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Strive to Be Different

The Concept

Your organization must **be different compared to your competitors** for three reasons. Firstly, **being different** makes it easier to become the natural choice in your chosen **market***. Secondly, if you are different (if you are not a **commodity***) then you will be able to defend your price much more easily and maximize **profitability+(2)**. And thirdly, if you are different, attractive to customers, able to defend your price and thus able to maintain profitability, you will be a popular company to work for and hence able to attract the best employees.

The best employees will be knowledgeable, skilled and **motivated+(3)** and with them you can build and maintain a world-class organization. And a world-class organization will be more than aware that staying different is critical to both surviving and thriving.

A **success cycle+(5)** has been created.

*(One small point: it is of course assumed that the difference you are offering is **wanted** by the target market. Obvious but worth stating; many an entrepreneur has fallen foul of*

his/her own dreams, which were not shared by a buying customer. Or not by enough of them anyway, e.g., [Sinclair](#).)*

Consequences

There are three ways in which you can create difference; ideally you will do so using all three ways and then each will [leverage*](#) the other. You can be different through **your company**, e.g., *you have an office in China to serve the local market but your competitors do not*. You can be different through **your solutions**, e.g., *all of your solutions are managed in-house allowing the most rapid of bug fixes*. And you can be different through **your people**, e.g., *their sheer professionalism and enthusiasm and passion for your product*. Your goal is to be improving all three areas, [kaizen*+\(5\)](#), of course: the Japanese word for constant, never-ending improvement.

Actions

- 1. Improve your company.** There are two major ways you might improve your company. One is *bottom up*: to simply *ask* your current or potential customers what they would like, what can you do for them? This is certainly a useful if not vital source of data but it does need to be remembered that customers often do not know what they want (an example being markets/products which are apparently created from nowhere, such as Schultz and

Starbucks or Jobs and the iPad) and/or they say they would like something (better service in banking) but are not always willing to pay for such a service (*How much are you charging me to run my account?*). An alternative, or additional, approach is bottom down and this is to *create* needs, to create desire essentially for ways of making the customer's life easier that they had not yet considered (e.g., the 3M yellow sticky notepad). A useful tool to help your internal discussions and analysis for both bottom up and top down analysis is the [SWOT! methodology](#)*: your internal strengths and weakness; your external opportunities and threats. It is often suggested that one result of such sessions should be defining the organization's mission, vision, and values. Perhaps. These might well be explored but can often result in meaningless plaques on a reception room wall, satisfying nothing more than a PowerPoint slide at a kick-off conference. Far better is to articulate your [story](#)! – what are you about as an organization? A story is something a customer can relate to (or not). A story is something that can inspire your people (or not).

- 2. Improve our solutions.** Once we are clear on our story we can provide solutions. And solutions that are different and constantly improving. This we do by being innovative. [Innovation!](#) might be defined as creativity + action. Creativity realizes potential new products and action brings them to market. Creativity in itself can be fun i.e. covering the board room wall with ideas but so often little is truly done with those efforts. That is where

action! is vital. A particular challenge is that these innovation skills can appear to be mutually exclusive. Thus [creativity!](#) is free-thinking, open ended and accepts all; judgement is avoided. Project Management or [PM!](#) needs definition, closure and action; ultimately judgement is essential. Such different skill sets tend to expose the quality of our [teamwork+\(3\)](#).

- 3. Improve your people.** Clearly for your solutions to be at their best, your people must not just understand the story but also live and breathe it on a daily basis. They need training so that they can deliver the story. And, most importantly, be motivated to deliver the story. An idea we will explore further is that established by [Maslow+\(3\)](#) who identified that motivation is a complex mix of fundamentals without which a person often seems demotivated, the so-called [hygiene factors+\(3\)](#). And fundamental to getting the best out of a person is allowing them to grow to become the best version of themselves: the more you can get an individual to feel that his/her goals are aligned with the organization's goals the more motivated they are likely to be. Read my publication, *Professionalism 101*, (ISBN: 9780956784841) for immediate ideas on what makes for a truly professional workforce.

