

30 Days on Oblique Strategies

'Over One Hundred Worthwhile
Dilemmas' at Work

Richard Sage

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Contents

Introduction	1
Day 1	3
Day 2	7
Day 3	12

Introduction

Why Oblique Strategies?

Today is the first of the 30 days of a bit of an experiment. For the next 30 days I will document my use of Brian Eno's and Peter Schmidt's Oblique Strategies. I will be documenting my progress on this blog, but first I thought i'd write a little bit about why i'm doing it.

I heard about the Oblique Strategies a few years ago and have always thought it is an intriguing technique. I think there is a creative element to most people's jobs nowadays with the rise of the knowledge worker :) whether people realise it or not. I certainly consider my job as a creative endeavour, so it seemed logical to me to experiment with a technique that could help. I see Oblique Strategies as a little crooked mirror that you can pick up and makes you look at yourself from different perspective, or a little mental plunger that helps unblock your mind (i'll stop with the bad analogies now).

My plan is that over the next 30 (working) days as I go through my normal day, if there is a moment where I feel stuck or need some inspiration I will:

- *Make a note of the situation, what i was trying to do how i felt and what i was thinking
- *Pull a card from the deck and make a note of it
- *Reflect on the card and take action
- *Write a note about what I thought and what action I took off the back of the card
- *At the end of the day write a post on this blog about the day

So that is it. I have no idea whether using Oblique Strategies will actually be useful or whether the content I generate doing will be interesting, i guess that is why its an experiment :)

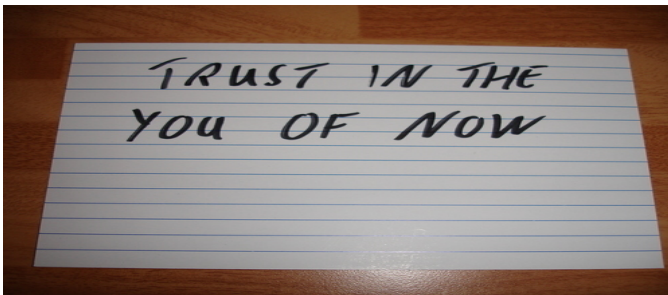
Day 1

So, Day 1 of '30 days on oblique strategies' is now complete. Here is a breakdown of how the day went.

Situation

I was just about to start a piece of work that involves presenting a coherent and simple story to some stakeholders. The story is complex and I was thinking about how I might possibly squeeze things into a coherent narrative, so I pulled a card from the deck.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

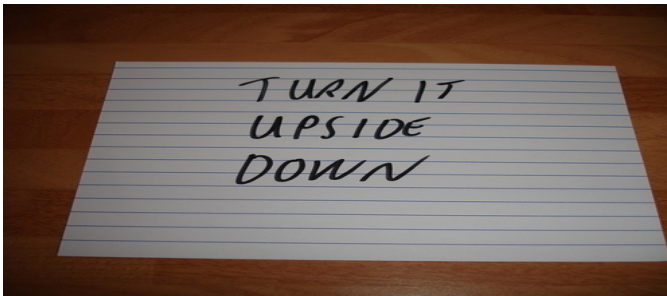
My interpretation of the card, given the context, was that in order to present that coherent story I needed to be clear and concise with my statements and diagrams. I should trust in my instinct and express exactly what I want to express at

that point without worrying about what the implications might be of the future feedback that I might have to deal with. The outcome was a shorter, more punchy story that covered less subject matter than it would have done if I hadn't pulled that card. I'll pass judgement on the 'me of then' for now (if that makes sense) as to whether that was the right thing to do.

