MONDAY MORNING MANAGER: DECISION MAKING: INTEGRATIVE THINKERS

In praise of the opposable mind

HARVEY SCHACHTER
JUNE 18, 2007

Successful leaders have the rare ability that novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald highlighted more than 60 years ago - to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. Indeed, according to Rotman School of Management Dean Roger Martin, those integrative thinkers prosper from what he calls their "opposable minds." In Harvard Business Review, he shows how this plays out in the four stages of decision making

Determining salience: The first step is to figure out which factors to take into account in a situation. The conventional approach is to discard as many as possible - or not even to consider some of them in the first place - in order to reduce complexity. Integrative thinkers, however, actively seek less obvious but potentially relevant factors, not minding the mess it creates. They welcome complexity, because that's where the best answers come from.

Analyzing causality: When it comes time to determine how those factors relate to one another, conventional thinkers maintain a narrow viewpoint, seeking straight-line relationships. But when we make bad decisions it's often because we got the links between the salient features wrong. Integrative thinkers aren't afraid of questioning the validity of obvious links or considering multidirectional and non-linear relationships.

Envisioning the decision architecture: The order in which you consider decisions can be important. Even considering whether to go to the movies tonight can involve which movie to see, which theatre to go to, and what time. The impulse is to establish a strict sequence in which issues in business decisions will be considered and dole out those elements to various parties, such as the different corporate functions, which can work on them separately. But integrative thinkers see the entire architecture of the problem in one entity - how the various parts fit together, and how they affect one another - rather than breaking the issue into individual pieces.

Analyzing resolution: Too often, after completing those stages, we accept a trade-off with relatively little complaint, since it appears to be the best alternative.

Print Edition - Section Front