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Fast-Forwarding Time as the Essence of Managers' Strategic Effectiveness:

Learning from Wayne Gretzky

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> Even in his prime, Gretzky wasn't very fast, his shot was oddly weak, and he was last in the team in strength training . . .. He would operate from his ''office,'' the small space in the back of the opponent's goal, anticipating where his team would be well before they got there and feeding them passes so unsuspected he would often surprise them. For a cover story in 1985 he told *Time*, ''People talk about skating, puck handling and shooting but the whole sport is angles and caroms, forgetting the straight direction the puck is going, calculating where it will be diverted, factoring in all the interruptions.'' *TIME* (April 26, 1999)

What Gretzky describes is his practiced ability to fast-forward time; i.e., the ability to travel forward in time and predict where, after seemingly infinite combinations of ricochets and caroms, the puck will emerge—and the ability to make his way to the precise spot. Gretzky's strategy, i.e., his objectives and choices about deploying his talents and energies, is to focus on the game as it *will* unfold ten seconds ahead of real-time, stay ahead of the puck, and move to the spot where the puck finds him. Imagine that! Watching the less skilled and the less initiated, one would think that the strategy for great hockey is about honing the talents for moving faster, shooting straighter, and playing harder—and becoming generally more effective at chasing the puck.

The moving eulogy to a great career cited above and Gretzky's description of the rink resonate with our learning from managers involved in implementing marketing strategies in 50 industrial organizations. We learn that their environments, not unlike the rink Gretzky describes, are highly formative and emergent. As many scholars have noted in other contexts, managers' day-to-day reality emerges from the highly complex caroms occurring in the firm ↔ environment interface, i.e., from the intense interactions between the firm, customers, technology, competitors, and other forces. Consequently, the environment calls managers to simultaneously deploy plans and improvise on a day-to-day basis. In this emergent context, much can be learned from some highly effective managers who display the Gretzkyesque ability to fast-forward time. Their genius lies not so much in creatively responding to the changes thrust upon them, as in their learned ability to: (a) predict where the market's and the customers' interest will lie the next day, the day after, and in the short term, and (b)

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position the firm in real-time to engage customers with the right mix of product/service offerings when those interests actually emerge. Their day-to-day strategic choices, i.e., their objectives and decisions about allocating their time and energies, emerge as brilliant in retrospect, *after* they have built value-creating, trust-building relationships with customers. Their skills are worth learning because in the real world, despite what the strategic management literature says about changing environments and creative responsiveness, too many managers spend too much time chasing the puck, and playing catch-up as it ricochets on ice.

The notion of fast-forwarding time is not foreign to all managers. For instance, almost any one who has spent time anticipating with a great deal of accuracy the unusual, non-routine events of the coming weeks, preparing for scenarios that in their estimation are certain to emerge even when they are not evident to others, has fast-forwarded time. Managers who, based on their prediction of future events, have pre-lobbied their ideas, garnered political support and gained commitment toward their plans from people with disparate views well before making them public, and favorably influenced the outcomes of future events, have fast-forwarded time. The amount of time managers spend fast-forwarding time, and carefully crafting strategies and tactics related to their day-to-day actions, and generating a coherent response from their firm, however, is woefully low. Sadly, and all too often, the opposite serves as a better descriptor of what managers *really* do in practice—less of strategy and tactics, and more of hustle, firefights, and stop-gap actions.

In this article, we discuss our learning about fast-forwarding time, and urge additional thinking about strategic responsiveness and effectiveness of managers by organizing our thoughts in the following way. We initially derive a continuum of time based on the responses of managers we studied, and show how they spend time, one of their most important resources. We then discuss the key skills some highly effective managers deploy to fast-forward time. We compare and contrast firefights and fast-forwarding time, and discuss implications that can speak to the practical realities of managers charged with producing meaningful results in organizations.

HOW MANAGERS SPEND TIME

While most managers regard time as an important resource, and are prone to advocate for its judicious use, their actions often belie their proclamations. Fig. 1 shows our learning about the three distinct ways managers make use of real-time in practice: (a) real-time spent firefighting, i.e., solving problems and responding to changes *after* they have occurred, (b) real-time spent deploying, improvising, and adapting, i.e., deploying according to plan and simultaneously taking adaptive actions on a day-to-day basis to accommodate changes that occur, and (c) real-time spent fast-forwarding time, i.e., predicting how the near future will unfold, positioning the firm at the right place and at the right time in the market, and favorably influencing outcomes.