Situation

I was preparing for a meeting to discuss a presentation I was collaborating on that would include a roadmap.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

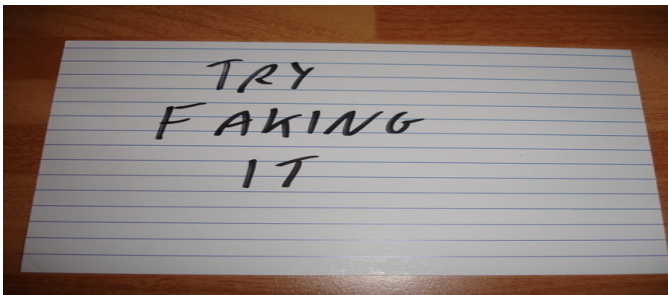
I'd already created the roadmap view at that point. I decided to interpret this card literally and turned a large part of the swimlanes of the roadmap upside down. The outcome of this was interesting (well to me anyway), in that it helped highlight a relationship between elements on

the roadmap that weren't clear before, this helped me think differently about the relationship and will (I hope) also help my stakeholders get a clearer understanding of the impact.

Situation

I was about to prepare for a conference call with a colleague who is working on a piece of strategy work for some of our internal customers. I'm responsible for producing a piece of work that will fit into the overall strategy. There were a couple of key concepts/bits of work that I really want to push as part of the overall strategy, so as part of my prep for the conference call I decided to pull a card.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

Given the context my interpretation was that I should confidently push the things I wanted to push. Usually I pride myself in being honest as to how sure I am of my thinking. If I'm not sure of something or can't see the

opposing view then I'll normally quite happily state that and explore it. This time I didn't. Despite being aware of the alternatives to the argument I was making I didn't mention them. Instead I talked firmly in favour of my argument.

The outcome was that the things I wanted to push are now recognised as key parts of the strategy. Would this have happened anyway? Probably, but by interpreting the "try faking it" card in the way I did, I probably got to the same point quicker than i would have, and I take that to be a good thing!

Summary

In summary, a good first day, i don't think my interpretation of the cards changed my thinking or behaviour significantly, but it did make subtle changes and it was quite nice to have definite points for reflection. I'm looking forward to tomorrow :)

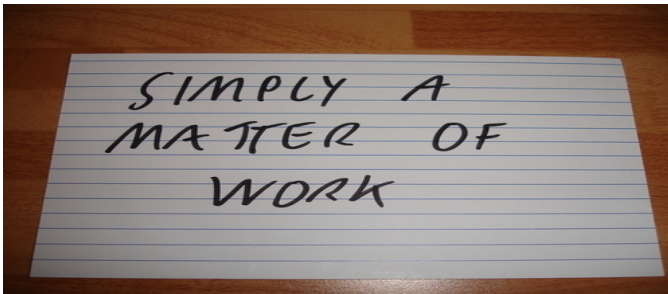
Day 2

Day 2 came and went as quickly as the first, surprising that. Here is a summary.

Situation

I was about to start doing some prep for a meeting to discuss designing a workshop that I'll be facilitating in a couple of weeks time. I was finding it hard to think of a good angle so I thought i'd pull a card.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

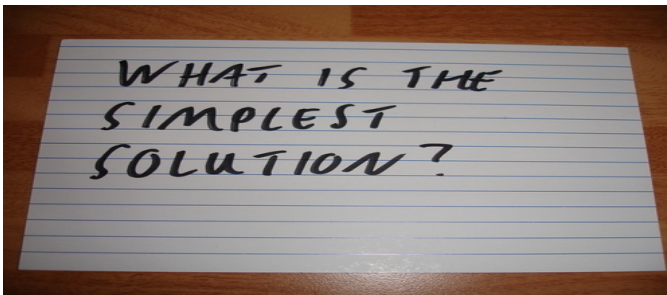
My interpretation was that I should suck it up and stop prevaricating, its only a workshop, just get it done. I closed down my email client, turned over a fresh page on my pad, turned away from my pc so I wouldn't get distracted and started listing the questions that I needed the workshop to

answer, with a view to then using the list as the starting point for designing the workshop. Unfortunately one of my colleagues had better ideas and started messaging me over Lync (I know I'd turned away from my pc but I saw the bloody thing flashing) asking me how my '30 days on oblique strategies' was going (oh the irony). So the outcome from this card, which could have been greater productivity wasn't realised, oh well onwards and upwards.

