

## STRATEGIC COLLABORATION – A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

### Emergence of an Insight

Some years back, I was sitting in a group meeting with a Professor from one of the Ivy League Business Schools. In Bangalore, India, it is not every day one get to sit and work with

the elite business gurus.

I mentioned as a casual remark, that may be to understand and solve business problems using Information Technology (IT), we need to involve our clients in brainstorming.

*There was a loud No from*

*the professor.* His logic - the customer will color the perception in the brainstorming session with what the customer already has faced and hence will reduce the brainstorming to non-optimal interaction.

### How do we kill ideas?

Everybody in the room rejected the idea as soon as he said no. This is nothing new for me, as I am used to the usual reaction to anything different that will come up in discussions.

Homo-Sapiens relish the process of nipping the idea in bud! We all wear the *De Bono's black hats – judge before it emerges*. The stillborn output of dead brainstorming sessions, we all have seen, participated, and have done nothing about it – it is remarkable we keep on doing same meetings, in same way with same output. The *Brainholes* that our brainstorming sessions typically get reduced to, indicate that we need different tools, techniques and methodologies with some structure to improve the efficacy of our Brainstorming sessions. “We” encompass – all organized human enterprises where problem solving is the core competence. This can be a software development project, a management problem, a research question, design of a new product, movie or advertisement, a manufacturing problem, a process improvement problem, a market expansion problem, a funds allocation problem, and so on. These issues are independent of type of organization. Even in our family meetings we can observe the output of collective problem solving – typically driven and controlled by the head of the family.

So back then, as soon as the Professor said no, and the body language of each one of the members in the room indicated my foolishness in creating this uncalled for perturbation, *I knew that's the way it has to be*. An ability to work with our customers in a brainstorming session may be for half a day workshop is what we all really need. If done properly, one can get to the core of the issues with lot of solution directions thrown in by both sides. *The amount of rework, labor burn, heart burn and dollar*

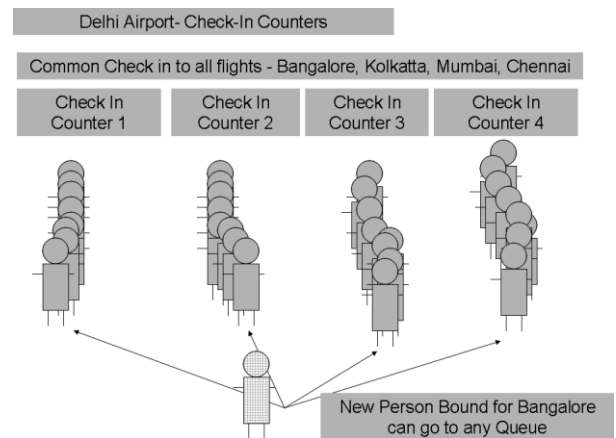
*burn our current approaches lead to can be cut down to zero in a half day brainstorming session with our customers.*

Before the release of a recent Bollywood movie, the Director giving an interview on the Television told that the movie has been shown to “interest groups” chosen from the target audiences of the movie. Further, some of their feedback, comments and suggestions have been taken up to change the movie. If we extend the trend - the director, writer and producer could have brainstormed with the group much before starting to make the movie. The concepts of various story ideas could have been discussed with potential viewers and they could have been part of the process from the beginning. Better still, there could have been partial brainstorms, feedbacks and discussion sessions during the movie making so as to adapt the movie as per the inputs. This is the age of co-creation. The dawn of the age may be signified when “interactive movie production” becomes the new reality. This is after “interactive TV” and “interactive story writing” on the Internet is becoming a reality. The individual in the new world demands continuous involvement in the co-creation. The new world demands, defines and develops new ways. These are not the bland ways of making the world flat – it is really about thriving in the melting pots of creative juices. *Evolving the interactions, connections, the networks, and the chaos into rapidly moving and changing structures where the value is not in any fixed static structure or organization. The value lies in the dynamic of the structure.* The new thriving,

creative and ever evolving world demands new ways to capture value and create value. What is this new world? Let us carry out a thought experiment to explore this further.