As the figure shows, the continuum of time emerges at the confluence of variables related to managerial thinking and actions. For instance, the horizontal axis reflects the variance in the focus of managerial thinking. Thinking associated with past occurrences is positioned toward the left, that with extrapolation of past events toward the middle, and that with imagining the future to the right of this continuum. Similarly, the vertical axis reflects the variance in the focus of managerial actions. Actions taken to correct previous mistakes and solve problems *after* they have occurred are clustered lower, and those taken to prepare for future scenarios are positioned higher on this continuum. The segments along the continuum of time, emerging at the confluence of managerial thinking and action, show how managers spend their real-time; i.e., firefighting, deploying and improvising, and fast-forwarding time.

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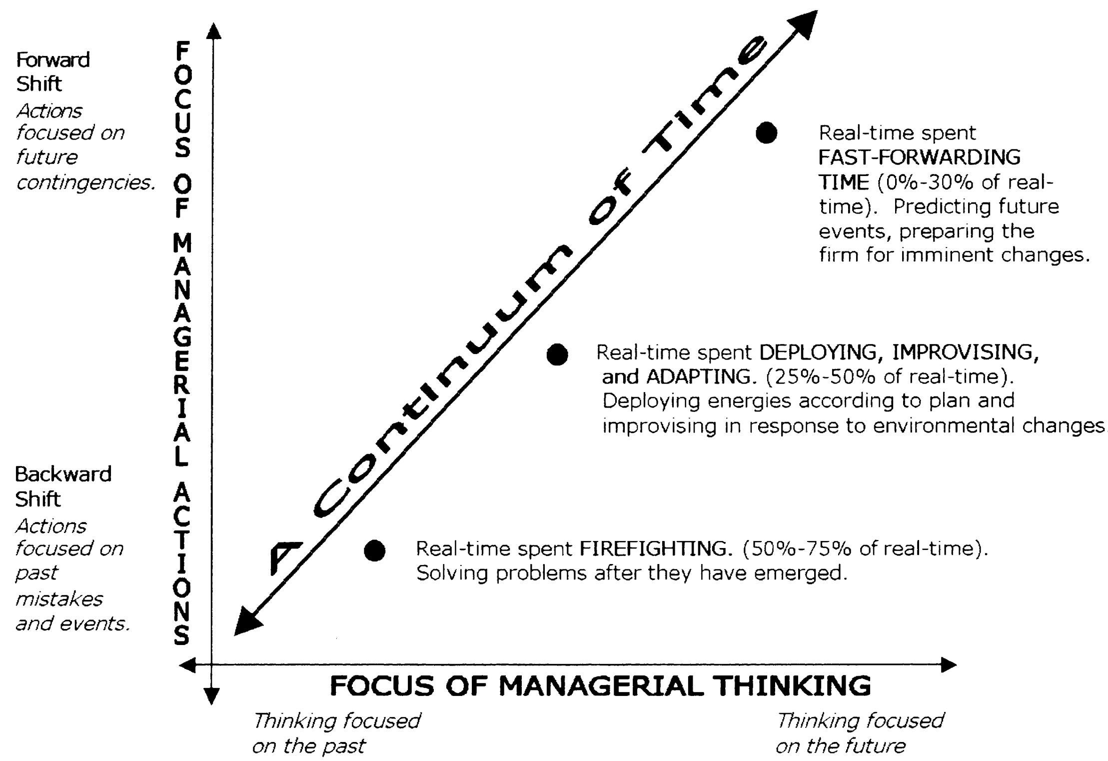
FIGURE 1 THE FOCUS OF MANAGERIAL THINKING AND ACTION



Real-Time Spent Firefighting

If it were possible to generalize such a thing, we estimate that greater than 40% of managers' real-time is spent firefighting. Among the managers with whom we spoke, half recount it as their *principal* activity, and all admit heavy involvement. Firefights refer to the immediate reactions of managers, and to actions aimed at solving problems after they have emerged. They refer to the hustle and stop-gap actions by which managers rush to realign the firm with the changing environmental reality and prevent further deterioration in the relationship with key constituents, particularly customers. They refer to seemingly endless conversations on the phone or in person aimed at ensuring that the things that ought to happen actually happen. Consider the response of a vice-president of marketing from a precision tool and dye manufacturer, describing his principal activity as a planner–implementer:

> I am a fireman. I put fires out. I have to be reactive. Less and less of my time is being able to be spent on where I think it should be spent.... Firefighting, that's what we do; we are firemen.

