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The Strategist MGMT-GB 2113 20/30/31: Course Syllabus¹

Adam Brandenburger

Course Overview

Business success requires being different. To succeed, a business needs to stand out from the competition. This is what business strategy courses teach, and they are right. But finding a way to be different is harder than just knowing that it is important to be different. This is the fundamental challenge facing the business strategist. It is the challenge of looking at an existing organization and coming up with ways to make its position in the marketplace more distinctive. Or, it is the challenge of looking at the potential of a new business and creating a distinct position for it. The strategist is equally important in the worlds of existing enterprise and of entrepreneurship.

The challenge of being different is considerable. Much of the time, everyone has access to more or less the same knowledge base. This is likely even more the case today, in a globally interconnected world, relative to the past. In this environment, the key to being different becomes one's ability to think differently. Of course, one has to think both differently and better, and come up with not just a different but a superior business proposition. Out-thinking others in this way is the job of the business strategist.

In this course, we will develop a four-way framework to help us think differently and better and become better business strategists. The four components of the framework (4 C's) are:

Strategy from Contrast
Strategy from Combination
Strategy from Constraint
Strategy from Context

We will examine many examples of great business strategies of each of these four types, and we will also use this framework to help us generate entirely new strategies.

The course will ask for a spirit of adventure and experimentation on the part of everyone present.

¹ This syllabus has benefitted greatly from research assistance by Andrew Lewicki and from the commitment to learning made by the students who have taken earlier versions of the course. Discussions of concepts and creators in the classroom and beyond have been extremely valuable and are gratefully acknowledged. Please note that some real-time adjustments may be made as the course progresses.

Academic Integrity

We take pride in our well-rounded education and approach our academics with honesty and integrity. Indeed, integrity is critical to all that we do here at NYU Stern. As members of our community, all students agree to abide by the [NYU Academic Integrity Policies](#) as well as the NYU Stern Student Code of Conduct, which includes a commitment to:

- Exercise integrity in all aspects of one's academic work including, but not limited to, the preparation and completion of exams, papers and all other course requirements by not engaging in any method or means that provides an unfair advantage.
- Clearly acknowledge the work and efforts of others when submitting written work as one's own. Ideas, data, direct quotations (which should be designated with quotation marks), paraphrasing, creative expression, or any other incorporation of the work of others should be fully referenced.
- Refrain from behaving in ways that knowingly support, assist, or in any way attempt to enable another person to engage in any violation of the Code of Conduct. Our support also includes reporting any observed violations of this Code of Conduct or other School and University policies that are deemed to adversely affect the NYU Stern community.

Stern Code of Conduct

The Stern Code of Conduct and Judiciary Process applies to all students enrolled in Stern courses. Additional information can be found here: <https://www.stern.nyu.edu/uc/codeofconduct>.

Integrity of Credit

Students will meet 1x a week for 3 hours for 6 weeks for this 1.5-credit course.

General Conduct and Behavior

Students are also expected to maintain and abide by the highest standards of professional conduct and behavior. Please familiarize yourself with Stern's Policy in Regard to In-Class Behavior & Expectations for graduate students and the NYU Student Conduct Policy:

<https://www.stern.nyu.edu/portal-partners/registrar/policies-procedures/general-policies/code-conduct>

<https://www.nyu.edu/about/policies-guidelines-compliance/policies-and-guidelines/university-student-conduct-policy.html>.

Student Accessibility

If you will require academic accommodation of any kind during this course, you must notify me at the beginning of the course (or as soon as your need arises) and provide a letter from the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (212-998-4980, mosescsa@nyu.edu) verifying your registration and outlining the accommodations they recommend. For more information, visit the CSA website: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/communities-and-groups/student-accessibility.html>.

Student Wellness

Our aim is for students to be as successful academically as they can, and to help them overcome any impediments to that. Any student who may be struggling and believes this may affect their performance in this course is urged to contact the Moses Center for Student Accessibility (see also the Student Accessibility section of this syllabus) at 212-998-4980 to discuss academic accommodations. If mental health assistance is needed, call the NYU's 24/7 Wellness Exchange hotline 212-443-9999. Furthermore, please approach me if you feel comfortable doing so. This will enable me to provide relevant resources or referrals. There are also drop in hours and appointments. Find out more at <http://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/counseling-services.html>.

You can also reach out to the Academic Advising team at academicaffairs@stern.nyu.edu if you would like to receive more information or further support.