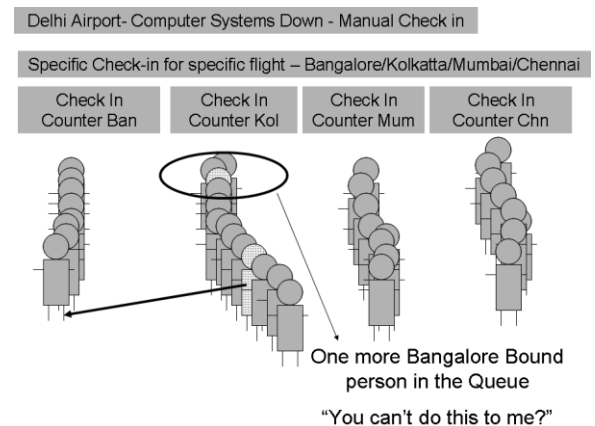
### A Thought Experiment

I was to catch a flight from Delhi airport on a lazy Sunday morning. I was going back to Bangalore. At Delhi airport, there were four counters for checking in. Also there were three more early morning flights going to Chennai,

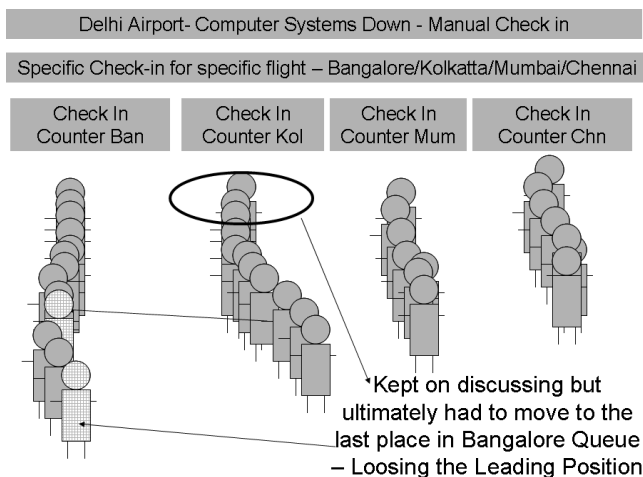


Kolkata, and Mumbai besides the flight to Bangalore. Usually one can check-in any of the check-in counters. I also stood in one of the queues as shown in figure 1.

As the luck would have it, the computer



systems failed for the airline. It was a big mess. The airline manager took a spot decision. He organized specific check-in counters for specific flights. Now we had counter 1 for Bangalore, counter 2 for Kolkata, counter 3 for Mumbai and counter 4 for Chennai (See figure 2). There was a person standing in the front of the queue that has now become the Kolkata queue. He was to board the Bangalore flight. He argued with the airline representative and did not move from the queue. However, I quickly moved to the Bangalore queue. Since anyway I was at the far end of the queue. The person at the top of the queue kept on arguing, although ultimately he had to move to Bangalore queue (Figure 3). His position in the Bangalore queue was much behind my position. He lost the leading position that he had because he delayed the decision to move.

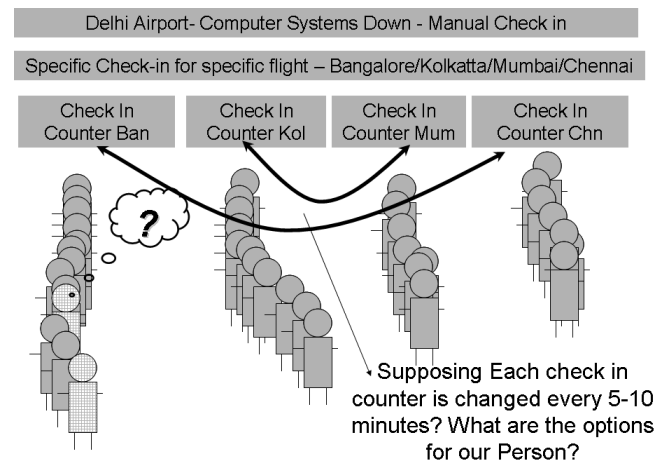


This led me to think. There are two main lessons that we can decipher – (a) *How quickly you make correct decisions – agility in making decisions is the key capability that will define success in a world that changes* (b) *Winners in*

*the existing world have deep inertia to move to new changing world.*

This is a key lesson – *the companies that are winning in today's world will have to move quickly to the new world – else they will not be able to continue their winning position in the new world.* However, the very success that these companies are enjoying *creates inertia for them to move or adapt to the new world that is changing or has changed.* The winning companies are slow in decision making which can lead to a shift in their market share or in fact repositioning behind the companies that created the shift or were agile in adapting to it at the first place.

