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# HENRY MINTZBERG: A REBELLIOUS SCHOLAR OF THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

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**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to comprehend, analyze and evaluate the Mintzberg's contribution in field of strategic management. **Design/methodology/approach:** Mintzberg's contribution in the field for more than 45 years is reviewed and compared with other schools of thought in strategic management. Business Source Premier Database source EBSCO host search is used to search and review relevant literature. **Findings:** Mintzberg's work is comprehensive to define debate and formulate strategy management concept. He was the first one to successfully challenge the concepts of traditional thinking on strategy management. His work is being studied by every MBA student around the world. He provided foundation for these studies. He strongly believed that management is about applying human skills to systems, it is not applying systems to people as former academics were promoting. **Research limitations/implications:** It provides a broader view of Mintzberg's work. **Practical implications:** Mintzberg's work has found wide applications in a variety of organizations and in academic world.

**Keywords:** Strategy Management, Design School, Emergent Strategy

## INTRODUCTION

"No job is more vital to our society than that of the manager. It is the manager who determines whether our social institutions serve us well or whether they squander our talents and resources. It is time to strip away the folklore about managerial work, and time to study it realistically so that we can begin the difficult task of making significant improvements in its performance." Mintzberg (1990).

Management's comprehension and use of

strategy as a tool of organisation's success has been an important issue for many decades. An organization's strategy is a roadmap to provide guidance concerning the organization's vision and goals, it is a formula of the tactics and policies that are needed to attain those goals (Dess and Davis, 1984). There are many factors and components that contribute for strategy making process. There are various schools of thoughts to explain the complex process of strategy formulation. Michael Porter and Henry Mintzberg are the two academics who have great influence

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on strategy management studies. Mintzberg is the first one to challenge the conventional ideas of strategy management. According to him, most successful strategies are visions and not plans. He contributed significantly in this field. When Porter focuses on deliberate strategy, Mintzberg put an idea of emergent strategy. Plans are important but they are bound to fail, incorporation of emergent strategy is the reality of today's modern world.

**Study Design:** Mintzberg contribution in theories of strategic management for more than 45 years is reviewed and compared with other schools of thought in strategic management. Relevant literature is searched using electronic databases and using Mintzberg own website. The literature produced by Mintzberg was critically appraised and compared with current and historical concepts in the field of strategic management.

**Summary of Mintzberg work:** Henry Mintzberg (1939- ) is an internationally renowned academic and author on business and management. He has published about 150 articles, 15 books. Mintzberg known for rebellious ideology, challenges the conventional concepts through his precise, articulate, logical and evidence based arguments. He is regarded as an iconoclast and a rebel. Mintzberg is one of the iconic contributors in field of strategic management and he work should be studied by every MBA aspirant. His work can be broadly classified into 3 categories: (1) Strategic management; (2) Management Training and Education for managers and leader; and (3) Healthcare Management – in recent years. This paper is more focused on his contribution in field of strategic management.

## DISCUSSION

### What is Strategy?

Oxford Dictionary defines strategy as: plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim. But clearly meaning of strategy in business sense is lot different. What is a business strategy? Is it just upward extension of decision making? Or lot more than that?

Strategy, in Greek, means the art of the general. The general is solely responsible for the instrumentation of the army (Spreitzer *et al.*, 1999). Strategy is different from vision, mission, goals, priorities, and plans. It is the result of choices executives make, on where to play and how to win, to maximize long-term value. There is lot of confusion in defining strategy; strategy is not merely a deliberate plan or structured behavioral pattern in decision making but it's an interrelationship among various processes. The concept of strategy is best explained by Mintzberg in his paper 'The Strategy Concept I: Five Ps for Strategy' (Mintzberg, 1987). In this paper, Mintzberg examined the strategic process. He concluded that strategy or designing strategy is much more fluid and unpredictable than people had thought. According to Mintzberg it is interrelationship between plan, ploy, pattern, position, and perspective. This paper helps to clarify the basics of strategy; it enriches our existing knowledge about strategy. As Mintzberg used various examples to explain his thinking, it is very informative piece to understand the complex concept. He coined new term Egg-McMuffin syndrome to explain role of perspective in strategy.

### Development of Different Schools of Thoughts and Mintzberg's Contribution

Mintzberg developed these five types of

management strategy into 10 “schools of thought”. These 10 schools are grouped into three categories (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1998).