Name Pronunciation and Pronouns

NYU Stern students now have the ability to include their pronouns and name pronunciation in Albert. I encourage you to share your name pronunciation and pronouns this way. Please utilize this link for additional information: [Pronouns and Name Pronunciation](#).

Religious Observances and Other Absences

NYU's [Calendar Policy on Religious Holidays](#) states that members of any religious group may, without penalty, absent themselves from classes when required in compliance with their religious obligations. You must notify me in advance of religious holidays or observances that might coincide with exams, assignments, or class times to schedule mutually acceptable alternatives. Students may also contact religiousaccommodations@nyu.edu for assistance.

NYU is committed to ensuring an equitable educational experience for all students regardless of identity or circumstances and strives to recognize the obligations its students have outside of Stern. Please review all class dates at the start of the semester and review all course requirements to identify any foreseeable conflicts with exams, course assignments, projects, or other items required for participation and attendance. If you are aware of a potential conflict, please contact me as soon as possible to discuss any potential conflicts to determine whether and how they can be accommodated.

Laptops, Cell Phones, and Other Electronic Devices

The use of electronic devices (e.g., tablets or laptops), for the purpose of in-class work, is permitted. However, students should make every effort to avoid distracting their classmates or disrupting the class, including arriving early and choosing a seat that is less distracting for peers.

Inclusion Statement

This course strives to support and cultivate diversity of thought, perspectives, and experiences. The intent is to present materials and activities that will challenge your current perspectives with a goal of understanding how others might see situations differently. By participating in this course, it is the expectation that everyone commits to making this an inclusive learning environment for all.

Course Schedule

Class #1: The Strategist as Creator

In preparation for our first class, please read through the syllabus, which will give you an overall picture of how the course will unfold. In class, we will start with introductions and then spend some time previewing the ideas of the course. After that, we will discuss the readings and move into an in-class exercise.

For class discussion, please prepare:

- a. Adam Brandenburger, "Strategy Needs Creativity," *Harvard Business Review*, March-April 2019.
- b. Felix Oberholzer-Gee, "Eliminate Strategic Overload," *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2021. (Focus on the material through the sections "The Elements of Value-Based Strategy" and "Value-Based Strategy in Action.")
- c. Aithan Shapira, "Spark Team Creativity by Embracing Uncertainty," *MIT Sloan Management Review*, Spring 2020.

The article "Strategy Needs Creativity" presents the framework we will follow in this course. Please go through the article and note the 4 C's model described there.

What is the definition of value put forward in the article "Eliminate Strategic Overload"? Based on this article, how would you define the idea of business strategy?

How do you relate the two articles "Strategy Needs Creativity" and "Eliminate Strategic Overload"? In particular, what is the role of creativity in strategy making as it is described in "Eliminate Strategic Overload"?

In "Spark Team Creativity by Embracing Uncertainty," the author encourages us to let uncertainty into the creative process. How do you think strategists should balance the use of formal frameworks with the need to embrace uncertainty? Can frameworks and uncertainty be made to work together in strategy-making — or are they inherently in tension?

Note: You do not need to submit anything before class.

For our in-class exercise, we will divide into groups and each group will:

- i. pick a person (from any domain of life) to whom you would apply the label of "creative strategist"
- ii. produce, on the fly, a mini-presentation on your strategist that includes a justification for your pick

Additional reading:

d. Adam Brandenburger, "Where Do Great Strategies Really Come From?" *Strategy Science*, 2, 2017, 220-225, at <https://doi.org/10.1287/stsc.2017.0039>. This is a more academic presentation of the same framework as in "Strategy Needs Creativity" (a. above). It talks more about the teaching of strategy and also contains some different examples.

e. Adam Brandenburger and Harborne Stuart, "Value-Based Business Strategy," *Journal of Economics & Management Strategy*, 5, 1996, 5-24, at <https://doi.org/10.1111/>

[j.1430-9134.1996.00005.x](https://doi.org/10.1430-9134.1996.00005.x). This article introduces the “value stick” described in the article “Eliminate Strategic Overload.” It also defines the “added value” of a player in the game of business, which is a key metric for how much value a player can capture.

Class #2: Strategy from Contrast

As part of preparation for this class, you should each individually choose a creative strategist, whom you will study during the course. Choose someone from business or from another field — such as the arts, sciences, or technology. You can choose someone who is famous, or not. Either is fine. Likely, the person you choose will have some special meaning for you (e.g., as a role model). Be sure to have some personal investment in your choice, so that this work takes on real significance. Starting prior to our next class, you will be asked to write memos about your creative strategist.