Specific Tools/Concepts Plus Cautions

- 1. Difference Pie.** Imagine a pie. Imagine it divided into three slices, three segments. One is labelled

your company, one your solution(s) and one your people. That's the image to keep in mind, to share with your people and to ensure that they understand: which bit of the pie do they make special? *Create and maintain the best difference pie that you can. Never let any slice become stale and having to be sold on **price+(2)** alone.*

2. **Story.** We all love stories. Stories are memorable, stories have flow and stories beg us to want an ending. You must ensure that you have a story (and perhaps in multiple markets and/or multiple products, different stories) and that it is simple and engaging. And that each and every one of your people know how they contribute to that story and are proud of it. Thus we do not produce security software, we are in the business of *“ensuring senior leaders can sleep at night knowing their data is secure from prying eyes”*.
3. **Awayday.** Whether it is a full day or a half day is not crucial. However, anything less than four hours is not likely to get those attending into “the zone” of deep thinking from whence the breakthroughs are made. An awayday is designed to discuss the topics which will be covered in *MBA On The Go* in particular the Critical Handful. It is not designed to discuss the month's sales figures nor why a project is failing: there should be different forums for those. It is to stretch the planning horizon; it is to do something today to help the long-term tomorrow; it is to create and keep difference, refine and strengthen the story and ensure everything

happening in the business is supporting the story. Much more on this in section 6.

4. **Action.** Remember: a decision is not a decision until action has been taken. Decisions are easy “*we must improve customer service*”. A great intent: but what are the immediate actions that will make that happen? And those actions need to be explicit not implicit. Not “get some customer data” (implicit and vague). But “talk to 500 customers over the next two days and ask them on a scale of 1 to 10 where 1 is dire and 10 is amazing, how would they would rate our customer service?” (explicit and measurable).
5. **Innovation** is the best of creative thinking turned to a practical use. It requires that creative thinking must be possible and that creative thinking must be harnessed through robust project management. An organization will become more innovative if:
 - it gives time to the process;
 - it works on developing the skill of creativity;
 - it refines the process by which creativity output is captured and explored through formal project management or PM.
6. **Creativity.** It is worth remembering that we tend to be pattern-seeking animals. Pattern-seeking? Yes; same old, same old, same old way. Thus it IS often tempting to copy your competitors, as after all they are currently stealing your business, but that approach has been done. The breakthrough will come when you leap your competitors. It is

much more left-brain thinking. Yes – it is “thinking outside the box”.

7. **PM.** This is more right-brain thinking. It is the isolation of the action, the explicit action, and an owner and a milestone. And once that simple plan of action/owner/milestone has been captured, monitoring and keeping to plan. It is knowing where the box is, keeping it fully maintained and updated.
8. **SWOT.** The SWOT tool is well known and often used. It is worth reminding that strengths and weaknesses are internal to the organization. Opportunities and threats are external. Both strengths & weaknesses and opportunities & threats will tend to complement each other. Thus a strong management team may well be an internal strength. But it might also reveal the weakness that there is little opportunity for career growth within the organization.

Case Study

Totally Objectively Finally Ultimately-Globally Integrated, TOFU-GI, launched 15 years ago as a niche player in IT software services. Those were of course happier economic times. Success – their sheer expertise and focus in a particular niche of the demanding software support area – brought them money (lots) and

demand (more than they could satisfactorily handle). Money and demand caused them to broaden their services in response to client requests and the search for easy growth. A demand which could not be fully handled caused them to allow their service and response levels to drop. As the economy faltered in 2008, customers started to migrate to the lower-priced services, which were available elsewhere as **TOFU-GI** had neglected its niche, and its original expertise (and the key reason to accept its premium pricing) had disappeared. Profitability plummeted as it was forced to compete on price. Large-scale redundancies followed. The best employees left for the newer players in new niche segments. In desperation they had started doing deals; the quarterly figures becoming all and everything. There was no planning time. They had no special story or, to put it more bluntly, their story was the same as everybody else's: we're cheap, buy us. Please.

At a recent awayday (its first for over five years) **TOFU-GI** recognized it had moved from being a specialist and niche payer in a buoyant market to a generalist in a tough market. But worse: this had not been a conscious decision. **TOFU-GI's** crime was two-fold: firstly, allowing the transition to happen and secondly, having no formally strategic planning process to avoid it.

TOFU-GI needed to re-boot, reinvent and revitalize. Read on . . .