

## Preface

This book is the first full treatment of an idea I discovered some ten years ago. At that time I was one of many scholars applying our research expertise to the problem of economic development in poor countries. It began to dawn on me that my fellow experts had elaborate methods for analysis and planning that ignored or even contradicted the existing sources on how creative achievement really happens. Over time my informal inquiry into these sources turned into a more formal study that in turn led to this book.

In my inquiry, three authors stood out right away: Thomas Kuhn on scientific revolutions, Joseph Schumpeter on entrepreneurial leaps of progress, and Carl von Clausewitz on military strategy. It struck me that all three described similar mechanisms for creative advance in their fields. The implications of this similarity seemed enormous to me for other fields too, including my own. All three scholars had independently arrived at a universal description of the structure of human achievement.

Once I saw this common thread, I set out to translate it into practical concepts that fields beyond science, entrepreneurship,

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and war might understand and accept. For this step I joined the faculty of Columbia Business School. There I found fellow scholars in economics, sociology, psychology, and political science dedicated to translating research insights into practical applications for all kinds of management in business, government, and nonprofit organizations.

My own work fit right in. Even more, this rich research environment greatly expanded my horizon. Beyond Kuhn, Schumpeter, and von Clausewitz, I now found common ground in other domains as well, including neuroscience, psychology, business strategy, social enterprise, professional and artistic mastery, and even the self-help movement. It led me to a wider understanding of how to create useful ideas in any field, not just my own.

My early discoveries led to two preliminary statements of what I found.<sup>1</sup> Armed with these publications, I set out to teach what I learned as a graduate university course. Hundreds of students later, I am much wiser for it. I found my students quite open to the ideas I offered them but very demanding too. For the most part they aim for careers as practitioners, not scholars, so they served as a vivid stand-in for the development experts I first set out to inform. For them each idea has to have a practical implication for their own actions. Students at business schools these days go on to an astonishing range of fields—banking, the arts, social services, diplomacy, and virtually anything else you can think of. This range forced me to try to present my discoveries in their clearest and most universal form, for all kinds of human achievement.

The unifying idea of this book is a common mechanism at the heart of outstanding achievements in every domain of human endeavor. I call that mechanism “strategic intuition,” although it goes by several other names in the various fields where I found it. Behind every story of major advance is a turning point where someone has a useful idea that changes the field or starts a new one. Strategic intuition explains what happens in the mind of whoever has that idea. For reasons I will discuss, you seldom read



about exactly where a new idea came from. But once you do, again and again you find strategic intuition. And by understanding how it works, you can do it more and better yourself.

By the nature of its subject, this book spans so many fields that it deals with each one in a very summary manner. I do not claim mastery in these fields but only an understanding of how strategic intuition applies to them. Strategy itself is a mongrel field with no pure pedigree in any of the traditional academic disciplines. So too with this book. And the brevity of treatment of each field forces me to skip over many of the people and works of scholarship that have helped inform my thought. As a result I can name only some of the works I consulted as citations in the pages that follow. As for people, here I name just a few.

Marcia Wright of Columbia University taught me the value of history as an empirical discipline. Lynn Ellsworth, a fellow scholar in development, served as my first example of the proper blend of Kuhn, Schumpeter, and von Clausewitz in a field of action. A second example was Steve Kerr, chief learning officer first at General Electric and then at Goldman Sachs. When I discovered Steve and what he did, in a very real sense my main ideas came true.

At Columbia Business School, Ray Horton gave me a warm welcome and key counsel for translating theory into useful ideas for practitioners. Paul Glasserman helped me gain rapid exposure to the full range of creative faculty research and its practical implications. Amar Bhidé has taken up Schumpeter's mantle with his research on modern entrepreneurial achievement. And Dean Glenn Hubbard especially encouraged me to pursue the implications of my work for teaching strategy. Myles Thompson of Columbia University Press offered precious editorial guidance, as well as the prize chance to launch the new imprint of Columbia Business School Publishing. Marina Petrova of Columbia University Press worked myriad wonders on the manuscript itself.

Last but not least, my students at Columbia Business School contributed much to this work. It is no exaggeration to say that I learned as much from them as from all the scholarly sources





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I consulted. The expression of an idea becomes the idea, and how I convey strategic intuition comes in large part from discussion with students. Our discussion continues online at [www.strategic-intuition.com](http://www.strategic-intuition.com), where you are welcome to join in. If you do, I very much look forward to learning from you too.

## Note

1. See William Duggan, *Napoleon's Glance: The Secret of Strategy* (New York: Nation Books, 2002); William Duggan, *The Art of What Works: How Success Really Happens* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003).



## Strategic Intuition

