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In praise of strategic indirection: an essay on the efficacy of oblique ways of responding

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# In praise of strategic indirection: an essay on the efficacy of oblique ways of responding

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*Having searched for her hundreds and thousands of times in the crowd, suddenly turning back by chance, I find her there in the waning candlelight (Xin Qiji, 辛弃疾 Song Dynasty, in Green Jade Table in The Lantern Festival).*

## Abstract

A penchant for the direct, the dramatic and the spectacular remains an overwhelming feature of the West in its dealings in the world of practical affairs. In business, corporate success is frequently credited to the highly visible contributions of heroic individuals ostensibly possessing almost superhuman qualities, including the vision and acumen to dramatically reverse the fortunes of faltering or failing enterprises. Leaders are construed as specially endowed causal agents armed with the capacity to take decisive actions in bringing about significant changes, thereby warranting their elevated status and their sometimes excessive rewards. This popular and romantic imagery of heroism in action derives from an inherited Western propensity to favour direct-causal, rational-calculative and high-profile actions over more discreet, indirect and at times understated gestures or responses in engendering a desired outcome. Consequently, there is a tendency to underestimate the self-transformative power of dynamic relational configurations and their ability to bring about desired outcomes. In this paper we show the downsides of the widely preferred 'spectacular' approach to achieving success and argue for greater appreciation of a less conspicuous, and less direct mode of engagement that is more in keeping with a world that is itself ever changing. We call this more nuanced approach 'Strategic Indirection'. We maintain that, contrary to popular belief, sustainable success in any field of endeavour is rarely a consequence of large-scale, attention-grabbing actions. Rather, the true cause of such success is often found elsewhere in the 'waning candlelight' of seemingly inconsequential acts and mundane coping actions.

## INTRODUCTION

*In order to grasp, it is necessary first to release*  
(Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, in Chan, 1963: 157).

*And the end of all our exploring,  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time*  
(T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, 2001).

An inherent 'heroism' persists in the collective reasoning of Western management academia that inevitably influences current explanatory models of corporate success. This prevalent attitude is intimately related to short-termism in corporate behaviour. Clarity of purpose, transparency of intention, rationality of action, and directness of intervention are key features of this preferred 'frontal' approach to achieving intended outcomes. According to this 'heroic' model of management, it is the bold decisions and often high-profile planned actions taken by significant individuals that primarily account for the success of businesses. Organisational fortunes are therefore causally linked to the dramatic interventions of identifiable individuals who are deemed to have been instrumental in shaping the course of events and in bringing about successful states of affairs (Tushman and Romanelli, 1986; Eisenhardt, 1989; Kotter, 1995; Burgelman & Grove, 2007). In this way, leadership is assigned an elevated, 'heroic' status.

This tendency to over-value individual agency and the efficacy of direct intervention is linked to the widespread academic practice of making sense of the practitioner world *ex post facto* in more dramatic and tightly coupled causal terms than may actually be the case. Whilst there may indeed be instances in which large-scale, high-profile, planned actions do appear to produce immediate short-term effects, there is also evidence to show that more often than not they eventually fail because of the unintended consequences that ensue from such actions (Scott, 1998; Flyberg, 1998; Chia and Holt, 2009). One alternative is to look elsewhere for a more 'loosely coupled' (Weick, 1976) causal explanation, whereby, over time, seemingly inconsequential and understated everyday actions, gestures or responses emerge as primary causal agents in their own right. Even more importantly, the notion of passive 'non-action' in the sense of 'allowing things to happen' must be countenanced in an alternative explanatory schema. For too long, such conceptually more difficult notions have been conveniently overlooked and under-appreciated because of the obvious empirical difficulties associated with them. Yet, to attempt to provide a causal explanation of what happens without recognising the role of such nuanced ways of responding would be to do a grave injustice to what actually goes on in the world of practical human affairs. This revised appreciation of the crucial role that such nuanced forms of responses and indeed non-action can play in shaping outcomes, will help reorient and re-educate our attention towards the mundane and the everyday in accounting for success in human endeavours.