**Group A:** (prescriptive or normative)—includes the informal design and conception school, the formal planning school, and the analytical positioning school.

**Group B:** (descriptive): includes six schools, describes how strategic management is actually done, rather than prescribing optimal plans or positions. The schools are the entrepreneurial, visionary, or great leader school, the cognitive or mental process school, the learning, adaptive, or emergent process school, the power or negotiation school, the corporate culture or collective process school, and the business environment or reactive school.

**Group C:** (hybrid), includes one, the configuration or transformation school, It is an hybrid of the other schools organized into stages, organizational life cycles, or “episodes”.

Thus the Mintzberg was the first academic to analyze and classify the previous concepts of strategic management into formal, logical and clear classification. This is helpful for students of strategic management to understand the literature and concepts. To explain the readers in details, he wrote a book *Strategy Safari: The Complete Guide through the Wilds of Strategic Management* in 1998. This book is most recommended book for students of management studies. This is self-explanatory to understand the place of his work in today's world.

### **Planning school and Mintzberg - An Analysis**

Different schools of thoughts in strategic management started developing on foundation of

Taylor's scientific management path. Alfred Chandler's 'structure follows strategy' concept showed that a long-term coordinated strategy was necessary to give a company structure, direction, and focus (Chandler, 1976). Igor Ansoff added a range of strategic concepts. It contributed to develop Planning School approach to strategy. He wrote the influential book *Corporate Strategy* in 1965 (Ansoff, 1965). Planning school was developed in 1950-60s and this approach popularized in 1970s in period of unexpected economic instability. This is more formal approach of devising strategy. The planning system was expected to produce a comprehensive strategic plan with step by step instructions to the managers so that they could not get it wrong. The formal planning is beneficial for both stable and unstable environments while the learning school prefers logical instrumentalism, particularly in unstable environments (Mintzberg, 1991) (Campbell, 1991) The planning school advocates business to function like a without a room for creativity. Mintzberg argued strategic planning is not strategic thinking, one is analysis and other is synthesis (Mintzberg, 1994). On contrary, Porter favored set of analytical techniques in developing strategy. In his famous book '*The fall and Rise of strategic planning*' he points out various limitations of planning in strategic management. Strategic planning was being used as strategic programming. As Mintzberg rightly points out in this paper, planners should make contribution around strategy making process than inside it. They should supply hard data and formal analysis required for strategic thinking. So Mintzberg never underestimate the importance of planners or role of analysis but he redefines planners' job description. Mintzberg argument was, being analytical in nature; formal planning



is based on preservation and rearrangement of existing categories, but real strategy should be inventing new categories. He illustrated role of creative input in strategy formulation by quoting example of development of Polaroid camera. Thus in today's modern world when technology is changing the lives every second, there is no alternative to incorporate innovation and creativity in any business thinking. Mintzberg explained this in 1965. Mintzberg is never against planning and planners, rather his work redefines their significant role in strategy management. He finds them as analysts, strategy finders and catalysts in the process of strategy development. His objection is to go over formalization edge. His objection is to develop strategies as isolated process and force it on doers. His contribution on Planning School of strategy management explains the rationale why analytical planning approach does not performs up to the mark.

### **Design School and Mintzberg – An Analysis**

The design school proposes a simple model which views the process as one of the design to achieve an essential fit between external threat and opportunity and internal distinctive competence. This school is quint essentially defined by the Harvard Business School General Management Group's textbook "Business Policy: Text and Cases" (1978). The design school is based on historical (inferential) reasoning and not on scientific reasoning, it makes certain assumptions to formulate an over simplified model of strategy formulation. Mintzberg criticizes the design school on a number of levels. His argument is at fundamental level. He argues promotion of thought is not independent of action; strategy formation is a process of learning rather than conception (Mintzberg). In his work,

Mintzberg never intended to dismiss the design school model, but he is not comfortable with assumption that it is the best way to make strategy. He trusts, making a strategy is an on-going process of learning. Mintzberg is right, in this world of uncertainty, unpredictability, and complexity oversimplified tools like SWOT analysis or designed model of strategy formulations are of no use. They are too superficial to understand the process. Mintzberg argues that in unpredictable environments it is impossible to formulate an explicit strategy before the trial and experience process has run its course; and that it is not necessary to make strategy explicit in predictable environments. But the key question is, whether all objections by Mintzberg on design schools are valid? How did this school exist for years and why did managers use these simplistic formulas to make their strategy? Actually Ansoff accuses Mintzberg as the concept of strengths and weaknesses is ascribed by Mintzberg to the Design School. In today's world, different types of organizations do have different dynamic environments. Thus, since the level of environmental turbulence has become a driving force which dictates strategic responses necessary for success (Ansoff and Sullivan, 1993). The argument by Mintzberg about Design School failed to adapt with times proved to be methodologically unsound. There are certain limitations of Mintzberg's paper on design school. This paper was challenged by Ansoff. His paper has some methodological weakness of the arguments, and contradiction to factual evidence. (Ansoff, 1991)