Situation

I was just about to write an email to a colleague highlighting some gaps in a target architecture (I know, my job is the essence of rock and roll!).

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

This was an interesting one. One of my goals as I work is to try to manage complexity and introduce simplicity wherever possible (if i'm honest I think this stems from

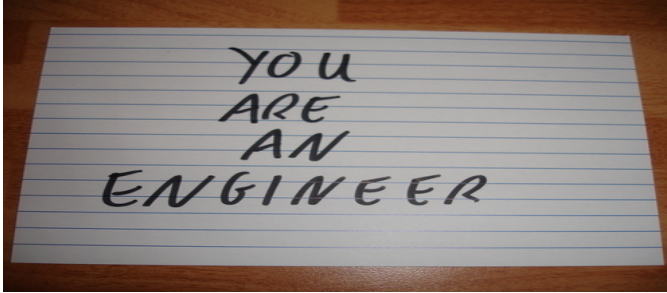
me being intellectually lazy and not wanting to deal with something too complex in my head, shush! don't tell anyone!). Pulling the card gave me an opportunity to re-assess what was actually the simplest solution, so when I emailed my colleague not only was I clearer about what I wanted to say I also tried to write it in the simplest way possible as well. The outcome was that my colleague didn't understand what i'd written and I ended up ringing him to discuss and explain. The moral of the story for me? Sometimes simple can be too simple, which reminds me of an einstein quote:

"Everything should be kept as simple as possible, but no simpler."

Situation

I was trying to create a different view of a roadmap (yeah the one I mentioned previously) to be capability focused. It wasn't really coming together and i'd been through a couple of iterations already but wasn't really happy.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

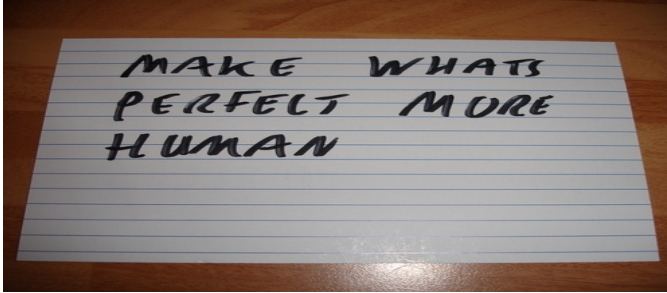
My interpretation was that I should think about the nuts and bolts before thinking about the polish. I tend to immediately abstract situations or problems and maybe in this instance that was why I was having problems. The roadmap was telling a story but I needed to think about the mechanics of the story and build it from the ground up. The outcome was that I added another layer of detail to the roadmap and doing this made things feel a bit more real. I'm still not 100% happy with it but then I never am, which reminds me of another great quote from E.P Box:

"Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful."

Situation

I was stuck on a diagram, trying to make it look nice (not cluttered) whilst expressing everything I wanted it to express.

Card



Interpretation and reaction

I reflected that the diagram didn't need to be perfect or even 100% correct, that its sole aim (in this instance) was to replay a conversation with a stakeholder to ensure that we were in agreement on a key concept. So I stopped working on it and just sent a copy to 'the stakeholder', he responded and made comments and we got to an understanding about 3 hours earlier than we would have if I'd carried on working on it :)

Summary

An interesting day, I think pulling 3/4 cards a day is a manageable average, i'm sure I'll pull less on some of the days. I think its interesting that some of my interpretations so far have possibly just what I would have been telling myself anyway if I'd taken the opportunity to reflect even without the cards.

Day 3

Like a sneaky sneaky sneaky thing competing for a sneaky gold in the sneaking olympics, fuelled by sneaky sneaking drugs, day 3 was upon me. I hadn't even blogged about day 1 and 2!