In this short article we maintain that much is to be gained from appreciating the silent efficacy of indirect, passive and understated ways of responding as opposed to the direct, rational and dramatic forms of action underpinning

current theories of management. We argue for a greater appreciation of the way small, seemingly inconspicuous adjustments and self-cultivating refinements, including occasions involving self-restraint in organisational life, actually enables the development of an organisational *modus operandi* (Bourdieu, 1990) that helps prepare it to capitalise on future possibilities. This more benign and understated form of organisational transformation eschews the dramatic and the spectacular in favour of more oblique and circuitous ways of bringing about desired outcomes. We call this 'anti-heroic' approach 'Strategic Indirection'. *Strategic Indirection refers to a collectively internalised disposition (whether societal or organisational) that favours indirect, circuitous and non-confrontational modes of engagement in dealing with human affairs.* Modesty of action, patience in allowing things to happen and timeliness of intervention are the hallmarks of Strategic Indirection. Yet, precisely because it favours the less conspicuous, this understated approach lacks the gloss of heroism, the objectivity of reason and the immediacy of impact craved by both business practitioners and management academics alike. Nevertheless, a more nuanced appreciation of the efficacy of such indirect responses can have far-reaching consequences for understanding strategic choices, priorities and outcomes.

In what follows, we begin by briefly tracing the roots of the 'heroic' approach in dealing with the world of practical affairs, showing how it originated from changes in attitudes in ancient Greek warfare. We then proceed to expose the attendant downsides of this preferred 'frontal' mode of engagement that is intimately tied to planned, rational-calculative reason. We show that this dominant approach is underpinned by commitment to an ontology of *being* and that revising this commitment to an ontology of *becoming* enables us to better understand how situations may contain their own internal momentum so that changes can take place even without the need for active intervention. This then leads us to argue that indirect, oblique or circuitous ways of responding, or even non-action (in the sense of 'letting happen'), can often be more efficacious in allowing a desired outcome to emerge seemingly of its own volition. We end by concluding that business and management scholars would do well to recognise and appreciate the existence and value of this art of Strategic Indirection in their academic theorising, even though this is not easily or immediately graspable.

## **THE DIRECT HEROIC APPROACH TO ATTAINING SUCCESS**

*One of the intellectual habits upon which we Anglo-Saxons pride ourselves most is that of going directly to the marrow of a subject, and when we have reached it saying exactly what we mean*  
(Arthur Smith, *Chinese Characteristics*, 1894: 63).

*Nothing is more amusing than to watch the [...] Chinese [...] What is far more likely to occur is the indirect suggestion, by oblique and devious routes, of something that cannot, which **must** not be told*  
(ibid: 68, my emphasis).

The Western attitude to dealing with human affairs is characterised by a

cultivated penchant for direct, frontal and dramatic action. Westerners, by and large, 'find it natural and normal to meet the world head-on' (Jullien: 2000: 7). Being direct, decisive, purposeful and rational are highly valued characteristics in Western societies; active doing is much preferred to passive receptivity and/or apparent reticence and inaction. This cultivated preference is clearly evident in the activities of warfare, politics, business, and sport, and even in the seeking of personal relationships. From the glitz and glitter of presidential campaigns to the high drama of reality television, the glamour and hero-worshipping of movie stars and sporting super-heroes, to the insatiable general appetite for eye-catching and attention-grabbing displays and more pertinently in the world of business, to the irresistible tendency to lionise successful corporations and captains of industry for their impressive and often short-term achievements. All these are symptomatic of a deeply entrenched adulation of the dramatic, the heroic and the spectacular within the realm of human affairs.

This preference for direct engagement can be traced back to a decisive shift in ancient Greek warfare beginning in about the seventh century BC (Hanson, 1989: 244; Jullien, 2000: 40-42) during which hostile engagement in the form of raids, ambushes and skirmishes gradually gave way to a frontal face-to-face clashing of opposing armies. Henceforth, a new structure, the phalanx, was introduced in which two bodies of heavily armed combatants were made to advance in tight formation in a head-on confrontation with the enemy. This spectacular clashing represented a newly discovered mode of engagement that has since been lionised in the conduct of warfare. It accounts for the tendency for direct confrontation and a resort to superior force in dealing with and overpowering adversaries—one well exemplified by the 'Shock and Awe' (Ullman and Wade, 2013) tactics employed in Iraq in 2003.

