


Re-thinking strategic thinking

What if Gregory Bateson taught Business Strategy?



What if Gregory Bateson had taught strategy?
Part 3



The way John has been thinking....

The cognitivist, analysis prescription implementation framework is riddled with error

We call it epistemological error – errors in what you think you know “to be true”

This video explores such errors.... And what they mean for strategy

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00:00 Let that beautiful little bird, finish going tweet tweet tweet, is connecting nectar from some of the flowers around me.

00:27 You didn't come to watch this for me to talk about that, did you? This is not a nature programme. Well, maybe it is. Maybe it is. There are dangers in overusing a nature metaphor, but this is about what Bateson would be considering and working



with if he was doing what I had been doing, *teaching strategy*.

Ah, there you are, I've arrived at where I wanted to be.

00:58 Bateson was very, very keen for us to understand that we come to terms with the world around through models.

He wanted to use models not in the way that we use it normally in speech or in management jargon, in management speech.

01:31 He wanted us to understand that the very way that we think and we see and we operate in the world is with an approximation of what is in the real.

It's a representation of what is in the real.

01:55 He clearly, or maybe I only see it clearly, but clearly then he had a preoccupation with what is in the literature known as epistemology.

02:17 You'll see different versions of interpretations of what the word epistemology means within the literatures of philosophy.

02:29 I use, and I think he uses **epistemology** in the sense of **how do you know what you know and how reliable is it?**

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And do you understand the way in which you came to know, (more on that in the next video), how did you come to know what you think you know?

02:55 Okay, John, that's a difficult one to swallow, but I'll go with that, but then, you know, you're telling me what you know.

[03:07 *Can I turn on the water?*

Yeah. Yesterday, because our water is pumped electrically, I turned the pump off, but I don't think it's going to disturb us in this corner, so Reza was just asking me, can she run the water? isn't she considerate, nice and lovely,anyway,]

epistemology, how do you come to know what you know?

03:39 Now, there's two processes here.

03:43 One is what you build out of your own direct experience, and that is to say how your appreciative system, as they call it in soft systems methodology, how you are set up in yourself to go for, to look for things and to bring them back and to assemble them into your model of how things are.

Okay.

04:11 Then there's the other bit, what you get told,

“oh, no, that's easy, I decide who I trust, and if they tell me something, then I think they know, they wouldn't knowingly and deliberately deceive me, so what they tell me they know, I know that, see, never mind, sure.

04:38 But Bateson was concerned about something more than that, and he was concerned about the errors, the mistakes in building models **due to the very words that we use.**

04:59 He knows that what we do and what we think comes off the words that we used, **not** how things really are.

05:13 All right, so I'm talking to you about Bateson and his concern with epistemological error.

05:27 An epistemological error for Bateson is where the words that we use to represent something, or to describe something, is not accurate because, well, not as accurate as it could be, or describes things working as a process, describes things working in a way that they do not work.

05:59 I'm afraid we're on a bit of a hobby horse of mine because management, the discipline of management and the stuff that gets taught in business schools is

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absolutely full to the brim, metaphorically speaking, with epistemological error.

06:25 Why do I say that?

06:27 Well, look, Bateson would point at one of the fundamental words, management, and say, there's no such thing. It's simply, it's not there. **It's a construct**, and it gets **constructed in many, many different ways**.

06:52 And it **gets used in many, many different ways**.

07:00 A colleague of mine, Tony Watson, Professor Tony Watson, wrote a book rather cheekily entitled "In Search of Management".

I say rather cheekily because it clearly was following that very, very popular book, "In Search of Excellence".

07:21 Anyway, Tony devotes a good chapter or more, quite a lot of words, pages, to a discussion of "management, a term in search of itself".

Sounds terribly impressive, doesn't it?

07:41 Tony, there's no such thing. Only an academic is going to get worried about management, what it is, where it comes from, the **epistemology of it**.

The rest of us are just trying to cope. We're just trying to cope. We're just trying to go on living, living within the...



This [hand gesture] is going to represent it, isn't it?

08:11 Living in the working environment that we're doing. We are processing.

We are thinking.

We are living.

We are alive, whatever that means.

08:27 But we're living, we're ongoing.

Bateson wants us to be concerned that we engage in process, processing, and stop using these nominalizations, these big...

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08:49 Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry, he didn't say that, did he?
He didn't say that.

08:57 **Bateson would have been concerned that we do not reason and take action based upon these false representations of how things are.**

09:19 Some people, some consultants and some academics, Tony, make their living by creating and using these false, in the sense of Bateson they're not accurate, these false notions.