Even though the precise causes of firefights are too numerous to list, several generalizations can be drawn. In general, they seem to occur as a result of any or all of the following: (a) intentions and plans are not sufficiently responsive to environmental changes, (b) planners and implementers are poorly coordinated and unrealistic promises are made to important constituencies (particularly customers), and/or (c) people within the organization do not perform according to plan. For instance, when confronted with an unfavorable situation such as a lost order, delayed shipment, angry customer, or unexpected introduction of discounts by competitors, managers are forced to spend inordinate time and energy on the phone and in travel to press customer flesh.

There is clearly such a thing as effective firefighting, and much of that involves situation-specific expertise, skills, and training—the bulk of which is ironically devoted to preventing fires in the first place. In the organizational strategy-related context, on the other hand, the hallmarks of firefights are: (a) managers inordinately consumed by short-term effectiveness, and narrowly focused on problems that should not have arisen or should have been solved already, (b) high incidence of mindless, resource wasting, low-efficiency reactiveness that all but precludes the development of a clear focus on the future, and (c) results too small, too few, and too corrective (versus progressive) to justify the managerial time and energy spent.

Real-Time Spent Deploying, Improvising and Adapting

We estimate that about half of all managerial time and energy is spent deploying according to plan and simultaneously improvising and adapting to the changing reality. Deployment and improvisation occur simultaneously because the environments managers encounter evolve constantly. A vice-president of a defense subcontractor, and a maker of parts and subassemblies for missile guidance systems, explains:

> . . . Plans as written, if they always worked out the way they were written, it would get boring . . .. Companies that are successful are those that can allow the plan to grow, and be flexible, and to change with the feedback from the marketplace, or from the people that are out there in the field.

We know managers are improvising, versus firefighting, when their actions produce results, solve problems, and move the firm purposefully forward. Improvisations have little meaning, and are hard to distinguish from firefights, unless actions are anchored to clearly defined plans. The vice-president of the precision tool manufacturer, explaining the importance of anchoring improvisations to clear plans notes:

> To grow (sales) you have to have a plan, you have to adhere to that plan, and the plan has to be flexible enough to reflect change necessary to meet the marketing conditions, and to meet objectives as other things change . . .. The key word is absolutely ''flexible'' . . . where they (plans) some times fall apart is that some people are trying to closely adhere to what the plan is, and they come across the first obstacle that the plan doesn't deal with, and all of a sudden there is chaos. So there has to be flexibility within that plan to be able to adjust to whatever that situation (may be). We flex; we adapt.

It is important to note that while both are responses to changing situations and environments, clear differences exist between firefights and improvisations in terms of their linkages to predetermined choices the results they produce. Without clear objectives and coherent plans for resource deployment, adaptive responses of managers are about as likely to build meaningful, sustaining, value-creating and trust-building relationships with others (particularly customers) as an uninitiated novice is to produce great jazz music by merely plunking the keys on a piano. All improvisation is not effective improvisation. Highly effective managers, like effective jazz improvisers, adapt and innovate on the fly—based on an incisive understanding of their instrument (their skills and their organization) and their strategies (their objectives and resource deployment choices). Like jazz improvisers, they rely on high levels of fluency with their craft (i.e., their knowledge of the links between environmental changes, their decision-making and behavioral skills, and results). When improvisations lose connection with clear objectives and resource deployment choices, however, they begin to suspiciously resemble resource-wasting firefights. Problems arise when managers think they are improvising, but the results reflect firefights. To briefly summarize, therefore, improvisations differ meaningfully from firefights because they: (a) are anchored to clear streams of thinking about objectives and resource deployment choices of the firm, (b) are focused on the current and the future, versus the past, and (c) produce sustaining results.

Real-Time Spent Fast-Forwarding Time

We estimate that a woefully small number of managers routinely fast-forward time, and in general, less than 5% of managerial time is spent in this activity. Inspired by Wayne Gretzky's play on ice, and based on the voices of highly effective managers we studied—those who are consistently able to define and accomplish bold agendas—we derive the following definition of fast-forwarding time:

> Fast-forwarding time is about: (a) *predicting the immediate future*, i.e., spotting trends from their highly interactive environments and predicting with a high degree of certainty the future about to unfold, (b) *positioning the firm*, i.e., gaining unprecedented support from key stakeholders—who employ their energies and creativity to accomplish the manager's day-to-day decisions, despite the emergence of real and conjectured impediments, and (c) favorably *influencing outcomes* of implementation efforts.