Yet this appetite for direct, dramatic forms of engagement is not restricted to warfare alone. It pervades much of the Western collective psyche and is no less evident in politics, where different ideologies and political views are openly pitted against each other on a regular basis in parliamentary and public debates, academic disputes, the judiciary, where justice is arrived at by confronting evidence amassed by both the prosecution and the defence, drama, where the forces of good and evil are made to confront each other with often tragic or heroic outcomes, and business and sports, where direct competition and the 'winner takes all' mentality remains dominant (Jullien, 2000: 44). It is even evident in much of classical Western art (Bryson, 1982: 89-94), where the final display presented by the artist represents a triumphal overcoming of the obstacles the painter faced in his (sic) monumental efforts to portray what he sees. Obliterated or obscured from view are the numerous previous failed attempts.

Born of this ancient legacy, the overall predisposition of the West has been to eulogise that final arrested moment of triumphal accomplishment (i.e., the final end state or outcome) and to downplay the importance of the messier, often convoluted and intrinsically precarious emergence of human situations, including, in particular, the phenomenon of success. There is a built-in impatience for visible, tangible, short-term results. Success or victory is to be accomplished 'loudly' by directly confronting and overpowering the 'adversary'. Yet such a heroic and spectacular approach in dealing with human affairs brings problems.

## THE DOWNSIDES OF A DIRECT APPROACH

*[T]he efficacy of (heroic) action is direct (the means leads to an end),  
but it is both costly and risky*

(François Jullien, *Treatise on Efficacy*, 2004: 48).

The sinologist François Jullien (2000; 2004) maintains that this Western preference for direct, frontal and heroic confrontation is intimately linked to a planned, goal-oriented, and rational-calculative logic of action. Thus 'a revolutionary designs the model of the city that must be built; a soldier sets out the plan of war to be followed; an economist decides on the growth curve to target [...] Each projects upon the world an ideal plan that will then have to be incorporated into factual reality' (Jullien, 2004: 3). This is the overarching formulation for the kind of consequentialist reasoning widely preached in business schools, in which actions and decisions are justified and driven by 'anticipations, incentives and desires' (March, 2003: 205). Such a consequentialist form of reasoning has become so well established that even those 'concerned with "management" today, although in quest of new models, cannot do without this concept' (Jullien, 2004: 33). It underpins the aspirations and strategic priorities of governments, businesses, and these days even charities and religious institutions, as well as universities, which are increasingly perceived and justified in narrowly instrumental terms.

Yet this approach carries with it significant downsides. It tends to generate unintended consequences because of the 'imperious immediacy of interest' (Merton, 1936: 901) associated with such an obsessive preoccupation. Because direct, calculative action involves single-mindedly intervening in the regular course of things, it is by definition intrusive and unsettling. It constitutes an arbitrary 'incision' (Whitehead, 1929: 58) that forcibly disrupts the status quo, much like the effect created by damming a river. Such an intrusive act simultaneously produces a 'foregrounding' that procures the 'singleness of the object' (Cooper, 1987: 408) at the expense of a 'backgrounded' *other*. Contained within the 'object' (or spectacle) that has been singled out for attention, therefore, is an implicit *objection* to being objectified; *the object objects to its forcible sundering from its necessary other* with which it is inextricably intertwined. It is this embedded objection that sows the seeds for the unintended consequences that eventually follow.