In class, we will look at strategy based on the first of our 4 C’s, namely, strategy from contrast. There will be some slides, after which we will discuss this week’s readings, and then we will move into an in-class exercise.

For class discussion, please prepare:

a. Adam Grant, *Originals: How Non-Conformists Move the World*, Viking, 2016, Chapter 1 (“Creative Destruction”), pp.1-14, 259-262.

b. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action*, paperback edition, Penguin, 2011, Chapter 3 (“The Golden Circle”), pp.37-51, 235.

c. Jonah Sachs, *Unsafe Thinking: How to be Creative and Bold When You Need It Most*, Random House, 2018, Chapter 5 (“The Explorer’s Edge”), pp.57-71, 204-205.

In the excerpt from *Originals*, the author mentions two paths to success. What are they? He also discusses a number of circumstances which he argues work against our ability to be an “original.” List the circumstances of this kind which are mentioned.

In the reading from *Start with Why*, the author talks about a reversal of the conventional way organizations communicate. What is this reversal, and how might it affect strategy?

In the reading from *Unsafe Thinking*, the author discusses an inverted U-shaped relationship between expertise and creativity. What reasons does he give for why creativity might fall off beyond a certain level of expertise? What suggestions does he make for transcending this tradeoff?

Note: You do not need to submit anything before class.

For our in-class exercise, we will divide into groups and each group will:

- i. identify a piece of conventional wisdom around strategy in some area of life (business, government, arts, sports, games, warfare, ...)
- ii. state a proposition (a new strategy) that stands in sharp contrast with this conventional wisdom
- iii. produce a mini-presentation arguing that the new approach could work

Additional reading:

d. Adam Brandenburger, “As Well As Thinking Differently, Seeing Differently,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2019, at <https://hbr.org/2019/04/to-change-the-way-you-think-change-the-way-you-see>. This article says that by literally looking at the world differently, we may be able to uncover additional opportunities for changing it.

e. Amanda Brugh, “The Secret History of the Little Black Dress,” *Medium*, December 2016, at <https://medium.com/@alb10600/the-secret-history-of-the-little-black-dress-2cb1ee3d132f>. This article explains how, with her most famous creation (the Little Black Dress, 1926), Coco Chanel falsified the status-quo assumption that women’s clothing could not be comfortable and chic at the same time.

f. “Why Entrepreneurs Should Think Like Scientists,” *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2024, at <https://hbr.org/2024/07/why-entrepreneurs-should-think-like-scientists>. This article adapts the scientific method to a process of hypothesis formation, testing, and refinement for entrepreneurs to use in building new businesses.

g. Shane Snow, “The Problem with Best Practices,” *Fast Company*, October 2015, at <https://www.fastcompany.com/3052222/the-problem-with-best-practices>. This article argues that paying a lot of attention to best practices in one’s industry works against finding creative new moves.

h. Sydney Finkelstein, “Don’t Be Blinded by Your Own Expertise,” *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2019, at <https://hbr.org/2019/05/dont-be-blinded-by-your-own-expertise>. This article talks about an “expertise trap” which can leave people blinkered even in their own fields. It suggests some ways to test one’s ingrained assumptions and seek out new ideas.

i. Gabriella Rosen Kellerman and Martin E.P. Seligman, “Cultivating the Four Kinds of Creativity,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2023, at <https://hbr.org/2023/01/cultivating-the-four-kinds-of-creativity>. This article has several overlaps with our course framework. It talks about a form of contrast thinking called “figure-ground reversal.” It also talks about “integration,” which foreshadows our next class on strategy from combination.

Class #3: Strategy from Combination

This session, we will look at strategy based on the second of our 4 C’s, namely, strategy from combination. There will be some slides, after which we will discuss this week’s readings, and then we will move into an in-class exercise.

By now you will have chosen your creative strategist to study during the course. Please submit a one-page memo (not longer!) on how your individual may be said to have practiced strategy from contrast. Put your name at the top of the first page and in the filename, and submit your memo as a pdf prior to the beginning of Class #3.

As discussed in class, you are free to use ChatGPT or another AI chatbot in creating your memo. Of course, no obligation. If you do use an AI chatbot, please add a few lines at the bottom of your memo saying which one(s) you have used and reflecting (without AI input — this is very important) on the experience.

Be aware that AI chatbots can produce output that is incorrect, biased, or hateful. You need to check carefully any text you have generated this way, to guard against this risk.

Overall, this is clearly a fast-moving and highly experimental period in learning to use AI to

enhance our own human abilities. You are free to use the assignments for this course as a learning opportunity in this regard, but please use good judgment and discretion.

