inwards' to allow the brain to begin searching for new combinations of information that can ultimately result in the creative insight.

We know, for example, that people's eyes are averted or develop a 'far away' look just before the moment of insight. This is sensory gating, where we remove the distraction of external stimuli to allow the brain to focus on finding new combinations of information from its various memory centres.

Unless we deliberately allow for this reflection time, sensory gating cannot occur, and brain has difficulty in searching for new combinations of information to generate a creative insight.

- 5. Recombine and regroup information:** Neuroscience research shows us how the moment of insight occurs - if the positive conditions described above, are present.

The Anterior Cingulate Cortex - the part of the brain that signals the need for a different way of thinking - prompts the brain to try a different approach. The brain then begins the process of combining previously unconnected ideas and information. At the moment of insight, a new neural connection is created which produces the sense of 'knowing' - the aha moment.

In terms of strategic thinking, creative insights are developed when we consider the concrete facts and seek to group them in different ways. By trying different combinations - by grouping and regrouping the data - we are looking for different ways to combine the information so as to make sense of the situation.

The key is avoid moving directly from the data into action. Look at the data, try different combinations of grouping and classifying it, and look for an overall picture to emerge. The brain will be prompted into seeking new connections from its various memory centres and eventually, a pattern will emerge. This is the core of strategic insight.

IMPROVING OUR STRATEGIC THINKING

I believe that a key to better strategic thinking - and winning like Napoleon - is to develop the right state of mind.

This implies that you combine rational analysis with those processes that allow for strategic insights. The keys to developing the so-called 'mind of the strategist' are:

- defining the problem correctly - ask why the observed phenomena are occurring
- avoid moving from problem definition directly to action - allow for the important contribution that is made by the insight process
- set up the necessary conditions for the generation of strategic insight - and allow your brain the space to develop its creative solutions.

I'd like to acknowledge the contribution of Dr Dan Radecki, with whom some of these ideas were developed.



Dr Norman Chorn is a strategist and organisation development practitioner with the BrainLink Group. He uses principles of neuroscience to address the challenges of developing strategy in a complex and certain environment. His particular areas of focus are:

- ›strategy in conditions of uncertainty
- ›organisational and cultural alignment
- ›strategic leadership.

BrainLink Group

www.brainlinkgroup.com