Forcibly imposing a pre-determined, rational plan on a pre-existing and coherent world through high-profile interventions therefore implies a certain amount of importunity and incompatibility. It 'tears at the tissue of things and upsets their coherence' (Jullien, 2004: 54), thereby provoking reticence or even internal resistance that gnaws away quietly at the unwelcome imposition, eventually undermining or annulling its intended efficacy. Moreover, such a visibly violent form of intervention, because it occurs at one moment and not another, invariably attracts undue attention. It becomes a spectacle that distracts us from the underlying rumblings of discontent that usually accompany it. While such spectacular events may well feed our appetite for drama and excitement, in reality they lack real impact because much energy is wasted in the display itself. Like a spectacular set of fireworks with its 'manifest superficiality' (Jullien, 2004: 55), they mesmerise us momentarily and then they are gone. In short, a direct, heroic approach to dealing

with problems encountered may, on the surface, appear effective, but 'like supernovas burning brightly and then flaring out, they often leave a big black hole behind' (Ho, 2009: 29). This may take the form of benign resistance from the 'mutilated' adversary in question (Morin, 1977/1992: 373) that will continue to haunt the all too expedient decisions made.

This awareness of the shortcomings of a direct and rational 'head-on' approach in dealing with human affairs is much better understood in the arts and humanities, and in the work of the wise. The fact that the irresistible urge to confront, rationalise and react to situations directly and in a quick and 'decisive' manner may actually be a weakness rather than a strength is well understood, for instance, by John Keats. In a conversation with his companion Dilke after an outing, Keats came to define his notion of 'negative capability' as a rare quality of being content with 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' and to resist the irritable tendency to reach 'after fact and reason' (Keats, 1817/2002: 60-61) prematurely. Some writers, he observed, exhibited the damning weakness of appearing overly hasty in reaching a conclusive view because of their own egoistic need for certainty. For Keats, it is this quality of 'negative capability' that characterised men of true lasting success and achievement such as William Shakespeare, whom he much admired. Negative capability is an indirect response in that it is more an ability to resist action than a positive capability of acting; it is a form of Strategic Indirection.

In a different but related context, William Wordsworth (1798/1967) invites us to resist the seductive tendency to be overly active and instrumental, and instead to cultivate an attitude of 'wise passiveness' by allowing ourselves to be immersed in nature and in so doing gradually absorb the lessons it holds for us. Wise passiveness is a state of calm, contemplative receptivity in which the rational mind is temporarily put to sleep, thereby allowing the body to absorb the impulses from the external world and be enlightened by it. In response to his friend Matthew, who had chided him for 'sitting on an old grey stone' and dreaming his time away, Wordsworth replies:

*I deem that there are powers,  
Which of themselves our minds impress,  
That can feed this mind of ours,  
In a wise passiveness  
(my emphasis)*

For Wordsworth, there is no need to forcibly confront and rationalise experiences in order to understand them. Instead, genuine insights are better arrived at by passively 'letting happen'. Thus he rebukes his friend, albeit obliquely, in the next stanza:

*Think you, mid all this mighty sum  
Of things for ever speaking,  
That nothing of itself will come,  
But we must still be seeking?  
(Wordsworth 1798/1967: 17-28)*

Wordsworth's mannered response encapsulates, yet again, the value of the passive and the indirect that is widely lauded and often expressed in the allusiveness of poetic phrases. It is beyond our scope here to delve deeper into this phenomenon of poetic indirectness, but suffice it to say that negative capability and wise passiveness are two distinct aspects of a multitude of ways



of appreciating the value and importance of approaching human situations unheroically and obliquely; of allowing change to happen and then harnessing its powers for our own purposes rather than actively confronting and seeking change in a direct, dramatic manner. This cultivated capacity to resist the urge to confront the world 'head-on' and to intervene 'heroically' to change things, and instead to bide our time and 'let change happen', is predicated upon a deep appreciation of the reality of change.

## RECALIBRATING DOMINANT ATTITUDES TOWARDS CHANGE

*[O]ne must neither pull on plants to hasten their growth (an image of direct action), nor must one fail to hoe the earth around them so as to encourage their growth (by creating favourable conditions for it) [...] You must allow it to grow [...] allowing things to happen constitutes active involvement*

(Jullien, 2004: 90–91, emphasis original).