09:34 One of them I'm going to have to deal with is *knowledge* as opposed to knowing.

09:40 And the interesting thing for me in that arena, as well as in the arena of strategy, is that the commercial interests of consultants who need to develop these labels, develop these names, and then sell their services, having sold the name, so to speak, interpreting and applying these false concepts.

10:10 What Bateson's concerned about is that we see things as they are and as they should be [seen], we look at them more accurately and engage in the *process of things going on*.

10:25 Now, what do I mean by that?
What are some examples?

I've mentioned management, but I'm not going to use that because it's just too big, too pervasive, and for some people, too frightening.

10:42 Let's think about skill, skillfully, and skillful.

I'm teetering on the edge of competence and having a go, well, no, let's go for it, let's go for competence, okay?

10:58 Skill and competence are abstractions, they're not things in the world, although the management jargon and the recruitment literature, adverts, my old profession, human resource development, is full of the wretched things, full of the wretched things, and yet they are false, they're not real things in the world.

11:22 Bateson is concerned about is that we would be looking at **how** people are doing things and we could recognise an idea of elegance, things done with economy and things done with efficiency, things done with efficacy.¹

¹ I have not got my language right here: quickly, cleanly, elegantly, efficiently

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11:46 Now, I know I'm using big words, but notice things are done elegantly, things are done *competently*, things seem to be finished or accomplished *easily*.

12:08 Now, these words describe action or activity by some of these, and effectively give an adjective [adverb].

12:27 What is being spoken of, what is being admired, if you like, *is the way the process is being carried out*.

12:40 Competence emerged out of identifying people who are seen to do their job well, interviewing those people who seem to do their job knowingly, do it well, and within those interview transcripts to find the things that make a difference in Batesonian terms, the difference that makes a difference to how well something gets done.

13:17 When you get those critical incidents, those parts of the process that have to be done well, they are the areas at which competence is demonstrated.

13:29 Now, I don't know exactly what people did, but what we can do is we can find those critical incidents and then we can ask people, what do you do if you're faced with this incident?

13:47 And if their answers are similar to the answers that I got from my research subjects, then they must be correct.

13:57 Look, that kind of makes sense from an academic, and I'm going to say pseudoscience, not because I want to be rude, but the description of that research process seems science-like, it seems scientific, that description of the research process seems science-like, seems scientific.

14:29 But the outcome is this weird thing of competence, or maybe capability, and then leading to language which is about, must be able to demonstrate competence, and capable of, and how do you know if somebody's done that?

14:59 Well, they tell you.

15:03 Okay, well somebody else will tell you that they have done it competently, if you're lucky, some kind of reference, but that's another whole set of different games.

15:19 **So, we need to be able to look at or understand an organisation, a business, a firm, a collective, a system, I really should call it, in**

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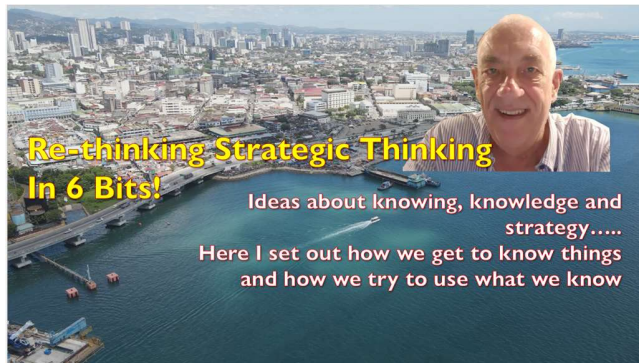


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the way that it's ongoing and in the way that it is functioning.

15:46 I'm sounding like a broken record, aren't I?

You take care. We'll see you next time.



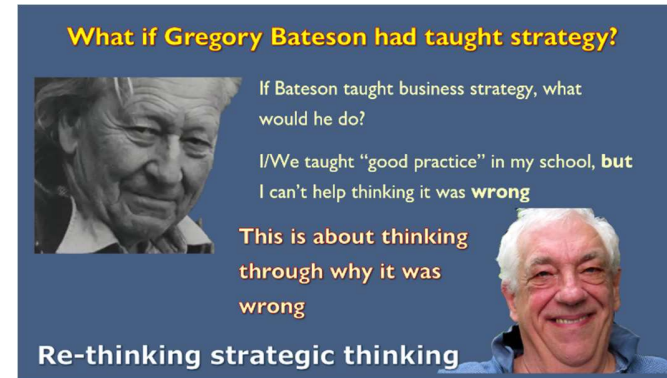
The playlist

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLOlzrdw8c9lxsImsgFsyy7CO32-kTfqi4>



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