Fighting Abstraction in Strategy Courses: Using a Personal Career Lens and LinkedIn for More Relevant Learning

Abstract

Strategy texts tend to focus on large multinational corporations (MNCs) to teach strategy. This inhibits both student learning and professors' practical approach to the concept. Students find strategy in part because its concepts are broad, cross-functional, and interdependent and because very few students have prior experience working as top decisions-makers, in multi-national corporations. This session describes semester-long project that avoids these impediments by drawing upon existing student experience in personally relevant contexts. The project further engages students by using LinkedIn as a tool for individual and professional research. This session describes the approach and reports on student responses.

Introduction and Teaching Implications

Personalization vs. Abstraction

As a long time professor of Strategic Management, I have experienced challenges communicating the value of strategic concepts and tools. Most students understand the benefits of using a SWOT analysis to examine strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats and it is used in a variety of other functional areas as well. They also colloquially understand strategy as long-term thinking and planning. And high profile companies like Honda, Samsung, or Walmart clearly value strategic practice. These companies are generally publically held companies that the media spends lavish attention on because of their successful or failed innovation stories (i.e., Uber, Tesla, and J.C. Penney) or the existence of intriguing and popular scandals (e.g., Enron, Wells Fargo, Samsung). While students benefit from this approach because they can find readily available information and they find comfort in the familiarity of such organizations, their ability to relate can be severely limited for most.

On the other hand, you can personalize strategy so that students appropriately apply these concepts motivated by their own interests, usually career planning and analysis. Students adopt a person-as-organization role wherein they *become* the organization to examine core competencies, key success factors, environmental analysis, and SWOT concepts. Students have applied this approach their current job in their current companies, their own small businesses, small or large companies, a well-established profession or industry, or even personal work style. Students have used this exercise to more clearly identify their goals and mission, to contemplate career change or advancement within their current companies; to evaluate their professional fit within an industry, or to evaluate work/life balance. All have successfully applied the individual

as organization perspective to evaluate and plan using strategic tools and concepts typically covered in strategy texts.

Course and Session Learning Objectives

These exercises (see Appendix) aim to better motivate students, improve their understanding, and engage in more realistic and personally relevant applications of strategy focused on internal and external analysis and decision-making. This session, in parallel, briefly demonstrates an approach to strategy designed to improve topic relevance and deepen understanding. I share student feedback on the project in general and their understanding of strategy.

Exercise Overview

This semester-long project greatly expands upon and enhances Gerard's (2012) "Linking In With LinkedIn" professional introduction exercises. Specifically it adds instructional detail and digs deeper into strategic concepts and analyses while applying insights from work in professional identity (Archer, 2008; Gerard, 2013; Ibarra, 1999; Roberts, 2005). Student submissions get posted to an online forum every two weeks and these form the basis for online and/or live discussion. Exercises (again, see Appendix) follow a comprehensive application of strategy from foundational concepts on. Complex and impersonal strategy concepts and processes gain clarity through application to personal goals. The project is set up in modules that last two weeks long to accommodate an 11 week long hybrid MBA program.

Appendix

Exercise and Discussion Prompts

Exercise 1
These assignments are all about you, your goals, and making sure that you reach them using a high-end, culturally important professional networking tool to accomplish that.

Instructions
Part 1, Join LinkedIn
...if you haven't already, *without* constructing a profile. Adjust the settings to accommodate your own level of privacy. Then, **invite me** to connect and answer the questions below. Make sure you understand additional explanation provided during either a past or current Live Session for Weeks #1 and/or #2 (Module #1). The past video will post before class and the current post after class. Current invite instructions may change. If so, please update me.

Part 2, Your "Self" Strategically Defined
Based on support material in the text's first four chapters, please describe:
- Your vision, mission, and objective/s.
- Core competencies for the environment you are looking at.
- Your most important distinctive competencies.
- Current or future competencies you need to attain your goal.

Exercise 2
Instructions
Use your **distinctive competencies (DCs)** from last week and **compare** these **with competencies**
seen as important, necessary, and/or rare and valuable *based on relevant professional groups* that exist *in LinkedIn*. Use articles or magazines referenced on LinkedIn too, if you would like, but you need to cite these published materials like you would any research. Groups only need an informal reference. **Answer the following**:
How do your DCs **compare** with the competencies you found?
Are there competencies of interest to you - interesting enough to obtain?
Are there competencies that are called something else (go by another name) or that are
  described in significantly different ways?

Exercise 3
Instructions
Answer the question, Who are your competitors? Think about this carefully based on characteristics that help to define competition above-and-beyond a general label like

"Accountant" or even specific labels like "Automotive Industry IT Analyst". **Describe** the **competitive dynamics** in the market you define based upon your response to the first part of this assignment.

Exercise 4
Your Assessment of Personal Strategy So Far
Instructions
Answer the following:
- What was the <u>most surprising aspect</u> in applying strategy to your personal profession/goals?
- What has the <u>greatest challenge</u> been in applying strategic thinking in these assignments?
Be sure to:
- <u>Supply</u> your response with a useful <u>header</u>.
- <u>Read</u> any other <u>posts</u> that appeal to you.
- <u>Award</u> up to *three* <u>five-star ratings</u> to posts you loved.

Exercise 5
Profile Exemplars
Background
In *Personal Strategy assignments*, we <u>laid the groundwork</u> (Mod #1) by describing:
- Vision, mission, and objectives
- Environment-specific competencies
- Distinctive, core, and desired competencies
We then:
- <u>Compared and aligned</u> personal competencies with those most valued or necessary in the competitive or goal environment (Mod #2).
- <u>Examined</u> the <u>language</u> used by you and your goal environment (Mod #2).
- <u>Defined/redefined</u> competitive persons or elements (Mod #3).
- <u>Received and provided</u> helpful feedback; shared perspectives (Mod #4).
- <u>Reflected</u> on the process (Mod #4).
- <u>Asked</u> about advancement, career goals, and work life (Mod #4).
This module, we:
- <u>Found</u> LinkedIn groups or other resources that could help with skill/environment fit using more focused Alumni, Groups, and Interest (Mod #5).

Instructions
Different **professions produce** <u>different looking profiles</u> and, as such, <u>judge</u> their <u>acceptability</u> along different standards. For example, ***sports management*** just lists events, groups, and responsibilities just below the profile header. ***Finance*** lists important licenses, certifications, and product experience. ***Others*** can simply list skills or philosophies.
- <u>Find</u> <u>three (3) profiles</u> that you think <u>represent great formats</u> given your professional strategic interests.
- <u>Explain</u> what it is that makes these profiles <u>good templates</u> for creating or adjusting your own profile.

Exercise 6
LinkedIn Profile
Instructions
Click HERE [web link] and *listen to a LinkedIn Learning Webinar* called "Creating an Online Presence".
The webinar should be very valuable and help you to better communicate your value to your professional peers.
- **Use** that **information** to <u>create</u>, <u>change</u>, or <u>justify</u> keeping parts of the three <u>elements</u> of the LinkedIn profile mentioned.
- **Explain why** you created, changed, or kept those elements.
- **Look** at others' profiles and **award** <u>up to 15 total stars</u> to individuals whom you think did an excellent job with their profiles. Individuals can be awarded between one and five stars.

References

Archer, L. (2008). Younger academics' constructions of 'authenticity', 'success' and professional identity. *Studies in Higher Education, 33*(4), 385-403. doi:10.1080/03075070802211729

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