In *The Silent Transformation*, Jullien (2011) maintains that our failure to notice the effects of small, cumulative changes over time is due to the grounding of Western thought in Greek philosophies of being, which encourages us to think in terms of determined forms and stable end states and which therefore leads us to neglect the inexorable nature of perpetual change. As a result, 'We no more see the world getting warmer than we see the rivers carve out their beds, glaciers melt or the sea eat into the shore, and yet this is what is constantly happening in front of our eyes' (Jullien, 2011: 11). Commitment to an ontology of being orients our attention towards end states and their immediate, visible causes rather than towards the underlying processes of emergence; *being* is privileged over *becoming*. Causality is therefore assigned to the 'heroic' actions of stable, identifiable agents and it is this outlook that motivates the direct interventionist approach to human affairs. Change is construed as epiphenomenal, something that has to be deliberately brought about through agentic action, rather than as something that occurs naturally and inevitably. As a consequence, active intervention is more valued than passively 'letting happen'.

For others in the West who, like ancient Orientals such as Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu (Chan, 1963), subscribe to a more processual view of reality (Bergson, 1911; James, 1911/1996; Whitehead, 1929), however, the Heraclitean *becoming* of things (Wheelwright, 1976) is more primary than stable states. For them, change occurs inexorably and inevitably of its own volition. The existence of 'unowned' as opposed to 'owned' processes of change (Rescher, 1996: 42; Mackay and Chia, 2013) is openly acknowledged; the latter presupposes changes to be a consequence of agentic initiation, whilst the former presupposes change to be a natural phenomenon taking place regardless of human intervention. Thus, from this alternative becoming worldview, 'there are changes, but there are underneath the change no things which change [...] There are movements, but there is no inert or invariable object which moves' (Bergson, 1946/1992: 147). Acknowledging the presence of 'unowned' processes implies acceptance that situations contain their own internal dynamics and that outcomes are more often a result of their



ongoing self-reconfiguration, independent of human intentions, than of direct, purposeful interventions. The cause of 'success' is therefore more attributable to the underlying propensity of things (Jullien, 1999) than to heroic actions on the part of identifiable agents. This, therefore, leads to a tempering of the heroism attributable to leaders and to recognition of the fact that efficacy in attaining outcomes may just as well be a result of timely, understated interventions that accord with the underlying momentum of things. The potency of human action is thereby accorded less significance than our egos would have us believe. Instead of forcibly 'making things happen' to conform to our wishes, it becomes more important to discern the inherent potentiality always already at work in the configuration of social reality and then to quietly let it work to our advantage.

The fact that the 'unowned' process of change is commonplace is easily demonstrated. Take two very banal examples of such change processes: growth and ageing. We do not see growth, and nor are we able to see ageing, yet they occur almost inexorably of their own volition. It is not just because these kinds of changes are too progressive and continuous for us to easily discern, but because they happen as a totality. Thus, in the case of ageing, 'not only does our hair turn grey, but also bags form under our eyes, lines grow thicker, our features become heavier, our shape is weighed down and the face becomes "like plaster" [...] the complexion changes, the skin cracks, the flesh sinks and retracts...'(Jullien, 2011: 2). Ageing happens quietly, 'without warning, without giving an alert, "in silence" without attracting attention, and as though independently of us' (Jullien, 2011: 3). Global warming, the ripening of wheat and the decaying of buildings are other well-known phenomena of which we usually notice the results but not the quiet and slow transformation process. We are not naturally disposed to noticing the smallest of changes, so that whilst we readily talk about change, 'we do not perceive it' (Bergson, 1946: 131). The idea that change processes cannot be reduced to the actions 'of' things (Rescher, 1996: 27) remains relatively foreign to the world of management academia, where heroic agency is regularly assigned an elevated status in accounting for the successes of corporations. As a consequence, there is inadequate appreciation of how situations can develop their own momentum and interlocking logic and thus take on a life of their own, regardless of human intentions. Jullien (1999: 14) calls this an 'inherent potentiality at work in the configuration'. In this regard, timing and timeliness of intervention, including 'active waiting', 'strategic inaction' and obliquity in the manner of intervening, become critical in increasing the probability of achieving a favourable outcome. For those more steeped in this tradition, it is a heightened sensitivity to such micro-changes often occurring unnoticed and at the periphery of attention that ultimately improves the chances of securing sustainable, longer-term success. Such an acute sensitivity to and awareness of micro-changes leads to an ingrained reluctance to heroically intervene in human affairs prematurely and instead to allow situations to 'ripen' before quiet, inconspicuous 'insertions' are made to achieve desired outcomes. This attitude is what characterises the traditional Oriental mind, where the habituated disposition for social harmony and non-intervention is often mistakenly construed as indecisiveness or a lack of ambition and hence a debilitating obstacle to progress. This interpretation is far from accurate. What underpins Orientals' apparent reluctance to intervene spectacularly in the course of things is a rich historical appreciation of an