For class discussion, please prepare:

a. Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff, "Symmetry and the Sixth Force: The Essential Role of Complements," *CPI Antitrust Chronicle*, November 2024, at <https://adambrandenburger.com/aux/material/ssf-12-13-24.pdf>.

b. Adam Alter, *Anatomy of a Breakthrough: How to Get Unstuck When It Matters Most*, Simon & Schuster, 2023, Chapter 8 ("Recombination and Pivoting"), pp. 137-145, 266-267.

c. Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative*, Workman, 2012, Chapter 1 ("Steal Like an Artist"), pp.5-9, 11, 13-15, and 17-23, and Chapter 10 ("Creativity is Subtraction"), pp.137-140.

The article "Symmetry and the Sixth Force" define a non-traditional set of players in the game of business which they call "complementors." What is the connection between complementors and strategy from combination?

In the reading from *Anatomy of a Breakthrough*, the author talks about recombination and randomness. What do you think is the distinction between the terms "combination" and "recombination"? What role do you think randomness can play in strategy from combination?

In the reading from *Steal Like an Artist*, what is the author's theory of where inventions and creations come from? List the various techniques the author suggests for arriving at new ideas.

For our in-class exercise, we will divide into groups and each group will:

- i. share the different industries in which group members have worked or are working
- ii. come up with meaningful, value-creating combinations of the products or services represented by these industries (ideally, coming up with a combination involving all of the industries!)
- iii. produce a mini-presentation on the combinations found

Additional reading:

d. Maria Popova, "What Is Creativity? Cultural Icons on What Ideation is and How It Works," *The Marginalian*, September 2013, at <https://www.themarginalian.org/2013/09/06/what-is-creativity/>. This article identifies several distinct kinds of combinatory thinking.

e. Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff, *Co-opetition*, Currency/Doubleday, 1996, Chapter 2 ("Co-opetition"), pp.11-22, 268. This book excerpt introduces the "complementor" term and a new map, called the Value Net, of the business landscape.

f. Adam Brandenburger and Barry Nalebuff, "The Rules of Co-opetition," *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2021, at <https://hbr.org/2021/01/the-rules-of-co-opetition>. This article provides a guide to thinking about the risks and rewards of cooperating with another organization, when that organization is also a competitor.

Class #4: Strategy from Constraint

This session, we will look at strategy based on the third of our 4 C's, namely, strategy from constraint. There will be some slides, after which we will discuss this week's readings, and then we will move into an in-class exercise.

Please submit a one-page memo (not longer!) on how your creative strategist may be said to have practiced strategy from combination. Put your name at the top of the first page and in the filename, and submit your memo as a pdf prior to the beginning of Class #4.

For class discussion, please prepare:

a. Adam Morgan and Mark Barden, *A Beautiful Constraint: How to Transform Your Limitations into Advantages, and Why It's Everyone's Business*, Wiley, 2015, Introduction, pp.1-7, 235.

b. Youngme Moon, "Break Free from the Product Life Cycle," *Harvard Business Review*, May 2005.

The excerpt from *A Beautiful Constraint* talks about several different types of creativity-enhancing constraint. Create a classification of the different such types you can find there.

The article "Break Free from the Product Life Cycle" proposes three types of product strategies: reverse positioning, breakaway positioning, and stealth positioning. What is the relationship between each of these three product strategies and the idea of strategy from constraint?

For our in-class exercise, we will divide into groups and each group will:

- i. choose an organization and list the strengths and weaknesses you see in it
- ii. then argue that the strengths listed actually constitute threats to the organization's future
- iii. and argue that the weaknesses listed actually constitute opportunities for the organization

Additional reading:

c. Adam Brandenburger, "Are Your Company's Strengths Really Weaknesses?" *Harvard Business Review*, August 2019, at <https://hbr.org/2019/08/are-your-companys-strengths-really-weaknesses>. This article considers both the idea that a business's limitations ("weaknesses") can turn out to be strengths, and the converse possibility that its strengths might become weaknesses. The article goes on to ask analogous questions about a competitors' weaknesses and strengths.

d. Navi Radjou, "Creative Problem-Solving in the Face of Extreme Limits," 2014, at https://www.ted.com/talks/navi_radjou_creative_problem_solving_in_the_face_of_extreme_limits. This video describes the concept of frugal innovation (called "jugaad") as it applies both in emerging markets and globally.

e. Ayse Birsal, "4 Ways to Use Constraints to Come Up with Breakthrough Ideas," *Inc.*, February 2017, at <https://www.inc.com/ayse-birsal/4-ways-to-use-constraints-to-come-up-with-breakthrough-ideas.html>. This article considers Elon Musk, Charles Eames, and Issey Miyake as three practitioners of the art of turning constraints into opportunities.

f. Matthew Schneps, “Dyslexia Can Deliver Benefits,” *Scientific American*, December 2014, at <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/dyslexia-can-deliver-benefits/>. This article describes research which suggests that people with dyslexia may possess particular strengths in the area of global visual awareness — an instance of the idea that there can be strengths as well as challenges associated with different ways of being and operating.

