



Using **ACCRETION** to develop Strategic Insights

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ACCRETION?

Accretion is defined as ‘*growth by a gradual accumulation of additional layers*’ (1).

It has its origins in astronomy, where it is used to describe the formation of stellar systems. The gravity of a heavy molecule attracts smaller molecules to it, and the smaller molecules **stick** to the heavier one. As the heavier molecule becomes even heavier, it attracts smaller objects to it. And so the process continues until you have a large object in space with significant gravitational pull.

I like this analogy because it can explain how strategic insights are achieved by a series of smaller ideas - and how a change in thinking takes place. How does this happen?

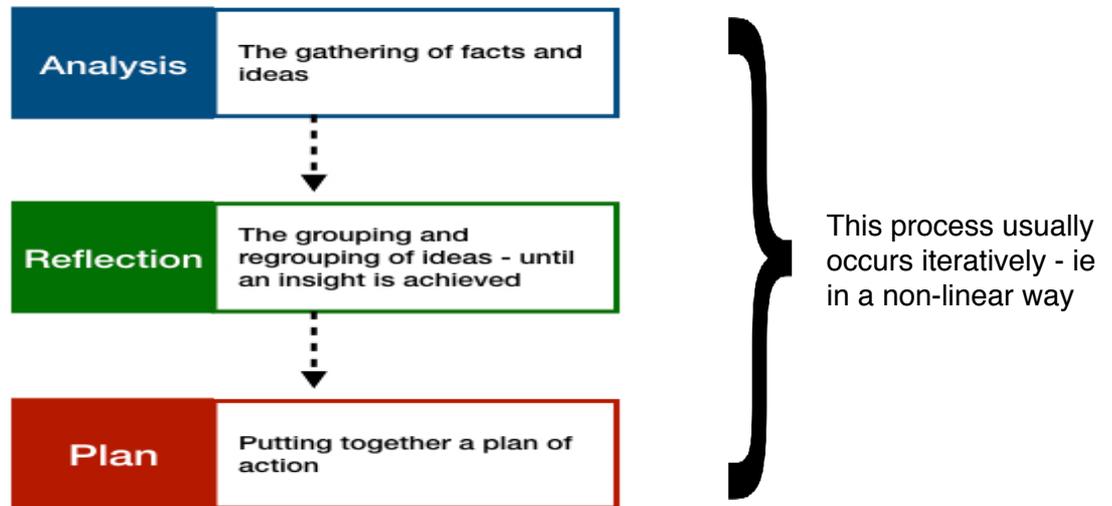
There are two key stages in accretion:

1. As you begin considering a problem or challenge, you gather pieces of information and a series of ideas
2. As these ideas accumulate, the smaller ones **stick** to the larger ones until a ‘tipping point’ is reached. This causes an eventual **avalanche** that changes the whole landscape.

In other words, accretion explains how a series of small ideas or steps can eventually cause a significant upheaval in the status quo - an avalanche that creates a new insight or breakthrough in your thinking process. This can sometimes be experienced as a ‘*eureka*’ moment - and has significant implications for the development of strategic insights.

HOW DOES ACCRETION HELP STRATEGIC THINKING?

Strategic thinking may be understood in three distinct phases:



This may appear to be a linear, sequential process - **but this is not the case**. Our brain - a key tool in strategic thinking - is best described as a *complex adaptive system*. As a complex system, it learns and makes connections in an unpredictable, non-linear way.

As we gather information and ideas about a situation, these ideas are put into the “ideas garden” of our brain (2). The larger ideas - having more gravitational pull - attract the smaller ideas and they stick together to form an even larger idea. These idea fragments float around grouping and regrouping, until some order begins to emerge in the constellation of ideas in our “ideas garden”. This is the first stage of the accretion process.

The second phase is best explained by the **sandpile effect** identified by Per Bak, a Danish scientist (3). He observed that if you piled sand, grain by grain, until it made a cone (a pyramid-like shape), you CANNOT predict when that cone will have an avalanche and collapse!



Furthermore, he observed that the sand cones, which look relatively stable, are in fact deeply unpredictable. There is no way of knowing what will happen next. This unpredictability is an important characteristic of complex adaptive systems, and describes the way our brain functions in these situations.

The sandpile effect suggests that we cannot predict when the collection of ideas in our “ideas garden” will generate an avalanche - i.e. the insight that changes the way we see and think about a situation.

Instead, we know that the process of solving complex problems reflects the tendency of complex systems to be constantly poised on the edge on unpredictable change. Bak argues that this is one of the fundamental forces of nature.

So, if we cannot predict when and how a new insight will emerge - what can we do to encourage the process?

HOW TO ENCOURAGE ACCRETION AND STRATEGIC INSIGHT

There are five things we can do to promote the development of strategic insight through accretion (4):

Be comfortable with small steps and the power of momentum	Accretion is a process of growth by a gradual accumulation of additional information and small ideas. The power is in the momentum of the process, as well as the grouping and regrouping of the smaller ideas. So, have patience and keep collecting information as you go
Give yourself the time and space for reflection	Reflective thinking generally takes place when you are removed from the challenge at hand. The 'gating' of your visual and auditory senses frees up your brain to undertake the reflective process of sorting through and combining information in different ways to give you new perspectives
Tend your "ideas garden" regularly to promote growth	Review your thinking regularly - take stock of "where you're up to" in your thinking. Allow different ideas to cross-pollinate. Entertain the little snippets of ideas, even if they are not completely formed or don't yet quite make sense
Consume information broadly - and allow for abrasion, agility and resolution of ideas	Collect and expose yourself to a broad range of information and ideas. Some of the ideas might be abrasive and contradictory - accommodate these contradictions. Be prepared to shift perspective regularly - show agility in the way you entertain the ideas. And allow the resolution of these ideas to occur - some of the initial "good" ideas may turn out to be less useful as time passes
Make space for the eventual avalanche	When the avalanche occurs - make space for the insight. Allow yourself to accept the new insight, even though it might represent a significant shift from your original position. Insights represent a fundamentally new way of understanding things, and this can be quite disconcerting in the beginning.

I'd like to acknowledge the work of Executive Coach, Erik Kruger (erikkruger.com), who started me thinking about Accretion.



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 uncertain environment. His particular areas of focus are strategy in conditions of uncertainty; organisational and cultural alignment; and strategic leadership.

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References

- 1) I was introduced to the notion of accretion by Erik Kruger, a talented writer who encourages the concept of accretion as a means of improving personal performance. I find his thinking to be insightful and helpful. See his blogs at <https://bettermanblueprint.com>
- 2) *How creative accretion leads to epiphanies*, C Gilkey, Productive Flourishing, April 2014
- 3) *Self organised criticality*, P Bak and K Chen, Scientific American 264, 1991
- 4) *The two dynamics of change*, C Gilkey, Productive Flourishing, October 2010