Situation

I was thinking about how to prep for a meeting (i'm already seeing a pattern in these situations) I hadn't given myself enough time to prepare, so i wasn't sure what I could quickly come up with to make sure it was effective.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

Initially I took this literally. I got up and went and got myself a nice fresh glass of water and drank it all up, deeeelicious! Then I started thinking about water and using

water to grow plants and vegetables and how I might water some ideas in the meeting. I decided to draw a mind map from quickly scanning the documents I hadn't had time to read. My hope was that in representing just the concepts and some of their interrelations that I might spark (or water to continue the analogy) some ideas in me and my colleagues. The outcome was ok, for one I didn't look like I hadn't prepared or absorbed the materials, in fact I'd managed to summarise them, and the mind map was used as a discussion point in part of the meeting. so overall a good intervention from the cards :)

Situation

Working on designing a workshop.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

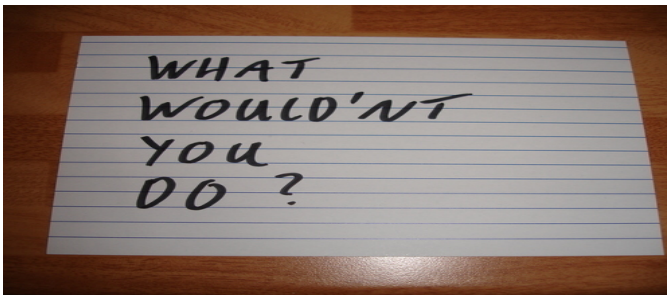
My interpretation was that there were two types of decoration an overblown, pompous decoration (implied by the

“D”) and a subtle understated decoration implied by the lower case “decorate”. I took this to mean that there could be elements of the workshop that I should accentuate and stress and bit that I could subtly convey. The outcome was that I thought differently about the attendees and how their personalities might relate to decorations, I decided to limit the personalities in a section of the workshop where the more subtle characters might be hidden.

Situation

I was working on a data architecture diagram, trying to do a sketch of the high level data entities used in a business unit.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

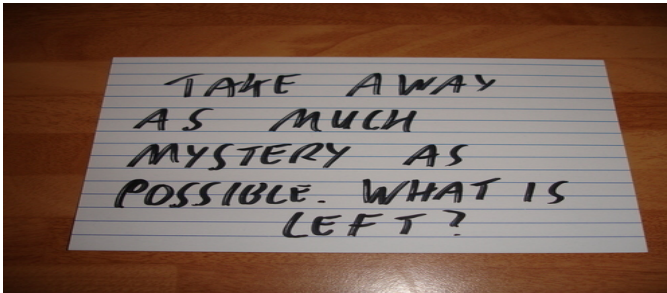
My first interpretation was that I should purposefully do something that I don't normally do at work. Lots of scenarios buzzed through my head, none of which were

particularly professional, legal or both. In the end I decided that i'd interpret the card as a reinforcement of what I wouldn't do. In this situation what I wouldn't do is commit significant changes to an architecture model without talking it through with a domain expert, so I went and had a chat with a colleague. This feels like a bit of a cop out of an interpretation and maybe it is...

Situation

Preping for a chat with a colleague to discuss CRM strategy.

Card



Interpretation and Reaction

I'm not sure the card changed my behaviour on this one in any way. It just so happens that the whole point of the chat was for me to explain some work i'd been doing to ensure that my colleague was kept in the loop and understand the progress that had been made. I talked through a set of slides and matrices and made sure to double check

understanding, afterwards I sent over the same artefacts so she could look over them without me bombarding her with information. I'd imagine I probably would have done all this anyway, but maybe in the back of my head the card was there subtly making me share more information that I would have done. I don't know.

Summary

I have an admission to make, I did pull another card on day 3 which I haven't mentioned. I'd just finished a task and before looking at my todo list i pulled another one, it was "give way to your worst impulse". I sat and thought about how I could honestly do that without getting fired or arrested, so I decided to ignore the card. I've just thought though, maybe ignoring things is my worst impulse!? or maybe i'm just trying to deny the fact that i chickened out. Oh hang on! maybe chickening out is my worst impulse!?... ad nauseum.