

# A Social Learning Approach to Strategic Management: Toward a Theoretical Foundation

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*Repeated calls have been made for a general theory of strategic management that will enhance research, teaching, and application of subject matter in the area. This paper presents a social learning theory of strategic management (SLTSM) that encompasses earlier attempts to explain strategic management and offers a distinctive conceptual framework. SLTSM links the interdependent elements of executive cognition, stimulus and consequence environments, and strategic behaviors, through reciprocal determinism, providing a unique perspective on strategic management.*

The field of strategic management has been enriched over the last 20 years by conceptual frameworks and research findings from a number of different disciplines. More recently, strategic management has begun to develop its own body of knowledge, and greater sophistication can be seen in strategy research (Bourgeois, 1980; Hofer, 1975a, 1975b; Leontiades, 1979; Steiner & Miner, 1977). However, although some evolution is evident, the field remains loosely knit, and a congruent theory of strategic management has yet to be proffered. The intent of this paper is to present a theory that will permit existing strategy concepts to be synthesized in a truly integrated framework.

## Traditional Strategic Management

The primary emphasis of strategic management is directed toward describing strategic processes (either normative or content) that facilitate organizational responses to the environment (external) (Ackoff, 1970; Andrews, 1971; Ansoff, 1965; Boston Consulting Group, 1968; Chandler, 1962; Glueck, 1980; Hofer, 1973; Katz, 1970; Schendel & Patton, 1978; Steiner, 1969; Uytterhoeven, Ackerman, & Rosenblum, 1973; Vancil & Lorange, 1975; Ward, 1976). To a lesser extent, strategic manage-

ment also has emphasized specific implementation management (internal) (Bourgeois, 1980). Popular, normative strategic management models reflect these two (external and internal) emphases often referred to as strategic planning and strategic implementation (Bates & Eldridge, 1980; Chang & Campo-Flores, 1980; Glueck, 1980; Higgins, 1979; Steiner & Miner, 1977; Thompson & Strickland, 1978).

In such models, strategic planning typically consists of (a) the assessment of internal/external threats and opportunities, (b) identification and evaluation of alternative courses of action, (c) strategy formulation and evaluation, and (d) contingency planning. Strategic implementation, on the other hand, refers to (a) policy formation, (b) establishment of organization structure, (c) tactical planning and integration, (d) functional coordination, (e) organizational control, (f) supervision, (g) motivation, and so on. Strategic management has been viewed as a macro strategic framework that includes more specific managerial approaches and techniques. However, lessons learned through the development of normative and/or descriptive process models have yet to be integrated into a broad theoretical framework. Without such a unifying,

theoretical base, the field will continue to remain disjointed.

## A Theory of Strategic Management

A general descriptive theory is important to the development of any field. Theories are abstractions that identify and explain patterns and relationships inherent to a phenomenon. As a result, theories are quite useful because they shortcut the need to store masses of data (Mintzberg, 1977). Drawing on the work of Dubin (1969), Luthans and Stewart (1977) have outlined the requirements of useful theory as follows: A theory should (1) integrate and synthesize diverse processes; (2) functionally incorporate the systems perspective; (3) provide a pragmatic basis for analysis and interpretation; (4) provide a framework for systematic and coordinated direction of new research, and perhaps most importantly (5) establish a mechanism for effectively translating theoretical constructs and the results of empirical research into management information and application techniques that are relevant and useful to the practitioner.

A variety of theoretical schemas such as systems, contingency theory, operational, and managerial roles have been drawn upon separately and in concert to explain and integrate strategy-level phenomena. For instance, systems perspectives have provided a generic methodology for understanding complex phenomena and their relationships. Contingency theories suggest the situational nature of strategic management and in some cases have provided limited if-then prescriptive models. The operational framework has contributed detailed descriptions of the essential elements of management processes. And, finally, the managerial roles view has offered fresh perspectives on the top management function. Each of these approaches is a valuable and necessary component of a broader strategic management theory. However, none of the approaches, in its own right, has provided a comprehensive framework that fulfills the requirements outlined above.

The lack of a unified theory of strategic management may well be due to the complexity and situational nature of the field itself. Yet, these two inhibiting factors may represent the most important reasons for the need to develop an integrating theory. As Mintzberg suggests, "researchers in management have gravitated away from policy-

making toward more tangible areas, where theory-building was less demanding, less risky, and immediately rewarding" (1977, p. 93).