### **Deliberate and Emergent Strategies and Mintzberg - An Analysis**

The deliberate strategies are realized as intended whereas emergent strategies are patterns or

consistencies realized despite, or in the absence of, intentions (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). In his paper, deliberate and emergent strategies, Mintzberg clarifies the concepts of these types of strategies and develop an ideal model. He argues, For strategy to be a perfectly deliberate strategy three essential pre-requisite must be present. There should be precise intentions in the organization, they must have been common to virtually all the actors, and no external force could interfere them. This is impossible to achieve in real life. On the other hand, it is difficult to imagine action in the total absence of intention which is seen in pure emergent strategies. Thus the purely emergent strategy is as rare as the purely deliberate. Figure explains the combination of both. Mintzberg introduces concept of emergent strategy to elaborate the process of learning in formation of strategies as a continuum. But this approach is criticized by Ansoff widely. He argues that emergent strategy cannot be used in 'mergers and acquisitions' which need a planned approach to diversification. This criticism sounds logical; however this argument does not undermine the importance of Mintzberg's theory in small and medium sized organizations. Ansoff does not explain how it is possible to have deliberate strategy formation in this environment of political, economic, market and natural uncertainties. Thus Mintzberg's concept of some form of trial and error while strategizing and learning model sounds more rational. In today's world is most dynamic ever, every hour new software or application is being invented. The big IT giants, Apple, Microsoft, Google, and Samsung are bringing cut edge game changing technology every minute. Nokia, once a leader in mobile handset market is struggling for survival and has to adopt new technology and strategy. So how

can a company plan and rely on a strategy in this era of super-fast change. It's not just technological changes; think about hurricanes, BP oil spill, Tsunami in Japan, unrest in Middle East, a list of many natural and man-made disasters which can change the economy and market upside down. So, if the environment is not stable, how on earth the planned strategy will work? The fact is plans always fail. If we take an example of National Health Service, which is a huge public sector organization in United Kingdom, it deals with most dynamic environment. If there is a national outbreak of any disease, clearly the hospitals in that area should be geared up in preventive healthcare as well as curative emergency healthcare than their planned targets and goals of elective workloads. One cannot fully control the external environment and that is a fact.

### **The Positioning School and Mintzberg - An Analysis**

The positioning school concept was championed by Porter in his books "Competitive Strategy" (Porter, 1980b) and "Competitive Advantage" (Porter, 1980a). This school was driven by an idea that "Strategy Formation is as an Analytical Process". Analysts play a vital role in this process. This process is consultancy-driven and programmatic. It is created by consultants to benefit consultants. Mintzberg thinking as strategies should be left as a broad vision than precisely articulated is understandable in dynamic market. Porters view still dominates the strategy literature with the three basic approaches: standardization, differentiation, and focused strategies along with the five forces model.

### **The Entrepreneurial School and Mintzberg - An Analysis**

The entrepreneur who is in personal control of

an organization is able to impose his or her vision of direction on it. These firms are tightly controlled by their owners; they can be called entrepreneurial strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985). Thus the Strategy Formation is a Visionary Process. Mintzberg argues that Is the entrepreneurial strategy is not only deliberate or just with intention of the person only, it also incorporates emergent characteristics. Mintzberg put forward his basic argument that strategies can not be deliberate alone; let it be entrepreneurship model which is based on single individual’s vision. It has to mould, i.e., it has to be emergent as time and need comes although such entrepreneurship is based on novel vision of the leader.

