

Using Debate to Improve Strategic Assessment & Response

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The future will not just happen if one wishes hard enough.
Peter Drucker, management guru

“Which of your books should I read?” “Where is your work do I find the best discussion about . . .?” Not a month goes by without my receiving half a dozen questions like these. With 15 books and 31 monographs, plus over 300 proceedings and articles, published over the past quarter century, even I find it difficult to answer these ‘one over the world’ questions. My challenge is usually the *question behind the question* (John Miller’s book of this title is a MUST READ), understanding the real issue below the surface (title of an excellent text by James G. Clawson), and/or the causative management system that has fractured the practice’s harmony and/or organizational culture (review *Strategies for Cultural Change*, by S. Paul Bate). Yes, three texts offered in the first paragraph; they are something that I bring from my Masters in Healthcare Administration, to wit: appreciation for reading beyond the routine veterinary rhetoric.

THE VALUE OF DEBATE

The next time you face a strategic decision, try staging a debate to release new energy, creativity and excitement around the strategic assessment and response (title of a Monograph in the VIN Bookstore) decisions. I actually recommend a mind mapping approach (shared in my text, *Building the Successful Veterinary Practice: Innovation & Creativity* (Volume 3), Wiley & Sons. The reference text I used when learning mind mapping as brain storming method was by Tony Buzon. This also is a method on speeding up adoption and implementation of new ideas. Debates, brainstorming, and Mind Mapping are all helpful because they pull people together and get them moving in the same direction. In fact, these three techniques are the key to having an argument that everyone can win. When mind mapping, use the project planning sheet in the *Leadership Action Planning* monograph (VIN Bookstore) to take the diverse brainstorming diagram and put some planning structure into it.

GUIDING LIGHT OF BRAINSTORMING & DEBATE

No person is ever wrong! Stay on topic and discuss/debate the variables.
Hear the caring intentions of each person offering any input.
All ideas are recorded without value judgments.
When moving discussion items from a mind map to a project planning sheet,
that is the time to refine the assessment using PEST and SWOT techniques.

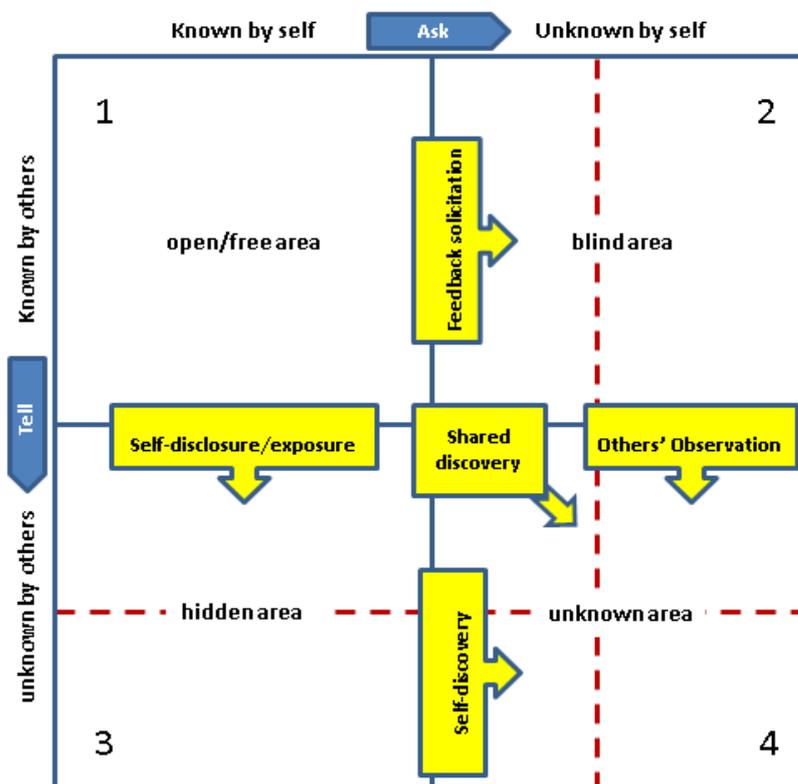
PEST stands for political, economic, social, and technological assessments required before a SWOT assessment. SWOT stands for Strength and Weakness within the organization, and Opportunity and Threats outside the organization. Both use the four quadrant Johari window format for outline structuring. A Johari window was originally

a psychological tool created by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham in 1955. It's a simple and useful tool for understanding and training:

- self-awareness
- personal development
- improving communications
- interpersonal relationships
- group dynamics
- team development; and
- inter group relationships

It is one of the few tools out there that has an emphasis on “soft skills” such as behaviour, empathy, co-operation, inter group development and interpersonal development. It's a great model to use because of its simplicity and also because it can be applied in a variety of situations and environments.

Johari Window model



The PEST and SWOT Assessments are excellent opportunities to activate all the brains in your practice. The staff members have insights that would amaze you. For best results – FOCUS - stage the debates/brainstorming around a specific element of the decision. As needed, assign staff to each side of the issue (e.g., one of the quadrants), based on their knowledge and passion for the debate. Because the staff will most likely view the mind map as a game rather than a debate, based on the “no wrong idea/answer” of brainstorming, they will likely approach it on a more objective

level. If the facilitator plays one quadrant against the other during the debate/brainstorming session, the team members will be less likely to “defend” their initial idea and be caught up in the assessment of the PEST or SWOT perspectives. As a result, each faction of the discussion will have a voice and provide thoughtful examination and advocacy for new perspectives.

Concurrently, several members will be able to listen to all views and ideas and consider additional viewpoints that could influence the mind map direction/outcome. This structured four-quadrant debate/discussion strategy incites the best thinking and perspectives from the team, while making them comfortable with the subject. When the decision(s) is made there is an intellectual understanding and emotional belief in the reasoning behind the final decision. Because a good facilitator encourages people to adopt contrary viewpoints when debating/discussing an element of an assessment, they are free to bring their intelligence – both cognitive and emotional – to the table, resulting in an environment where all sides and perspectives of the issue can be weighed and examined, without fear of being wrong, that can cause discomfort in many staff members (or leaders).

Many practice owners would make their strategic decision in isolation, or only after talking with a few practice members, and then expend enormous amounts of time explain the decision and getting buy-in. Convincing others to implement a “boss driven” initiative has about a 35% success rate in healthcare situations, while a team-based initiative has about a 65% success rate of succeeding. The lasting empathy this exercise develops ensures that the practice leadership is in alignment with the team, and allows for faster and more effective strategic response following the strategic assessment process.

“Coming together is a beginning.
Keeping together is progress.
Working together is success.”
Henry Ford

PUNTER vs FUTURIST

In Australia, people who bet are “punters”, and I have become one. I have listed seven texts/monographs in this article, and I bet less than 10% of the readers will go out and buy even one of the monographs or texts. Furthermore, I bet that less than 10% will use team-based mind mapping for their strategic assessment and strategic response needs. I hope that 20% will start considering their staff as appreciating assets for problem solving, but I concurrently will bet over half of those will say “it takes too much time” and will return to “boss-centered” decisions, and then wonder why their ideas seldom take hold. *Tom Cat >*-*<*