

## The Prescriptive Schools of Strategy: A Critique

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The Corporate strategy is a contested field, largely because knowledge about how firms function, or ought to function, pertains to the direction of societies as a whole. Firms are the dominant institutions of capitalism, just as management—the manner in which firms are guided toward their objectives—is a relational process that fundamentally structures reality. Perhaps the most important one. Corporate strategy thus emerges as the most elaborate, complex, and refined expression of management.

Henry Mintzberg—along with two other authors, Bruce Ahlstrand and Joseph Lampel—conducted an inventory of knowledge on corporate strategy, analyzing and classifying authors, theories, and metaphors into schools of thought. As a result of this investigation, they published the book *Strategy Safari* years ago. It may not be one of the most refined expressions of the scholarly literature, featuring a simplistic text, unnecessary dramatic pauses, and tedious cases and examples. However, if the reader can overlook all this noise, they will find therein a very useful work of theoretical organization.

A primary layer of classification separates the schools by the teleological sense of their knowledge narrative, dividing them into prescriptive and descriptive, with one in particular exhibiting hybrid prescriptive-descriptive characteristics. The schools of thought identified ("discovered") by Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel that are considered prescriptive are denominated the Design School, the Planning School, and the Positioning School. The authors deem them prescriptive because the individuals associated with these schools construct their discourses of knowledge from the perspective of intellectuals capable of teaching the "correct form," the "best procedure" for a firm to develop its strategies.

Researchers associated with the prescriptive schools, along with the theories and management procedures

they have developed, start from the belief/premise that they master a strategic management model superior to all others. Their insights into organizations and the market allegedly represent reality more correctly. Their premises, regarding both knowledge and explanations of the world, supposedly constitute a faithful basis for understanding how social processes and phenomena function. Therefore, the management suggestions, theories, and models that logically derive from these premises are invariably presented as the most "adequate."

Consequently, their primary objective is to enlighten the perception of managers and students regarding how best to "design" a strategy. The Design, Planning, and Positioning schools claim to master, and to be capable of teaching, the most appropriate way to manage. These pretensions are based on the presupposition that the sole and most important objective of organizations is profit—the valorization of capital. This end, they promise, will be achieved through competitive performance.

They are prescriptive schools because they effectively prescribe a strategy, or ways of elaborating strategies, championing a specific line of anamnesis, diagnosis, and recommendation of solutions. "Prescribing," therefore, has a literal meaning in describing how these schools of thought operate: to indicate which attitudes and procedures will, undoubtedly, provide the effects expected by management. And what might these effects be? The achievement of superior competitiveness and profit.

A primary inquiry to be raised concerns the pretense of sufficiency these schools represent. The belief that they are capable of better understanding reality—and that from this understanding they can deduce a sequence of actions that optimize processes and generate controlled effects—fails to account for the cognitive, cultural, political, and

psychological limitations of people and organizations. Reality is more complex than can be reduced to any given model of representation. Moreover, assuming that introducing alterations into this same reality will lead to a controlled set of results borders on naive. Accepting the conclusions of the prescriptive schools of strategy requires a large dose of arrogance, and faith—a dose so large it is only possible from the perspective of one who, in truth, knows very little about the reality they presume to influence, and even less about themselves.

One can further question the myopia of the centrality of utilitarian performance. From the utilitarian perspective, people are described as animals whose rationality is constantly oriented toward selfish gain. This is what the thinkers classified within the prescriptive schools expect from an organization, especially a business: that it privilege material gain, i.e., profit. In practice, however, an organization's objectives can be many, and vastly distinct from merely increasing shareholder capital. Expansion, symbolic reference, technological leadership, political prominence, community development, and perpetuity—these and other examples of high-level goals are often pursued by firms.

The focus on profit, on the short-term result, is a type of symbolic and objective (violent) capture of the organizational complex. Thus, the organization is subjected to the exclusive usufruct of capital and its shareholders—who demand that an entire community, indeed all of society, mobilize so that they might gain more. Simultaneously, the organization

functions as an instrument for the subsumption of the working class.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, one observes a universalist pretense in the proposals of the prescriptive strategy schools. When the classical school suggests a simple, leader-centric strategy, or the planning school offers a methodology for the organization's formal economic programming, or the positioning school prescribes "generic" strategies, it is being asserted that such suggestions can be replicated in any organization. This is regardless of cultural background, workforce composition, nature of the activity, or stage in the institutional life cycle. This universal pretense stems as much from the myopic premise of organizational objectives as from the puerile self-sufficiency of the researchers in these fields. To them, any business organization pursues the same ends

they imagine, just as it functions in the same way they idealize. This is a simplistic universalism that attempts to frame the entire world, with all its differences and transformations, into idealized interpretive schemes. At best, this pretense can only produce errors.

All this reveals a profound methodological and cultural arrogance, perhaps even racial, on the part of the researchers associated with the prescriptive schools. Not coincidentally, Alfred Sloan, Igor Ansoff, Michael Porter, Alfred Chandler, and many others were white, North American men, based in elite universities and, in many cases, directly involved in management or consulting for large U.S. corporations. The rationalism inherent in their theoretical constructs, much like the universalist pretense of their prescriptive formulas, operates as an extension of

functionalist sociology. The underlying reason itself—the peculiar mode of thinking of the community from which they emerge—is positioned as superior, more civilized, and refined.

A focus on utilitarian performativity, simplistic universalism, puerile self-sufficiency, and the underlying methodological arrogance are all striking characteristics of the prescriptive schools of strategy. It is no accident that the corporate world—especially the one of U.S. origin, conducted according to the creed of competitive capitalism—is established upon many of the premises and presuppositions shared by these schools of thought. They are, in fact, the very image and likeness of the 20th-century North American global presence.

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<sup>1</sup> Capitalism is, above all, a scheme of collective articulation in which all of society mobilizes, makes sacrifices, and gives up food, housing, leisure,

security, happiness, and physical and psychological health, to further enrich the already rich, as well as to hand over to them the largest and best parts of all

that is produced. In return, capitalists despise, repudiate, humiliate, and plan the extermination of the people who bovinely serve them