

Timely intervention

Mark Alexander finds out how Mika Aaltonen has customised elements of Einstein's Theory of Relativity into a management strategy for businesses

The way we manage adversity reveals a lot about ourselves. Robert Benchley, an American humorist and newspaper columnist, perhaps revealed too much when he said: "My only solution for the problem of habitual accidents... is to stay in bed all day. Even then, there is always the chance that you will fall out."

Yet, since time immemorial, the search for a reliable problem-solving strategy has occupied some of mankind's finest minds, leading to insightful conjecture and illuminating supposition about how to untangle the complex issues we face today.

Mika Aaltonen (pictured far right), chairman of the board of StraX – a research unit for strategic intelligence and exploration of futures at Helsinki University of Technology – is one of those minds. His notion of co-existing discourses, explained in his book *The Third Lens*, encourages 21st-century strategists to reconsider the boundaries typically

associated with time and reassess conventional views of the world in which we live. It requires a fundamental shift in thinking, but offers a creative approach to difficult situations.

"I wanted to build a coherent management model because few business models put time and the strategic landscape at the focus of their theories," says Aaltonen. "The concept is an old one – it was used by Einstein in his Theory of Relativity – but this is the first time it will be used in management science."

Aaltonen believes that we can encourage lateral thinking and fresh ideas by finding a trade-off between time and strategy using 'chronotopes', which, literally translated, means space-time. For Einstein, chronotopes formed the principle of finite velocity (it takes time to move from one place to another, therefore we cannot travel instantaneously); for Aaltonen, they produce valuable reflection points for sense- and decision-making, and can cast light on the seemingly impossible.

"By using chronotopes, we may be able to

reveal significant possibilities for changes where previously we had detected none, reveal parallel interdependent events where previously we had assumed none and reveal repetition of what we had thought unique," Aaltonen explains.

The Third Lens looks at how those responsible for masterminding corporate futures (board members, CEOs, presidents, directors and managers) make sense of various situations and the challenges they face due to a rapidly changing, digital, virtual and global strategic landscape. It questions how we initially define a problem, the actions we take, and the arguments we use to justify our actions, based on the premise that they are all critically intertwined. "We shouldn't have a general theory," Aaltonen argues. "If you use a sense-making model, you can identify when certain kinds of theories, tools and interventions work best. It's a very large structure that absorbs other methods."

His methodology has already won him

The RSA and the Millennium Project

The RSA is constantly engaging with and contributing to new ideas and theories at both a national and a global level.

One of the ways in which we do this is through our involvement with the UN Millennium Project – the RSA acts as the UK node, contributing research and conclusions to its futures studies. It is chaired by RSA acting head of programme Jonathan Carr-West.

Carr-West travelled to Helsinki in June to participate in, and address, a conference designed to expose representatives from

commercial enterprise to futures thinking and improve their understanding of strategic planning theory. He began by covering some of the major global challenges facing humanity, focusing on the consequences of the rapid expansion of the economies of the so-called BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China).

Climate change is foremost among these and Carr-West emphasised its socio-economic consequences before moving on to the problem of resource insecurity, particularly oil and water.

Having underlined the urgent need for action in these and other areas, Carr-West went on to explore the human dimension of these issues. In an increasingly multicultural society, he suggested that we should see diversity as a strength rather than a weakness, and proposed a citizen-centred, participative model of change.

The wealth of new collaborative tools and technological innovations that are available to us are a central part of this model, allowing us to engage in what Carr-West called 'wiki-politics' – a radical approach

that involves the population closely in the democratic process. He concluded by calling for the creation of new social contracts, not only between state and citizen, but between citizens themselves.

Commenting on his visit, Carr-West said: "Contributing to events like this Millennium Project conference is central to our involvement with a broader intellectual network. As the UK node of the Millennium Project, it's vital that we exchange ideas on an international level whenever possible."

critical acclaim from across the globe. Dave Snowden, founder and chief scientific officer of Cognitive Edge – a Singapore-based organisation that seeks to apply insight from science and the humanities to a wider audience – believes this multi-faceted approach encourages ingenuity and creation.

“There are simply too many books and far too many consultants offering a definitive approach to strategy based on models that assume discoverable and repeatable relationships between cause and effect. Such approaches are all too often written with the benefit of hindsight. Multi-ontology sense-making, with its explicit recognition that there are differing types of system in which different causal assumptions apply, offers a radically new way of approaching management in an uncertain world.”

According to Aaltonen, it’s about breaking down conventions. “In Western societies, we have been taught to think that order is good, something that must be maintained,” he argues. “The preference for order is accompanied by the assumption that the very nature of the strategic landscape is order. And because the way we think affects the way we act, there is nothing surprising in the strategic choices that stem from traditional management thinking. Shifting our thinking, or changing our perspectives to disruptive and visionary thinking would provide space for new insights and new actions.”

“By making sense of the trade-offs between time frames and the nature of

the strategic landscape, chronotope space assists the second step, which determines the use of appropriate methods, and the third step, which matches the management interventions.” As well as developing methodology with which to tackle the challenges of our time, Aaltonen has also been involved in helping to identify them.

He works closely with The Millennium Project – the international grouping of futures-focused think-tanks that developed a pioneering list of 15 global challenges that consequently shaped a list of eight Millennium Development Goals.

“This is the fifth year I’ve been involved with the Millennium Project,” he says. “I’ve been in the Planning Committee and worked as a Chair of Helsinki node. In particular, I’ve worked with the Futures Research Methodology in various ways.” He says the objective of the Millennium Project – to create a concrete action plan for the world to

reverse grinding poverty, hunger and disease – requires the same guiding principles as a planning meeting on a Monday morning.

“One of the reasons many real-world problems appear difficult to resolve is that single causes are sought even though such problems arise from the interaction of multiple, underlying and inter-related causes,” he argues. “Rarely is it possible to perceive and define a problem, then design an appropriate intervention and finally select a single course of action. More often the biggest challenge is making sense of what is really happening and identifying those factors which success or failure consists of.” ■

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For more information about the work of the UN Millennium Project, visit www.unmillenniumproject.org

