



From my perspective

Gaining insight: Re-thinking at the edge

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ABSTRACT

Pierre Wack, one of the founders of scenario planning, pioneered a new way of thinking – the “gentle art of re-perceiving.” While scholars and practitioners have explored the process of scenario planning at great length, little attention has yet been paid to the meta-process of re-thinking. Referencing Wack’s work at Shell, interviews with his former colleagues and family members, and information about his life and research available in both published and unpublished sources, this article provides a framework for this meta-process. By re-thinking to re-perceive the world differently, this paper explains how the “inner space” of the mind gains foresight. The research findings indicate that an individual must go through five stages – clutching old realities, reasoning and emotion, reflection and inspiration, seeing and awakening, and knowing and molding – to gain insight and see the future.

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1. Introduction

Though some organizations are able to adapt during tumultuous times, others lie paralyzed in inaction, lacking foresight. Some researchers argue that the major factors causing organizational inertia are bias and overconfidence (Russo & Schoemaker, 1992); others point to how the world is seen and action is taken in the face of uncertainty and risk (Day & Schoemaker, 2006). Empirical studies indicate that managers interpret the environment through their mental lens (Barr, 1998; Tripsas & Gavetti, 2000) – specifically, their actions are based on assumptions, beliefs, and preconceptions of the world (Drucker, 1980). Such mental maps and behavior speaks to the malnourished ability of management to anticipate and respond to dynamic environments. They are in crisis, unable to re-think *before* the strategic environment changes.

At Royal Dutch/Shell, Pierre Wack expressed precisely this concern about perception when he called for managers to get a “sense” of the strategic environment¹ because it could alter their operating reality as well as the firm’s profitability (Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b). Wack understood that what was needed was re-perceiving – that is, an ability to see the environment in new and different ways, not based on assumptions or the past. To change the minds of managers, Wack and Newland were among the key members of Group Planning who

institutionalized a process for cultivating the ability to re-perceive. Their work brought the power of scenarios to light. Through scenario planning, they were able to affect management perceptions and business decisions (Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b; DuMoulin & Eyre, 1979; Wade, 1994; Schwartz, 1996; Schoemaker, 1995; van der Heijden, 2005; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2013; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2014).

Although researchers point to understanding predetermined and uncertain elements within their business environments as the basis for perceiving new realities (Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b; Burt, 2006; Burt, 2010; Selin, 2007; Jefferson, 2012; Wack, 1987), Wack was more concerned with whether scenarios could make the “inner space” – that is, the microcosm where choices are played out and judgments – come alive (Wack, 1985b). Thus, this paper submits that tapping into one’s neurological processes – that is, the right and left side of the brain – is the fundamental essence and legacy of Wack.

At Shell, scenarios were aimed at shifting the microcosms of employees and managers. The process did accomplish this specific objective for many (Jefferson, 2012). Such mental recalibration was done through the power of reframing (Watzlawick et al., 1974).² Ancient tools³ of storytelling and pictorial description were leveraged to reframe

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¹ Much like Wack’s contribution in the ‘gentle art of re-perceiving’ (Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b), it is important to recognize the pioneering contributions by several members of Group Planning – namely, James (Jimmy) Davidson, Cornelius Kuiken, Harry Beckers, Edward (Ted) Newland, Neville Beale, Hein Tausk, Napier Collyns, Hans DuMoulin, Doug Wade and Ray Thomasson, who were also reflecting on the idea of sense-making and revolutionizing the Unified Planning Machinery (Wade, 1994; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2013).

² “To reframe means to change the conceptual and/or emotional setting or viewpoint in relation to which a situation is experienced and to place it in another frame which fits the ‘facts’ of the same concrete situation equally well or even better, and thereby change its entire meaning” (Watzlawick et al., 1974, p. 95).

³ Stories and pictorial images are persuasive instruments to change people’s minds. Although facts in papers and reports have seldom been able to allow people to think differently, they have been used to present a case logically to the audience. Effective storytellers blend factual information with myths alongside images in pictures so that the audience can distill plausible realities and capture important lessons.

human understanding about plausible and compelling tomorrows. Storytelling and pictures were used to invite individuals to rethink their sense of the world by operating on the level of meta-reality. This method worked because, through stories, people were able to imagine outcomes and events quite beyond the possibilities of the “real” world. While organizational leaders and academic researchers have written in journals and spoken at conferences (e.g., The World Futures Society, The Wharton Mack Institute for Innovation Management and The Oxford Futures Forum) about storytelling and images (Boje, 2008; Coleville et al., 1999) and altering frames of mind (Wack, 1984; Wack, 1986; Gardner, 2000; Boje, 1991) in the context of scenarios (Schwartz, 1996; Schoemaker, 1995; Wilkinson & Kupers, 2014; Burt, 2010; Bowman et al., 2013; Bradfield et al., 2005), their focus has been mainly on the mechanics – specifically, the tools, techniques, methods and approaches – that have facilitated foresight. To date, little attention has been paid to understanding the meta-process of re-thinking (Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b; Wack, 1984; Wack, 1986). By exploring this meta-process more deeply, researchers and practitioners will be better prepared for scenario planning.