For instance, time is fast-forwarded when managers know how customer preferences will change, their decisions reflect this understanding before the market clearly exhibits such changes, and their team is prepared and ready when those changes emerge. Time is forwarded when from the din of seemingly chaotic changes in the environment, managers spot a trend that can predict the immediate future, and then align people and resources in ways that effectively engage the changing environment. Fast-forwarding time preempts firefights and knee-jerk responsiveness and allows managers greater control over the process by which time is spent. In general, managers who routinely fast-forward time are: (a) seldom being surprised and rarely overwhelmed by the day-to-day turn of events in the firm and in the market, (b) enjoy enthusiastic support of key internal (sales and support staff, other functional groups), and external constituencies (market intermediaries), and (c) maintain high levels of flexibility in their organization, continually engage customers, and gain favored positions in the market despite the environmental uncertainty and turbulence. Table 1 provides a brief checklist of actions that seem to indicate involvement in fast-forwarding time and firefighting.

HOW THEY DO THAT

Scholars have found that managers capable of predicting future scenarios are intuitive, often possess considerable experience in their fields, and can project the trajectories of past patterns into the future. This is true to a great extent about managers from whom we learn about fast-forwarding time as well. There is more, however, to fast-forwarding time. This capability seems to emerge from managers' intimate understanding of the caroms and ricochets in their environment, and the scenarios they produce. Moreover, these managers seem facile with the interactions in ways that allow them to position themselves ahead of the changes that actually occur. We learn that this facility emerges in large part from their unrelenting commitment to: (a) listening,

TABLE 1 YOU ARE FIREFIGHTING OR FAST-FORWARDING TIME IF . . .

YOU MAY BE EXCESSIVELY INVOLVED IN FIREFIGHTS IF . . .	YOU COULD BE FAST-FORWARDING TIME IF . . .
Your average week consists of many surprises and/or inexplicable events. You frequently experience *deja vu* all over again. New problems look and feel amazingly like the ones you have solved in the past.	You are seldom surprised, and rarely engaged in desperate maneuvers.
You are always busy. You spend an inordinate amount of time (often on the phone) talking to people about what should be occurring, and what they should be doing.	You are keenly aware of what the key people in your environment (internal and external) are thinking today. You can often detect minor, subtle changes occurring in others' thinking, motivations, and behaviors.
You work hard and are always rushed for time. You find yourself constantly rushing from one task to another. You *think on your feet* and enjoy being regarded as the problem-solver. Others also regard you as a hard-working person.	Your team understands what is expected of them, and routinely takes risks and innovative actions to solve problems as they emerge without *always* checking with you.
You feel you are indispensable. You feel that you are the important trouble-shooter in your firm, and find yourself frequently involved in damage control activities.	You gain inordinately high levels of cooperation from your colleagues across the organization.
You know many things about solving problems that others do not know. You possess expertise about your organization's way of doing things that others do not possess.	You spend an inordinate amount of time sharing your expertise with others so that they can do things as well as you do, and no longer need you.

(b) building a network of interpersonal relationships characterized by high levels of trust, and (c) strategic thinking skills.

Listening

Effective managers can fast-forward time because they listen and stay connected with the key sources of uncertainty in their environment, i.e., other people. Effective managers know that human intelligence all but trumps that which originates from sophisticated, computerized information systems—when it comes to predicting the immediate behaviors of people. Hence, listening seems to feature as the more important component of the conversations they have with others. The importance of listening is heard in the voices of industry leaders as well. For instance, Joseph F. Walton, senior vice-president of global customer services for EMC Corporation, has said:

> The best way to deal with problems is to listen for them before they happen. (*Fast Company*, June 2001)

We find listening and fast-forwarding time linked for a variety of reasons. First, the listening allows managers to hear multiple voices and become aware of others' multiple, subjective and often disjointed realities. By listening, they come to understand how others view the situation, and how others define their own behaviors in light of their subjective interpretations of reality. Managers come to understand the disparate intents and desires of relevant constituencies within and outside the firm, and can translate this understanding into improvisations that produce results. Listening emerges as the immediate precursor to intelligent, informed action.