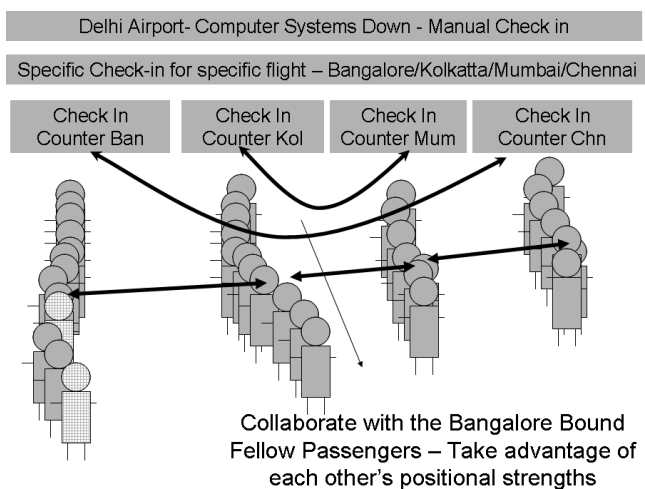
Let us extend our thought experiment a little bit more. Suppose the airline management got cranky. They said every 5-10 minutes the



counters will be changed randomly. No body can predict which counter will have which flight say 5 minutes later. It will be complete chaos. What are the options for the person bound to Bangalore to get his boarding pass (See figure 4 above)?

In many workshops conducted using this thought experiment; initially participants came out with solutions from individual perspective. Let us examine these:

- Well, obviously he can wait in one of the queues and say some time in future at last he will get Bangalore on his counter. However this strategy has a *starvation risk* where due to the random nature – his counter will never get Bangalore. I call this – **No Action Strategy**.
- He can look at the past data and try to predict which of the counters in immediate future will have Bangalore. Also predict how much time each person is taking and evaluate how much time it will take him to reach the front of the queue. Then based on these two predictions choose a particular queue which has maximum probability of synchronizing with the counter becoming Bangalore and he reaching the first position in the queue. I call this – **Measurement-Analytical Strategy**.
- Some people do get a more open and



obvious solution. Find out three more Bangalore bound passengers and let each of you stand in each queue. Whoever reaches the counter will call other three to get their boarding passes. This is more of a **Collaborative Strategy** (See figure 5). This strategy takes care of each other's **positional strength**.

- There is further possibility when all passengers collaborate with each other. This requires **emergence of higher order collaboration**. Let all passengers form four queues – one each for each destination. As the counters change let all the queues move as per the change.

*An important lesson of this thought experiment is that the actors with whom I was competing for Bangalore bound queue, I started collaborating to adapt to the change in the rules. Further collaboration may evolve between competitors provided all collaborators get benefit from the cooperation. However, initially every actor would like to do it alone. This me-first or me-only competitive strategy has been the hallmark of the world that actually we have passed by. However our management, our structures, our strategies, our leadership, and our lives are governed by the competitive rules that successfully created the world that has gone behind us. In the new world,*

- rules of the game can change any time; success will come to those who adapt quickly to the new rules,

- winners in the existing situation have inertia in moving to new situation, and
- *collabtetion* – simultaneous collaboration and competition is the key.

Let us explore little bit deeply what is this new world that is unfolding in front of us. There seems to be fundamental shifts that are shaping our lives. The Globe has been re-engineered and we don't even know it.

### Key Insights

Rules of the game in a changing world are dynamic. The winning actors in a changing world have higher degree of inertia to adapt to the new world. A strategy and viewpoint of simultaneous collaboration and competition is must to explore the new world. The emergence of *strategic collaboration in a changing world is definite*. *How can you craft strategic collaboration is a Crafitti TIP* for our clients to understand the new world. Secondly, do you use thought experiments as a means to understand the world!



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