



Learning from 2017 - a year of **Distinctions**

Dr Norman Chorn

WHAT A YEAR!

2017 will go down as a year of distinctions - twelve months in which we saw extreme positions vigorously pursued by people and commentators. We saw the clash of progressive vs conservative politics, the economic debate of wealth creation vs wealth sharing, the “yes” vs “no” vote, and the unending argument for and against climate change (to name but a few).

This caused me to reflect on some of the positions taken by leaders and organisations in our society. They reflect significant **distinctions** in the philosophy and behaviour with which they tackled the challenges of 2017. I use these distinctions to understand leadership, organisations and strategy. I believe there are key learnings from these that are useful as we plan ahead for 2018.

SEVEN KEY DISTINCTIONS

- Action vs thought
- Leaders vs leadership
- Align vs engage
- Focus vs balance
- Plan vs strategy
- Pressure vs stress
- Pleasure vs happiness.

1. ACTION vs THOUGHT - NATURAL ENEMIES?

I have written previously about the trade-off between being overly action-oriented and the ability to think strategically (1). It seems that leaders and organisations who pride themselves on a high operating tempo may rely too much on *reflexive decision making* - choosing solutions and approaches that are well practiced and have produced good outcomes in the past.

As conditions become more complex and uncertain, there is a danger in applying old solutions to new problems. And yet, we see that leaders and organisations often revert to habitual approaches as the pressure increases. The *reflexive* approach is an instinctive response to both pressure and operating at a high pace.

As conditions become more complex and uncertain, leaders would be well advised to pause and reflect. This is an important pre-condition for generating innovative insights into new challenges (2).

2. LEADERS vs LEADERSHIP - ELITIST OR PLURALIST?

I observe this confusion within talent development in several organisations - and it reflects the mental model that they hold about a “leader”. In some instances, effective leaders are defined by a particular competency model - and their organisation places much emphasis on selecting and developing so-called “high potential” people. The assumption is that these leaders can have a disproportionate impact on improving organisational performance.

Perhaps they can. However we know that complex systems (which most of our modern organisations embody) have to be understood as complete systems, particularly if we wish to introduce change and improvement. This means adopting a view of the whole “leadership system” and focusing on developing the way that all the elements (people, processes, systems) work together, rather than focusing primarily on one of the elements. Developing the leadership system is the work of *organisation development*, rather than talent development (2).

3. ALIGNMENT vs ENGAGEMENT - AN ISSUE OF CONTROL?

“*Line up your ducks*” and getting people to “*sing off the same hymn-sheet*” are catch cries often heard from leaders as they seek to execute strategy. This seems reasonable when the strategy is fully developed and all we want is for people to execute accurately and efficiently.

But is this a reasonable expectation when conditions are dynamic and people are expected to use their judgement and creativity?

Seeking *alignment* is possibly an exaggerated control-oriented approach, particularly in fluid conditions with complex challenges. It might be more appropriate if, instead, we sought to develop *engagement* from our people? Engagement implies a commitment to the goals and purpose of the organisation, but it suggests that people are free to use their ingenuity and resourcefulness in addressing organisational challenges.

Simply semantics? Perhaps. But the mindset and methods for building engagement are very different to those where the key outcome is to ensure that everyone is closely aligned.

4. BALANCE vs FOCUS - A MATTER OF DESIRE OR EFFECTIVENESS?

This is an old chestnut of mine. I observe many organisations seeking balance in their approach to strategy and organisation design. This is understandable, given the positive connotations associated with “balance”.

But we know that strategic effectiveness is closely related to focus. And focus is *imbalance*. It is a deliberate over-allocation of resource and effort in one area of the organisation at the expense of others.

I am not suggesting that organisations develop a lopsided approach to their strategy or design, but simply that trade-offs are required to achieve focus, particularly in a resource constrained environment.