The business press also notes the link between listening and intelligent planning and responsiveness. For instance, Steve Ballmer's (President, Microsoft, Inc.) interest in listening to diverse voices as a critical input to planning has been reported in the following way:

> . . . (Steve) Ballmer has been on a quest. He's been walking the halls at Microsoft's headquarters in Redmond, Wash., ... A brilliant, wildly energetic, table-pounding kind of boss who for the previous six years had run Microsoft's sales and marketing, Ballmer has spent his time as president listening. He held one-on-one meetings with more than 100 software engineers, product managers, vice presidents, and other employees, most for an hour or more. His goal: to assess what the $14.5 billion a year giant is doing right and, more important, what it is doing wrong. (*Fortune*, April 26, 1999)

Second, managers in our study suggest that listening communicates the high levels of trust and respect they intend to convey to the people on whose energy and creativity they rely—the soft and fuzzy, yet critical, ingredient of productive, interdependent relationships. The listening signals their personal commitment and interest in making others believe they are valued contributors. The vice-president of the CATV equipment manufacturer from our study describes the importance of listening the following way:

> You listen. You make the individuals working for you feel that they actually are contributors. That's important . . .. You have to listen to them, you have to become friends with them.

The notion of listening as a way of conveying respect to key players is voiced by several industry leaders including Herb Kelleher, one of the founders and later CEO of Southwest Airlines Inc., who notes:

> I think showing respect for people's ideas is very, very important because as soon as you stop doing that, you stop getting ideas. We tell people that if you need a suggestion box, then

> you're not doing what you should be doing. You shouldn't have to interpose the box between you and the people with the ideas. You ought to be talking to them on a regular basis. You ought to be with your people enough that they are comfortable to just pop on in and give you their ideas. (*Fortune*, May 28, 2001)

Relationship and Trust

A manager achieves complex organizational objectives when others (including his or her own team members, plus key members of other functional groups) commit to risky and bold initiatives, and are willing to improvise and innovate *on the fly* when confronted with seemingly plausible obstacles as well as genuine impediments. This occurs more often when managers build a complex network of relationships characterized by trust—the social glue and a strong predictor of the productivity and health of interdependent relationships. Trust-building enables managers to leverage their own talents, gain the emotional commitment of people focused on their own personal, often divergent agendas, and motivate innovative behaviors. The sales manager of a custom engineering component manufacturing firm from our study explains:

> (The challenge of effective implementation is) probably the excessive amount of things that have to be done by too few people working with too few physical resources. You can't always get what you want the second you ask for it. You have to negotiate and try to get people to find time to squeeze in something special that you might ask for on behalf of a customer. A lot of it is interpersonal skills, just dealing with people here everyday with their cooperation and trust and respect.

Additionally, we learn that high levels of trust allow managers access to the interpretative processes in which other people engage. It affords them the legitimacy of participating and influencing the subjective process by which others define their situation and choose appropriate ways of responding. The trust that managers generate from their social interaction largely determines the extent to which people will support their initiatives, go out on a limb, improvise, innovate and overcome when unexpected obstacles arise.

Leading scholars have spoken to the issue of trust in the network of interpersonal relationships developed by managers, and of its importance in terms of getting work done. For instance, Warren Bennis notes:

> (In a network of relationships) rank is unclear. We work in teams, which are often interdepartmental—hierarchical power can't guarantee that work gets done. Networks encourage people to operate informally, with few rules. They depend on trust. Few business people I meet are mystified by power. Trust, on the other hand, baffles them—yet it is more important. (*Fortune*, June 12, 2000)