The social learning-based framework of strategic management set forth in this paper appears to offer a broad theoretical framework that conceptually encompasses available management approaches and techniques and provides the means for their integration. The social learning theory (SLT) construct provides a vehicle for understanding and explaining the relationships among strategic-level phenomena and contributes a framework for prediction, research, and control. The construct is broad enough to apply to all types of organizations; yet, it recognizes the contingent relationship of unique system variables and environmental factors to system performance.

## Social Learning: A Theoretical Foundation

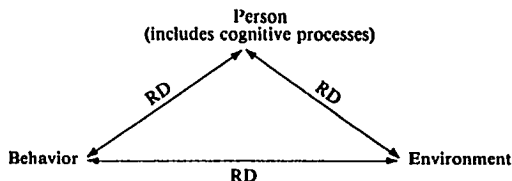
SLT essentially is a behavioral theory (i.e., a theory of learning). At the heart of SLT is the premise that behavior results from the interaction of persons and situations, rather than from either factor alone. Such an approach combines principles of both classical and operant conditioning with cognitive-based dispositional determinants of behavior. SLT was introduced by Bandura (1968) and later expanded upon by Bandura (1976, 1977) and others (Mahoney, 1974; Meichenbaum, 1974, 1977; Mischel, 1973, 1976; Staats, 1975). Recently, writers and theorists such as Davis and Luthans (1979, 1980) and Manz and Sims (1980, 1981) have expanded the scope of application for SLT, offering the theory as an alternative to more traditional leadership theories and even as an underlying framework for the field of organizational behavior, itself. Thus far, however, attempts to apply SLT represent little more than means by which behavioristic theories can be applied to human behavior problems in organizations.

Although a person-situation interaction theory is not particularly unique in itself (Bowers, 1973; Endler & Magnusson, 1975), an SLT view of interaction suggests that behavior, other personal factors, and environmental factors all operate as interdependent determinants of each other (Bandura, 1977). As Davis and Luthans have explained, "social learning posits that the person and the environment do not function as independent units but instead determine each other in a reciprocal manner"

(1980, p. 282). Further, SLT suggests that it is primarily through their actions that people produce the environmental conditions that affect their behaviors in a reciprocal fashion (Davis & Luthans, 1980).

Behavior, therefore, is explained in terms of a continuous, reciprocal interaction among an individual's cognitions, his/her behavior, and the environment. This social learning view of interaction, denoted as "reciprocal determinism," is depicted in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
**Model of Social Learning**



RD = Reciprocal determinism

SLT derives its name from the emphasis it places on learning from other than actual experience. Traditionally, behavioral theorists have assumed that learning can occur only as a result of performing responses and experiencing their effects. However, SLT posits that learning can occur on a vicarious and symbolic basis by observing the behavior of others and its contingent consequences for them. As Bandura suggests, "the capacity to learn by observation enables people to acquire large, integrated patterns of behavior without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error" (1977, p. 12). In addition, through cognition, people are able to exercise some measures of control over their own behavior. Therefore, an SLT approach allows symbolic, vicarious, and self-regulatory (social) processes to assume a prominent role in acquiring new behaviors (Bandura, 1977).

## A Social Learning Theory

As with the basic social learning model, a social learning theory of strategic management (SLTSM) consists of three primary components and stresses their reciprocal relationships. These components are the environment, top management's cognitive process, and alternative strategic behaviors. The

components are not new to strategic management, but the context in which they are presented offers a useful conceptual framework.

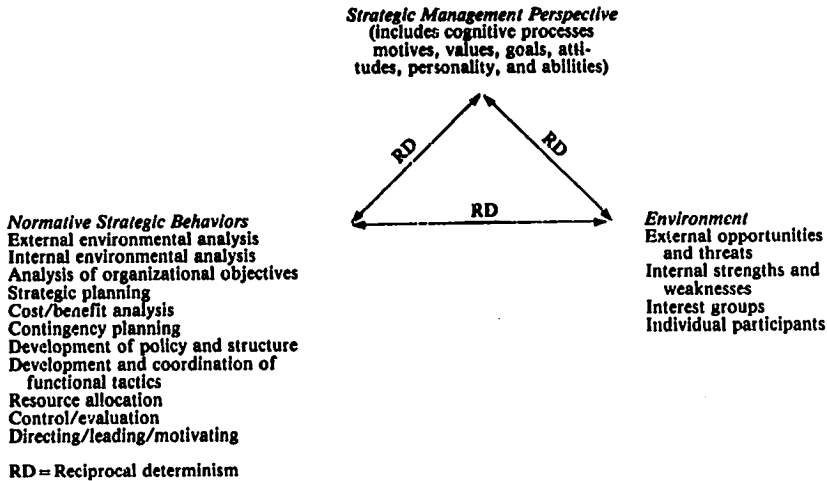
SLTSM posits that strategic behavior is the result of an interaction of top management cognitive processes and environmental influences. Strategic behavior, in turn, shapes the environment and conditions top management's future cognitions (see Figure 2). Writers in the field of strategic management have acknowledged the influences of the environment upon the organization. A number of authors have addressed the issue of top management cognition (style, values, goals, etc.) (Anderson & Paine, 1975; Argyris, 1973; Baumol, 1967; Bower, 1966; England, 1967, 1973; Hegarty & Sims, 1979; Marris, 1964; Monsen & Downs, 1965; Neuschel, 1969). But neither the impact of cognitions on strategic behavior nor the reciprocal effects of strategic behavior have been stressed adequately in the strategy literature.