By drawing from the underpinnings of philosophy and psychology, this paper explores two important issues:

1. Wack’s involvement with eastern philosophy, highlighting the importance of this connection for his work at Shell, and
2. The meta-process involved in re-thinking that leads to re-perceiving.

By presenting a framework of the meta-process, this article can contribute to the scant literature on the personal routines for changing “microcosms” (Wack, 1985a, p. 84) within an organizational context. This paper offers three key contributions to the work of scenario planners. Understanding the meta-process of re-thinking is applicable to:

1. Improving managers’ and decision makers’ attentiveness to the dynamic environments in which they operate (Barr, 1998; Kaplan, 2008a; Kaplan, 2008b; Ocasio, 1997; Ocasio, 2011);
2. Enhancing the choices made by individuals, since re-perceiving can “... lead us to a deeper understanding of ourselves because of the linkage between the biology of the mind and other areas of humanistic knowledge, including a base of knowledge on how we may respond ...” (Kandel, 2012, p. 499); and
3. Deepening participants’ awareness of the “essence of entrepreneurship” because “breaking out of one’s own assumptions” (Coleville et al., 1999, p. 44; Wack, 1987) leads to the type of creativity that can produce resilient strategic options in organizations (Schoemaker, 1995; van der Heijden, 2005).

As a result of these contributions, this paper invites an interdisciplinary collaboration between management, psychology, and philosophy so that new concepts can evolve about how managers’ minds create meaning and make strategic decisions.

The paper is organized into seven sections. The introductory section outlines the issue. The second section describes the research approach and tactics. The third section establishes the perspective from philosophy and psychology so that the case study and framework can be put into proper context. The fourth section provides an explanation of Wack’s “gentle art of re-perceiving.” The fifth section elaborates on the framework for the meta-process of re-thinking that leads to insight and foresight. The sixth section lays out some practical implications for managers who might engage in scenario planning. In the final section, this paper offers concluding remarks, possible areas for future research and limitations.

2. Method and data

2.1. Research issue and design

The framing question for this study is: what is the meta-process for re-thinking? To answer this question, the research design included a

literature review, a series of interviews, and an analysis of Wack’s work at Shell.

2.2. Literature review

A literature review provided an in-depth historical look at Wack’s personal background and professional activities at Shell. The literature review included both published and private documents. Published documents were collected from academic works, including books, journals, and magazines. These materials were reviewed for relevance to the research question. To ensure that the research had certain quality and richness, I gained access to his personal readings and writings as well as books and articles from institutional libraries. Private documents were collated from archives in which private diaries and personal notes were available. Several expert accounts are included among these materials. Given that Wack had been strongly influenced by oriental philosophies from his gurus, I decided to gain a deeper understanding of eastern philosophy.

2.3. Interviews

To complement this baseline of knowledge about Wack and bolster the information gathered through the literature review, I collected experientially-based information from informal conversations, semi-structured interviews and discussions with the former employees of Shell. I contacted four of his former colleagues – Napier Collins, James (Jimmy) Davidson, Edward (Ted) Newland and Peter Schwartz – as well as his spouse, Eve Wack and son, Jean-Pierre Wack. Access to such information from these individuals was helpful because it enabled me to propose and interpret how to gain insight by the process of re-thinking and framed my understanding about the practical implications for engagements in scenario planning.

2.4. Case study – Wack at Shell

The sessions with former employees as well as private documents informed me about the practice of re-perceiving, and the literature and archived material assisted in establishing a framework for the meta-process of individual rethinking. In addition to these resources, I also reviewed the case writings of Wack at Shell. The work Wack conducted there presents his novel way to re-think the future. After all, Wack had mastered the art of re-perceiving that he explained as “seeing and knowing” and attempted to inject sense-making into Shell through scenarios and storytelling. Thus, the case of Shell is an excellent one to highlight the unique thought processes involved in Wack’s methods.

2.5. Additional supporting materials

Beyond the materials directly connected to Wack’s history and work, additional resources were also leveraged to build the framework. The concept for the framework assumes that the cognitive and affective aspects of the mind are influenced by various media – specifically, art (e.g. drama, painting, sculpture, film, music) and narration (e.g., written and spoken word).⁴ Literature is available on: (a) changing minds (e.g., Gardner, 2000; Adler, 2010) and discovery that leads to sudden illumination and insight (e.g., Wallas, 1926; Smith & Kounois, 1996; Sternberg & Davidson, 1995; Metcalfe & Wiebe, 1987); (b) methods, approaches, tools and techniques for creation of mental shifts (e.g., Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b; Schwartz, 1996; Schoemaker, 1995); and (c) experiences with scenarios and script at Shell related to resiliency of organizational vision and strategy (e.g., Wack, 1985a; Wack, 1985b;

⁴ The scope of this paper is focused on the re-thinking process of the individual. It does not tackle the ways in which media like art or narrative may influence the re-thinking process.

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