immanent potentiality always already at work in the configuration of reality at each particular moment in time. It is also what inspires Wordsworth's notion of 'wise passivity'. From this understanding, 'every kind of reality [...] may be perceived as a particular deployment or arrangement of things to be relied on and worked to one's advantage' (Jullien, 1999: 15). The need for forceful heroic intervention is, therefore, readily eschewed. Timeliness of initiation and obliquity of intervention, not magnitude of force, are the keys to efficacy. When, for instance, the *Tao Te Ching* (Chan, 1963) alludes to 'non-action', what is really meant is action that is inconspicuous and hence unnoticed, action that 'goes with the flow', hence capitalising on the latent energy and momentum of situations to attain one's end. Such action does not create unnecessary 'ripples' or generate internal resistance since it carries with it an air of inevitability. This Oriental preference for 'silent' intervention (Jullien, 2004: 46), allowing things to follow their natural course and hence ripen for picking, represents an entrenched attitude in its dealings in the world of affairs, be it in politics, business or in the cultivation of human relationships. Such an attitude derives from an appreciation of the presence of 'unowned' forces always already at work in every human situation. It is also to be found, albeit less prominently, in the West.

## IN PRAISE OF STRATEGIC INDIRECTION

*The history of strategy is, fundamentally a record of the application and evolution of the indirect approach [...] The indirect approach is as fundamental to the realm of politics as it is to the realm of sex*  
(Basil Liddle-Hart, *Strategy: The Indirect Approach*, 19, xix-xx)

*To point at the chicken to insult the dog (Old Chinese Saying)*

Strategic Indirection begins with a fundamental appreciation of the pervasiveness and relentlessness of change, and of the presence and potential of the 'unowned' processes which it must ride on and harness without destroying in order to arrive at a desired end in the most economical manner possible. It is this heightened sensitivity to the changing nature of reality and the power contained therein that leads to a greater appreciation of the efficacy of the indirect and hence a preference for more circuitous and understated ways of responding. Such a nuanced appreciation arises *intaglio*; it is something which is gradually etched into the disposition of those exposed to the richness of life experiences and those immersed in the writings of the wise. Through such prolonged immersions it becomes easier to appreciate how it can be that small, seemingly insignificant self-refining actions including muted responses and gestures of self-restraint (i.e. 'wise passiveness' and 'negative capability') are more likely to achieve greater individual and organisational outcomes than the more aggressive, goal-oriented approach promoted by business schools. Such acts of personal refinement, made in response to the 'arbitrary and unconditional claims of a proper life' (March, 2003: 206) and hence carried out without anticipation of any return, can nevertheless surprisingly produce outstanding accomplishments. The quiet efficacy of this 'vocation-like' concern for perfecting understanding, action and ultimately the self for its own sake is little understood in management

academia. Yet, paradoxically, truly sustainable and successful corporations, like enduring civilisations, ancient seats of learning and great works of art, have become so not because they are products of planned, deliberate and rational-calculative actions but because they have emerged unintentionally and unceremoniously as precious by-products of the relentless effort to refine thought and cultivate self. Individuals, in committing themselves wholeheartedly to their immediate tasks, within the social-organisational contexts they find themselves in, often unwittingly through their sustained efforts contribute to the betterment of organisation and society.