## Expanding SLTSM Theory

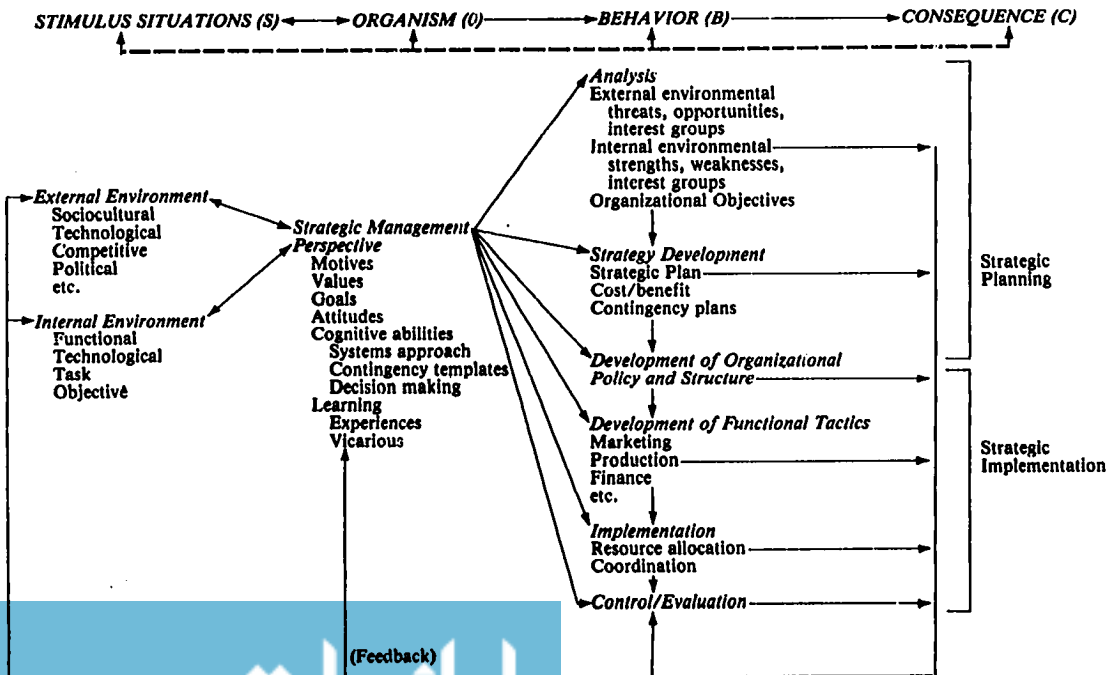
Davis and Luthans (1980) found it useful to expand the social learning triad to delineate more explicitly the antecedent and consequence environments in their formulation of an SLT theory of organizational behavior. The authors recognized the importance of the situational stimulus, organism, and behavior relationships. Drawing on their earlier work (Davis & Luthans, 1979; Luthans, 1977), they utilized a stimulus-organism-behavior-consequence (SOBC) construct to explain more fully environmental influences on behavior. Such a formulation is logical and complements the writings of Maier (1965) and Seiler (1967). In their SOBC construct, Luthans and Davis essentially have divided the environment component of social learning theory into two parts—the antecedent (stimulus) environment and the consequence environment.