Strategic Thinking

While listening connects managers to the sources of uncertainty, and trust building creates the social glue for interdependent relationships, these skills are of little consequence when their day-to-day and long-term decisions emerge in the absence of strategic thinking. The cognitive activities of strategic thinkers differ from firefighters' in many meaningful ways. First, when called to make decisions, strategic thinkers identify multiple courses of action rather than focusing on the one that is immediately obvious. They evaluate multiple alternatives using clear decision-making criteria that allow the elimination of all but the most plausible, equally compelling alternatives. They also identify and evaluate the first, second, and subsequent order consequences of the plausible alternatives, i.e., *if I do A then B is likely to result*, *if B results then C is likely to result*, and so on. Second, strategic thinkers evaluate how different people and constituencies such as customers, market intermediaries, team members, and other functional groups within the firm will interpret each of the plausible decision/action alternatives, draw meanings, and use these meanings to define their own behaviors. They evaluate the extent to which each important constituency is likely to support their agenda, and the kind of improvisations and risk-taking each constituency will display in the pursuit of this agenda. They also evaluate the interactions likely to occur between the constituencies, and how each is likely to influence the other's behaviors, i.e., *if A does X, then B is likely to do Y*, and identify alternative ways of drawing the meanings for the constituencies in order to gain their support. The marketing manager of an industrial pump manufacturer from our study explains:

> You as an individual, first you have to know what you are doing. You have to exude that kind of understanding; you have to be almost a sociologist, psychologist to be a good marketer . . .. The sales person is an interpreter and the enactment of a concept, . . . marketer develops the road and the road signs, sales travels the roads and follows the road signs and gets somewhere. Marketers don't travel, they create (scenarios).

Recent writings in the popular press also highlight the importance of strategic thinking. Describing his secret of success, Kelleher, the recently retired chairman and CEO of Southwest Airlines, has said:

> The way I've always approached things is to be prepared for all possible scenarios of what might happen. I usually come up with four or five different scenarios. I do this all the time. I do it in the shower. I do it when I'm out drinking. Right now I'm thinking through the scenarios of the possibility of United Airlines and American dividing US Airways, the scenarios of American acquiring TWA. You have to think, ''Okay, American's bought TWA: How's it going to integrate it? . . . You have to do that sort of thing so you're prepared to go one way or the other way depending on what American does. You have to think that way all the time. (*Fortune*, May 28, 2001, p. 70)

NEW THINKING ABOUT FAST-FORWARDING TIME

There is nothing new in the notions that environments change, plans are altered, or managers improvise. Almost the entire strategic management literature has focused on these issues. Despite the high levels of awareness around issues of change and improvising, however, firefighting as the principal and easily the least effective response of real-life managers has received less attention than it deserves. There is much room for drawing inspiration from highly effective athletes who triumph in rapidly changing arenas and hyper-competitive environments, and learning about fast-forwarding time. Despite proliferating insights on strategy, implementation, effectiveness, and time management, most real-life managers spend less time being strategic or tactical, and more time hustling and firefighting. The practical problems associated with firefights cannot be significantly alleviated, and the opportunities for fast-forwarding time cannot be meaningfully harnessed, unless innovative ways of conceptualizing what managers do clearly emerge. There are several implications we draw from our findings that address issues of firefights and fast-forwarding time, and of improving managers' strategic effectiveness. At the outset, we highlight the important differences between managers capable of fast-forwarding time and those consumed by firefights (see Table 2).

TABLE 2 DIFFERENTIATING MANAGERS: FIREFIGHTS VERSUS FAST-FORWARD TIME

MANAGERS ENGAGED IN ENDEMIC FIREFIGHTS . . .	MANAGERS ENGAGED IN FAST-FORWARDING TIME . . .
Are likely to tell interesting *war stories*, and possess a host of descriptive insights about their environment; i.e., know *what* occurs, *when* and how.	Are likely to possess descriptive insights, as well as knowledge about the complex linkages between events. They understand *what* occurs and *why*.
Are heavily involved in solving problems created by unresponsive plans, poor organization of activities, and poor engagement of customers—*after* they have emerged.	Are heavily involved in assessing the nature and outcomes of the complex *interactions* between the firm's internal and external forces.
Rely largely on their own personal abilities and skills, and on their freedom to redirect their time and energies to solve problems after they have emerged.	Rely largely on the coordinated efforts of a large, complex network of people with whom they have strong interpersonal relationships characterized by high levels of trust.
Are highly focused on their own, and less aware or concerned about others' agendas.	Are inordinately aware of the diverse, often conflicting agendas of the constituencies in their environment, and reflect this understanding in their day-to-day decision-making.
Demonstrate inadequately low levels of learning from past events, and seem powerless to prevent fires from recurring.	Show high levels of interest in learning about *why* events occur the way they do, and in predicting future scenarios to prevent fires.
Are often regarded by superiors' and colleagues' as hard working managers who are *always on the ball*. (Are likely to discount possibilities of adopting better decision-making processes to reduce firefights, because of the strong conviction in the notion that firefights are inevitable.)	Are often perceived as idiosyncratic, lucky individuals with uncanny, inexplicable (often magical) innate talents by others. (Others are often likely to discount the possibility that their abilities are learned and practiced, or that their abilities emerged from deeply ingrained algorithms and metrics.)
They are more likely to emerge in organizations that reward actions over results.	They are more likely to emerge in organizations in which managers take personal ownership of long-term effectiveness (often by holding an equity interest in the firm).
Ought to be educated, trained, or perhaps replaced.	Ought to be provided opportunities for new learning and growth in different areas of the organization, along with opportunities for greater equity interest in the firm.