Sustainable progress, material success and outstanding accomplishments, like deep insights, often come unexpectedly and 'on the rebound' so to speak; apparently aimless and 'purposeless' exploration or action can be surprisingly productive in terms of tangible outcomes. Like the unexpected and unplanned emergence of the phenomena of language, money, medieval cities and modern civil societies, many major social and commercial accomplishments have been realised not because of any direct, planned activity but because of the cumulative sustained efforts of a multitude of people going about their work diligently without any awareness of their possible contribution to the greater scheme of things. Thus, echoing Adam Smith's (1759) notion of the 'invisible hand', the Scottish Enlightenment figure Adam Ferguson wrote:

Mankind [...] in striving to remove inconveniences [...] arrive[s] at ends which even their imagination could not anticipate [...] Every step and every movement of the multitude [...] are made with equal blindness to the future, and nations stumble upon establishments,

*which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design*

(Ferguson, 1767/1966: 122, my emphasis)

Many outstanding social (and indeed organisational) successes that we celebrate and/or take so much for granted have emerged unplanned and unexpected in this way. The same is true of great works of art. Thus, John Ruskin, the art critic and social reformer, writes:

*The first and absolute condition of the thing's ever becoming saleable is, that we shall make it without wanting to sell it; nay, rather with a determination not to sell it at any price, if once we get hold of it. Try making your Art popular, cheap [...] and the foreign market will always show something better. But make it only to please yourselves, and ever be resolved that you won't let anybody else have it; and forthwith you will find everybody else wants it. [...] [Great works of] Art ha[ve] only been produced by nations who rejoiced in it; fed themselves with it, as if it were bread; basked in it, as if it were sunshine; shouted at the sight of it; danced with the delight of it; quarrelled for it; fought for it; starved for it; did, in fact precisely the opposite with it of what we want to do with it*

(Ruskin, 1927, Vol. 16:184)

Paradoxically, the more we rely on a direct, rational-calculative logic to justify our high-profile interventions, the more we are likely to succumb to popular public expectations and the more likely it is that a culture of mediocrity will eventually set in. Such impatience for immediate results produces 'a

short-sighted world which destroys the sources of its own prosperity [...] Low thoughts mean low behaviour, and after a brief orgy of exploitation, low behaviour means a descending standard of life' (Whitehead, 1933: 129). Truly sustainable success is more often than not attained slowly, painstakingly, unceremoniously, and without expectation for 'great outcomes' (March, 2003: 206). Thus, the richest people did not initially set out to deliberately accumulate great wealth, the most profitable corporations are not those obsessively 'profit-driven' and the happiest people are not those who deliberately seek happiness (Kay, 2010). We maintain that, paradoxically, the more action is motivated by such a direct, means-ends logic, 'the more likely it is that such calculated actions eventually work to undermine and erode their own initial success, often with devastating consequences' (Chia and Holt, 2009: x). Surprisingly, truly sustainable success does not come from directly seeking it, but instead arises on a 'rebound', so to speak. This view is predicated upon an implicit acknowledgement of the presence of unseen situational forces that have a hand in shaping eventual outcomes, regardless of human intentions. The priority shifts from one of actively intervening to one of learning how to be patient and *allow* things to take shape, then learning to mobilise the inherent tendency of the situation to realise one's own possibilities.

Because this more oblique and indirect form of engagement is more broadly diffused and more discreet, it is less noticed and hence less threatening but it is also less widely appreciated; it more easily harmonises with the status quo. The notions of 'actively waiting for the fruit to ripen', of 'letting things happen', of 'testing the ground', of 'alluding to' rather than saying, of using 'quotations as a proxy' (Jullien, 2000: 76-78) and indeed of embracing 'strategic ambiguity' better encapsulates this more nuanced and indirect way of engaging with the world of practical affairs. It is one that implicitly acknowledges the ever-changing and transient nature of social reality. It is this celebration of the passive, the understated, the circuitous and the allusive which differentiates Strategic Indirection from the heroic, rational-calculative approaches championed in the management literature.

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