Both the environmental antecedent and consequence determinants of behavior are inherent in a social learning theory of behavior. But the SOBC construct seems to give a better emphasis to the influence of each. Social learning theory, as enriched by the SOBC construct, provides a broader explanation of behavior that can be applied on either an intraorganization basis or an interorganization basis. The SLTSM (as expanded by the SOBC construct) now can be examined via its major components, as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 2**  
**A Social Learning Theory of Strategic Management**



**Figure 3**  
**Strategic Management System Within an SOBC Framework**



## Environment

Over the last three decades various theorists have credited environmental forces with affecting organizational systems. Organizational theorists have concerned themselves primarily with environmental impact on structure and technology, and organizational behavioralists have tended to look at the behavior of individuals and groups (Pondy & Mitroff, 1979). Those concerned with management at the strategic level, on the other hand, must consider not only the questions addressed by organization theory and organizational behavior researchers and theorists, but more importantly the overall issue of organizational performance. Thus, executives also must be concerned with decisions about domain, strategy, and long range organizational continuity (Miles, Snow, & Pfeffer, 1974). In addition to external environmental forces, attention also must be given to factors in the internal environment. Although assessment of internal forces is not a new concern in management modeling (Johnston, 1976; Kilmann, Pondy, & Slevin, 1976), the need for a comprehensive and integrative theory that addresses both external and internal environmental factors only recently has been addressed in the management literature (Mealiea & Lee, 1979; Shepard & Houglund, 1978).

Delineation of major subsystems in each of these environments will lead to a better understanding of their specific antecedent stimuli and consequences. Major subsystems in the external environment might be analyzed in terms of (1) sociocultural environment, (2) technological environment, (3) competitive environment, (4) political/legal environment, (5) economic environment, (6) physical environment, and so on. (Thompson, 1967). The internal environment may be categorized in a variety of ways. Most typical, perhaps, is to understand the organization through its functional departments. Other subsystems utilized include technology, task, objective, group, individual, and culture (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1973; Seiler, 1967; Wright, 1977). Each of these environments (external and internal) interacts with top management cognition, thereby influencing strategic behaviors and, in turn, is affected by the strategic behaviors (see Figure 3).

## Organism

SLT suggests that cognitive processes play an important part along with the environment in deter-

mining and limiting the type and range of behavior in which executives engage. The influence of cognitive processes on behavior largely has been accepted on an individual level (Bandura, 1968). The framework would appear to be equally important at the strategic level in organizations, at which decisions are made by an individual (e.g., a CEO) or by a cadre of executives whose shared perspective influences the strategic behaviors adopted. The contribution of executive-level cognitive process is an essential element in any viable theory of strategic management (Mintzberg, 1973; Murdick & Ross, 1977).

The responsibilities of top managers generally are acknowledged to be different from those of middle management personnel (Ansoff, 1972; Frankenhoff & Granger, 1971; Schendel & Hatten, 1972). Differences in their goals, values, role perceptions, and patterns of learned behavior may be equally as important. Based on these differences, effective top managers well may develop unique cognitive abilities and a strategic management perspective, that is, a certain way of thinking that enables them to identify and understand system inputs, to assess accurately the nature of the environment, and to make decisions that will lead to effective performance for the enterprise as a whole (Steiner & Miner, 1977).

The strategic management perspective within a social learning framework, is achieved through:

- (1) acquiring strategic behaviors through practice and experience (experiential learning)
- (2) becoming acquainted with a wide range of possible strategic processes and behaviors (vicarious learning)
- (3) the development of cognitive skills (systems perspectives and decision making)
- (4) learning contingency relationships that provide templates for top management action
- (5) embracing a set of values, goals, motives, and so on—which appears to be unique to top managers.

These activities acknowledge the importance of the effect of cognition on strategic behavior and are directed toward developing a top manager's cognitive abilities. In addition, they are supported by the SLT propositions that symbolic and vicarious learning, as well as experiential learning, can influence future behavior and that such behavior can be regulated by the learner.

## Strategic Behaviors

The interaction between manager cognitions and

environmental variables may produce any of a variety of strategic behaviors. The operational approach and various contingency approaches have been particularly helpful in developing the range and description of these alternative strategic behaviors. The operational approach has provided detailed principles, descriptions, and step-by-step guidelines on essential managerial activities. As Koontz suggests,

The operational approach to management recognizes that there is a central core of knowledge about managing that exists only in management: such matters as line and staff, departmentation, the limits of the span of management, managerial appraisal, and various managerial control techniques involve concepts and theory only found where managing is involved (1980, p. 181).

The contingency approach, as suggested earlier, provides "if-then" decision making guidelines for top managers. The development of these strategic templates, along with their communication to top managers, can provide a wide range of valid, effective behaviors to strategic-level decision makers. Expansion of strategic "response" behaviors can place the executive in a better position to deal with a dynamic and complex environment.

For the most part, management process models that delineate strategic behaviors are comprised of two major subsystems: (1) strategic planning, and (2) strategic implementation. A normative model of strategic management containing both strategic planning and implementation and utilizing the expanded social learning SOBC construct is depicted in Figure 3. This model provides the basic framework and direction for pragmatic strategic management. It also indicates representative, normative strategic behaviors and their relationships with the organism and antecedent and consequence environments. Possible behaviors, then, are a result of top management's cognition (cognitive abilities plus vicarious and experiential learning) and environmental stimuli.