Differentiating Visionaries and Fast-Forwarding Time

There are many similarities among managers capable of fast-forwarding time, and those regarded as visionary managers in the literature. Both operate from an in-depth knowledge of past events. Both can identify the logical connection between past conditions and emerging scenarios, and both can extend their thinking to the future. In both instances, their ability to make predictions is learned versus innate, and deeply rooted in tacit algorithms and metrics. Hence, their learned abilities differ radically from the inexplicable, seemingly innate abilities that some clairvoyants may claim to possess.

There are, however, important differences among managers who can fast-forward time and those who are colloquially regarded as visionaries. First, fast-forwarding time is about predicting what occurs tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that. Visionary managers often extrapolate over longer periods of time. Second, fast-forwarding time is about predicting the minutia and the subtleties in the short-term behaviors of people (particularly customers), based on an intimate understanding of the interactions among key forces in their environment. Visionaries focus on larger, general trends, and not as much on the finer details of the day-to-day interactions. Third, fast-forwarding time is about taking purposeful actions to create favorable outcomes. It is directly related to problem solving, achieving results, and moving the firm forward. This is not always true about visionaries. Many managers are regarded as visionaries, even when the impact of their personal actions on all their predicted outcomes is less direct. Finally, we learn about fast-forwarding time from front-line managers, and in the context of implementing plans at functional, operational levels of the firm. Visionaries, in most instances, are found in loftier milieus, somewhat removed from where the rubber meets the proverbial pavement. It is possible that some of the managers from whom we learn about fast-forwarding time are visionaries as well. That, however, is another discussion.

Knowing What and Knowing Why

Many managers in our sample can tell interesting war stories, and provide a fair bit of detail about *what* happens and *when*. Those who can fast-forward time, however, can explain *why* things occur the way they do. Their causal insights emerge from their implicit belief that the interactions among key players and forces in their environment, more than the intrinsic natures of any factor *per se*, create their emerging reality.

Causal insights seem critical because sustaining high levels of effectiveness calls managers to rely on the energies and creativity of people who often function outside their zone of authority. Plans anchored in descriptions of markets and what people do, without much connection to *why* they do what they do, seem to almost invariably relegate managers to the roles of firefighters. Simply put, when managers know and plan according to what is occurring, but not according to why it is occurring in the first place, most actions taken on a day-to-day basis are hard to differentiate from shots in the dark followed by knee-jerk responsiveness. Without a Gretzkyesque understanding of the caroms and ricochets, there is not much for managers to do except chase the puck. In the absence of causal insights, even the more ponderous managers interested in self-improvement are equipped to do little more than hone their talents for chasing the puck. Managers from whom we learn about fast-forwarding time differ from others, because they can explicitly differentiate between descriptive knowledge and causal insights, and ensure that their plans and actions are firmly rooted in both.

Managerial Orientations

While few managers publicly advocate stop-gap actions, there are clear differences between those less and more tolerant of firefights. Managers appear less likely to express dissatisfaction with their involvement in firefights, and more likely to view them as focal, intrinsic, and unavoidable components of day-to-day management when: (a) poor planning and poor execution on *their* part serves as the chief cause of the firefights, and (b) damage–control activities rely mostly on their own personal ability to stretch and redirect their time, creativity and energy. There is a clear segment of managers for whom firefighting and knee-jerk responsiveness is the *modus operendi* of choice, and they would like to keep it that way.