**The Cognitive School and Mintzberg – An Analysis**

This is one of the least developed schools among Mintzberg’s schools. This analyses the thinking process in strategists’ mind. It is based on cognitive functions of the planner who develops strategies as concepts or frames. Hence

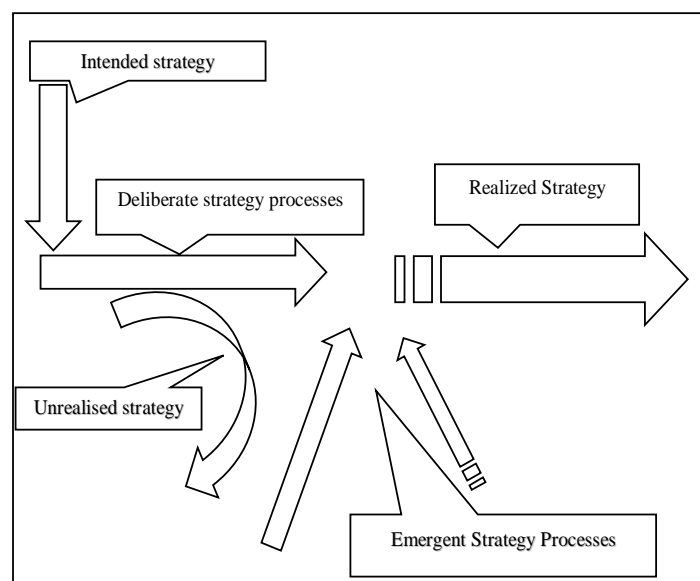
Mintzberg rightly argues them as more theoretical than practical approach. This School absolutely underlines the idea of the social Construction of reality (Simpson, 1967).

**The Power School, Cultural School, Environmental School, Configuration School and Mintzberg - An Analysis**

The strategy formation is a process which involves negotiations (The power school), it can be a reactive (the environmental school), or a collective process (as in cultural school), strategy formation can be an emergent process (learning school), or transformation (The configuration school). Thus Mintzberg provides a guided tour in the jungle of strategy management. His work on strategic management can not be just summarized with these different types of processes or theories, he provides us an integrated model (Mintzberg, 2003)

This model explains the complex process of strategy formation (Figure 1). The basic principles of external word verses internal process are

**Figure 1: Complex Process of Strategy Formation**



beautifully explained by Mintzberg. However this model does not account for time factor. Mintzberg demonstrates strategy formation is not a simple process of one or other theory as described by academics; it is a complex response to dynamically changing complex situations. So organizations could not afford to rely on strategy spelt and “planned” by so called experts. His contribution is hugely important to classify previous knowledge into different precise schools. He clearly elaborates the processes involved in strategy management among these different schools. Mintzberg then beautifully knit these concepts together to simply complex nature of strategy management and dynamics of the process. This would help every manager and student of strategy management to understand the fundamentals.

## CONCLUSION

Mintzberg published more than 150 articles. This assignment was focussed on his contribution on strategic management. He was a prominent critic of planning school approach and of deliberate strategy makers. He simplified the concepts with his rational writing. He classified and divided the schools into different categories which formed the foundation for study of strategy management. He argued the process involved in each school with his logical fluent argument.

Sometimes to prove his point, he incorporated few concepts to the school in his description which was not originally described by the previous author then he argued the concept which he himself introduced in that school! He was accused by Angoff (1991) for the similar approach about design school. Post-modern managers do not want to led, but want to work with. Hence Prof Karl Moore writes in Forbes “ Mintzberg is better

way to do corporate strategy”. There are changes and approaches in management today, Just-In-time and TQM, made emergent strategy as inseparable part of strategy making. The managers are learning Just-In-Time as well. Thus what Mintzberg argued decades ago, is no more fiction but today’s reality. Mintzberg is respected as a guru in strategic management for his immense contribution to the field. His writing style succeeds to simplify the complex concepts which is rarely seen in any academic writings. He chose attractive, self explanatory and precise titles for the books and articles for example, Strategy safari: A guided tour..., What is Planning Anyway?, Of Strategies, deliberate and emergent, society Has Become Unmanageable as a Result of Management, Managing Design, Designing Management, Managing Government, Governing Management, Managers not MBAs. These are few examples of his witty, clever, precise and academic writings. Mintzberg is read by managers all over the world and his contribution is placed among top two contributors in the field. His work is providing intellectual domain for many academics to follow his path. Many organizations are incorporating his concepts, original thinking and models to formulate their strategic management. Thus the practical implications of his work on strategy management are to set standards for any new concept, new academic writings, providing fundamentals for argument, and most importantly applied importance in all organizations daily functioning. His work can not be ignored by any management students, strategy consultants or academic world.

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