Class #5: Strategy from Context

This session, we will look at strategy based on the fourth of our 4 C’s, namely, strategy from context. There will be some slides, after which we will discuss this week’s readings, and then we will move into an in-class exercise.

Please submit a one-page memo (not longer!) on how your creative strategist may be said to have practiced strategy from constraint. Put your name at the top of the first page and in the filename, and submit your memo as a pdf prior to the beginning of Class #5.

For class discussion, please prepare:

a. Giovanni Gavetti and Jan Rivkin, “How Strategists Really Think: Tapping the Power of Analogy,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2005.

b. Selena Hernandez, “Using Biomimicry as a Lever for Business Innovation and Resilience,” at <https://www.talkspirit.com/blog/using-biomimicry-as-a-lever-for-business-innovation-and-resilience>, January 2025.

In the article “How Strategists Really Think,” the authors talk about three types of reasoning about strategy: deduction, trial and error, and analogical reasoning. What is the distinction between these three types? Also, what factors do the authors say lead to the use of bad analogies and what can be done to guard against such uses?

The article “Using Biomimicry as a Lever for Business Innovation and Resilience” describes how principles and processes from the natural world have been used to spur innovation in business. Come up with your own examples of where business has drawn on ideas from very different fields.

For our in-class exercise, we will divide into groups and each group will:

- i. compile a list of the industries in which members have worked or are working
- ii. for each industry, determine what ideas or activities might be usefully imported from the other industries represented in the group into the industry in question

Additional reading:

c. Roberto Veganti, “The Innovative Power of Criticism,” *Harvard Business Review*, January-February 2016, at <https://hbr.org/2016/01/the-innovative-power-of-criticism>. This article describes a balance between developing one’s own ideas and seeking feedback from experts who are outsiders to one’s industry.

d. Go to <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Biomimetics> to read about the field of biomimetics, which looks to nature for solutions (evolved via natural selection) to analogs to human engineering problems, and then adapts these solutions to our (human) world.

e. Carmine Gallo, “The Soft Skill That MIT Considers Essential for Career Success,” *Inc.*, July 2024, at <https://www.inc.com/carmine-gallo/the-soft-skill-that-mit-considers-fundamental-for->

[career-success.html](#). This article promotes the use of metaphors in communicating ideas — and suggests that finding effective metaphors is one of the roles that humans should play when working with AI to craft a message.

f. John McIlroy, “Why Car Manufacturers Turn to Archives for ‘New’ ideas,” CNN style, June 2017, at <https://www.cnn.com/style/article/revival-classic-car-designs/index.html>. This article describes how past car designs can be a generative context for coming up with new designs (but also a less-than-creative constraint).

Class #6: The Strategist is Me

In class, we will have some summary slides. After that, we will move to an in-class exercise, and we will end by sharing the personal manifestos “The Strategist is Me.”

In preparation, please write:

- a. a one-page memo (not longer!) on how your creative strategist may be said to have practiced strategy from context;
- b. a two-page personal manifesto, titled “The Strategist is Me,” and covering: (i) the notion you had, prior to the course, of what it means to be a strategist; (ii) the notion of being a strategist you now have; (iii) how you plan put this notion into practice after the course ends; and (iv) how you plan to keep refining and developing your notion of a strategist.

Please put your name at the top of the first page and in the filename of each piece of work, and submit your your two deliverables as pdfs prior to the beginning of Class #6.

For our in-class exercise, each group will:

- i. come up with a proposed fifth ingredient to add to the 4 C’s framework we have been exploring
- ii. operate under the constraint that the proposed additional ingredient must begin with the letter “C”
- iii. produce a mini-presentation arguing that its ingredient adds usefully to the 4 C’s

Grading

The course is graded pass/fail. The expectation is that each student will attend all class sessions and contribute to class discussions and exercises. Each student is required to submit the four course memos and the personal manifesto. A student who meets the requirements will obtain a passing grade.