Those more capable of fast-forwarding time exhibit several traits worth noting. First, contrasting with others, they appear more aware of the interdependent web of relationships in which they function, and more aware of the ripples their actions can cause in their ecosystem. Second, they appear to take personal ownership of the implementation process and its outcomes. It is likely that the equity interest held by those from whom we learn the most about fast-forwarding time, and their emotional commitment to the firm's long-term effectiveness, create a sense of concern for efficiency that overrides the concern for appearing busy. Third, they appear more likely to empower subordinates and try to work themselves out of a job, contrasting with the chronic firefighters who tend to hoard information and view themselves as indispensable.

Organizational Priorities

Although it is hard to conceptualize the real world of marketing and management devoid of managers involved in firefights, the impact of their personal, often unyielding interest in creating an impression to observers that they are *doing* something about the situation is hard to ignore. Firefights occur in large part because they are organizationally valued, and worse yet, highly rewarded. The socially learned charade of appearing busy chasing the puck is so exhilarating, and so organizationally rewarded, that managers find little incentive in seeking a cognitively richer basis for taking actions, or in thinking about their personal efficiency and the impact of their actions over the long term.

The culture and ethos of the organization that results from this order of priorities holds that real men put out fires and only earnest pre-adolescent boy scouts concern themselves with fire-prevention. Why very little real progress is made even when managers complain about overwork, and why firefights are necessary in the first place, are rarely questioned, because putting out fires is viewed as heroic, preventing them considerably less so.

Firefights are strangely reinforcing and addictive. They can leave managers with a heightened sense of their own personal effectiveness, and with a strong sense of accomplishment, even when they *say* that firefights are time- and resource-wasting activities. Moreover, firefights are undeniably self-serving and self-reinforcing—firefights beget firefights. They eventually create a culture in which firefighters are viewed not so much as overwhelmed managers in a breathless pursuit of the puck, but as valued problem-solvers and trouble-shooters. While firefights will occur in all organizations, knee-jerk responsiveness is likely to stay a *dominant* feature of how things get done as long as firefighters have appreciative audiences and organizational rewards.

Challenges for Future Thinking

Much in the current way of thinking about strategy-related behaviors of managers prevents practical insights from emerging. For instance, the current way of thinking about behaviors of firms and managers is too strongly tethered to the strategy-tactics dichotomy, i.e., that which is not strategic is regarded as tactical. This dichotomous view almost entirely precludes the concern for activities that take up the *bulk* of managerial time—time spent being neither strategically nor tactically, but in knee-jerk responsiveness. It also precludes concern for the day-to-day interactions, the hustle and the firefights that can create radically different trajectories in practice for two managers who otherwise aim to follow similar strategies and objectives.

Rethinking the merits of prevalent vocabularies in the management literature and the usefulness of current dichotomies and metaphors seems necessary for fresh insights to emerge. The view of firefights as aberrant, avoidable behaviors may not easily emerge when current conceptualizations are rich with macho, military metaphors such as strategy, tactics, and warfare. Management literature could stand an infusion of new nomenclature and metaphors, some borrowed from highly effective athletes, that can provide innovative and creative ways of conceptualizing what managers *really* do. But for the consistency with which highly effective managers produce quality results against formidable odds, observers operating from unsophisticated frames of reference and limited by dated vocabularies and metaphors are apt to label them as plain *lucky*.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The inherent complexity of modern management, and the frequency and magnitude of interactions managers are called to engage in, make management analogous to a fast-paced hockey game—and not only because consistently winning in this scenario is the stuff of legendary managers. The task of planning and implementation calls for managers to develop high levels of fluency with their environment so that they can predict the *one* scenario from a potentially infinite set of outcomes that will actually emerge, and develop strategies that will effectively engage customers in that scenario. True mastery over the interactions occurring in the marketplace is so rare that it is not surprising to find managers more challenged by implementation than by planning, or to find a formidable gap between what a firm intends and what it actually accomplishes in the marketplace. There are, however, the Gretzkys among managers from whom much can be learned about the differences between chasing and positioning the firm ahead of the puck.

Effective managers seem far more interested in imposing their dreams on reality, and imposing their agendas on the marketplace than in operating as pawns of the highly interactive market forces. While they believe in planning, they are clear about its limitations and are committed to unrelenting improvisation. They are able to anchor their improvisations on a firm understanding of why people and the market behave the way they do. They also seem notably more fluent with the caroms and ricochets in the marketplace, and are capable of positioning themselves in ways that are consistently effective. Their knowledge of not just what occurs but why, their high levels of connection with the people in their social environment, and their strategic thinking appears to lie at the root of their ability to fast-forward time.

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