5. PLANNING vs STRATEGY - A MISUNDERSTOOD DISTINCTION

Another common source of confusion. The traditional process of planning is to begin with a statement of purpose, and then proceed with a series of objectives and action plans. The emphasis is on developing a series of milestones and then holding people accountable to achieving these in a given timeframe.

Strategy, on the other hand, is rather like a game of chess. Each time you or any player makes a move, the board changes and you have to rethink your approach. Strategy is, therefore, the process of ongoing learning and deciding on the best approach to move forward.

Contrast this with planning, where the emphasis is mainly on achieving the stated milestones and holding people accountable. The irony is that, in these circumstances,

learning is almost eliminated after the initial objectives have been set - even though these objectives may have become irrelevant as the environment changes.

6. PRESSURE vs STRESS - IT'S ALL IN THE MIND!

Robert Zapolsky asks the question “*why don't Zebras get ulcers?*” Despite the extreme levels of stress they encounter when pursued by lion and other beasts of prey, they do not suffer from stress-related ulcers as humans do.

Stress causes the release of adrenaline and cortisol, hormones that increase blood pressure, heart rate and energy supplies. These hormones are key to our “fight or flight” ability and are useful in short term bursts. However, during longer periods of stress, they can cause numerous health problems such as ulcers, heart disease and memory impairment.

Most leaders experience pressure at work. Multiple demands, high workload and short timeframes all contribute to feeling pressured. Pressure is an external force related to the demands of your situation. Stress, on the other hand, is caused by rumination - the continuous worry that you might not be able to cope, or focusing on the consequences of possible failure. It is generated internally by “self-talk”, self-doubt and considering the consequences of worse-case outcomes.

So, why don't Zebras get ulcers? Because they do not ruminate. Minutes after being pursued by a lion and seeing one of their group being killed, they are back at the same water-hole, drinking and getting on with daily life. Zebras are incapable of the rumination which causes people to continuously relive the stress and fear of the moment.

Manage your self-talk and doubt! I spend much of my time assisting leaders to overcome their negative self-talk and to reflect more objectively on their situation.

7. PLEASURE vs HAPPINESS - ARE WE ON THE RIGHT PATH?

My list of distinctions ends with the pursuit of pleasure in the belief that it can lead to happiness.

Pleasure is a short lived feeling that comes from something external - alcohol, a generous bonus and so on. In essence, we **take** pleasure from one of these events.

Happiness, on the other hand, is a deep sense of contentment and self comfort that comes from within. While pleasure can produce momentary bursts of happiness, it does not last.

Why? Pleasure seeking activities release the neurotransmitter dopamine, that influences the reward and pleasure centres of the brain. So our brain registers “pleasure” and we feel

good in that moment. Repetitive releases of dopamine (in pleasure-seeking behaviours) cause the dopamine receptors in the brain to recede, to protect themselves from the high levels of dopamine. And so, we need increasingly larger doses of dopamine (pleasure-seeking behaviour) to get that same good feeling. This is one of the sources of addiction.

Happiness, on the other hand, is associated with the neurotransmitter serotonin - the absence of which can cause anxiety and depression. Furthermore, *excessive dopamine can destroy serotonin*, and so rob us of feelings of happiness. Serotonin will contribute to feelings of contentment, calmness and self-comfort. It is boosted by a focus on human connections; contributions made to others; adequate sleep and exercise; and good food that is high in fish and omega 3.

So, despite the marketing and advertising hype that tries to sell us products and services claiming to give us happiness, it seems that true happiness comes from other sources.

LOOKING TO THE YEAR AHEAD

I hope these observations and reflections from 2017 provide some insight as you lead and manage in the year ahead. I know that they have given me pause for thought and allowed me to develop new goals for 2018.



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References

1. See “*Action is the Enemy of Thought*” - <https://www.brainlinkgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Action-is-the-Enemy-of-Thought.pdf>
2. See “*Using Accretion to develop Strategic Insights*” - <https://www.brainlinkgroup.com/brainlink-resources/>
3. See “*Talent Management is Dead*” - <https://www.brainlinkgroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Talent-management-is-dead.pdf>