*Strategic Planning.* Strategic planning is the process by which decisions are made that are intended to guide the long range behaviors of the organization. It is through this process that the "best possible future state" of the organization is profiled and decisions are made today that are directed toward creating that best possible profile. As Peter Drucker lucidly suggests, strategic planning

is the continuous process of making present en-

trepreneurial (risk taking) decisions systematically and with the greatest knowledge of their futurity; organizing systematically the efforts needed to carry out these decisions; and measuring the results of these decisions against the expectations through organized, systematic feedback (1974, p. 125).

The social learning SOBC construct as reflected in Figure 3 explains the strategic planning process.

The model illustrates that the external and internal environments of the organization provide stimulus-consequence influences on the executive's strategic management perspective. Strategic management essentially is a matter of reacting to these stimuli or initiating proactive behaviors. The interaction of the environment and strategic management perspective (style, attitudes, motives, etc.) elicits strategic "coping" behaviors (strategic planning). Normative response patterns may include such behaviors as external environmental analysis, internal environmental analysis, analysis of organizational objectives, and/or the development of a comprehensive strategic plan. In addition, each of these behaviors, independently and in concert, affects the process, the individual, and the environments.

*Strategic Implementation.* The best plan represents little more than good intentions unless it is translated into work (Drucker, 1974). Organizational policies provide decision making guidelines that further articulate adopted strategic plans. More specific tactics must be developed within the framework established by the enterprise strategy and its supporting policies. Such tactics usually are formulated at the functional level of the organization. For instance, marketing managers must decide what tactic is most appropriate to fulfill marketing's role within the total enterprise strategy, and managers in the general accounting department are responsible for making decisions affecting various organizational control systems. As with strategic planning, strategic implementation is linked directly to the interaction of managerial cognitions and environmental factors (stimuli and consequences). Thus, the SOBC model facilitates and helps to explain strategic as well as functional decision making.

### Consequences

Management literature traditionally has addressed the importance of the "stimulus environment"

to the system. Such forces are seen as originating from outside the organization and having significant influence upon it. However, the SOBC construct also focuses attention on behavior consequences. Strategic behaviors influence the organization's environment, affecting competition, technology, economic conditions, and so on. As such, each implementation strategy must be evaluated periodically in light of its consequences and modified if necessary.

Feedback occupies an important role in the SOBC framework because it contributes to afferent environmental linkages. Consequence feedback, although not always immediate, provides the organism with information necessary to regulate itself and evolve heuristically. Operationalized in the form of evaluation criteria, feedback may lead to changes in cognition and subsequent strategic behaviors, as illustrated in Figure 3. The reciprocal influence of organism, behavior, and environment represents a unique and necessary element in any comprehensive theory of strategic management.

## Conclusion

The strategic management field presently exists without a broad, integrative theory to guide understanding, research, and application. As a result, the field has been slow to mature and has developed in patchwork fashion. This paper has presented a social learning theory of strategic management in an attempt to provide a theoretical framework that (1) encompasses already existing management approaches and techniques and (2) offers a fresh perspective on the reciprocal relationships of important strategic variables.

The theoretical construct is patterned after the social learning theory model advanced by Bandura.

Bandura postulates that human learning is a function of the reciprocal interaction of the person, his/her behavior, and the environment. Subsequent writers also have emphasized the important role of behavioral consequences within this construct. SLTSM postulates that strategic actions conceptually evolve in a similar manner. That is, strategic planning and implementation result from the interaction of top management cognition and stimulus and consequence environmental influences. The behaviors in which strategic-level executives engage, in turn, affect their subsequent cognitions and their respective environments.

SLTSM offers a comprehensive and cogent framework for explaining strategic management level phenomena and fulfills the requisites for a useful management theory. As such, it incorporates systems and contingency theory perspectives, provides a framework for analysis and research, is applicable to a variety of organizational types, and provides a mechanism for translating theory into practice.

Strategic management researchers have examined the influence of environment on strategy and to a lesser extent the impact of strategy on the firm's environment. Similarly, the manner in which motives, values, and so on of top level managers affect strategy formulation has been studied. However, the social learning theory of strategic management suggests that a broader, more comprehensive approach to studying strategic management is required. The conceptual framework offered by SLTSM provides new research directions in the area of strategic management and stimulates consideration of interactive and reciprocal determinants. Such a framework can have significant implications for understanding the field both now and in the future.

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