

Strategizing as polarity management: biographical analysis of leadership in the Polish furniture industry (1989–2015)

Strategizing
as polarity
management

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to analyze the strategic work of Polish entrepreneurs in the furniture industry following the political changes in 1989. The authors examined how these entrepreneurs transitioned from local craftsmen or importers into leaders of international manufacturing companies and how their strategizing contributed to the unprecedented growth of the Polish furniture sector.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors examined extant data, specifically biographical interviews conducted with 11 prominent leaders in the Polish furniture industry (Hryniewicz, 2015, 2018). They analyzed within a theoretical framework that integrates J.C. Spender's theory of strategic management with Barry Johnson's concept of polarity management. Polarity is a way of understanding and managing interdependent, opposing pairs of values or perspectives that give rise to conflict.

Findings – The analysis reveals key patterns of strategic challenges at the level of human agency, history and sense-making. The authors identified four key polarities: life and business, knowledge presence and absence, concordance and discordance, and instrumental and non-instrumental sense-making.

Originality/value – The polarity concept illuminates the interplay of agency and determinism in strategic decision-making, offering valuable insights for methodology and a deeper understanding of Poland's furniture industry.

Keywords Business strategy, Strategizing, Polarity management, Furniture industry, Leadership

Paper type Research paper

In this article [1], we contribute to the understanding of the factors that have led to the remarkable success and rapid growth of the Polish furniture industry over the past few decades. We did this by examining the strategic work of the leading entrepreneurs in this industry.

Following the political changes in 1989, Poland experienced an unprecedented growth in the furniture industry, becoming one of the world's leading furniture producer and exporter. In 2022 [2], Poland ranked second in the world as a furniture exporter, after China. Several Polish brands have gained international recognition and secured a substantial market share. The domestic market has also experienced significant expansion. We may attribute this

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exceptional growth to the strategic work of Polish entrepreneurs, who transformed from local artisans or importers into efficient leaders of international companies (Bielecka, 2014; Janiuk, Ribberink, & Jarosinski, 2017; Jarosinski & Janiuk, 2020; Grzegorzewska & Stasiak-Betlejewska, 2022).

In the following sections, we will discuss the theoretical framework, which merges the theories of strategy and polarity thinking (section 1). Next, we will present the applied methodology and research material (section 2). The subsequent two sections contain the research findings. We will present four polarities that correspond with the three features of strategic work: human agency (life and business; knowledge absence and knowledge presence); nonlinearity (concordance and discordance); and sense-making (instrumental and non-instrumental).

1. Theoretical framework

In his writings, J.C. Spender challenges several mainstream approaches to strategy (Spender, 2014; Kraaijenbrink, Spender, & Groen, 2009). He directs his critique toward the overarching, positivist and abstract conceptualizations of strategy, including the resource-based view (Barney, 1991, 1994, 2002), core competences (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994), dynamic capabilities (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997; Helfat & Peteraf, 2003) and the knowledge-based view (Grant, 1996). Spender's theorizing comes back to the fundamental question of the nature of the firm (Coase, 1937). Spender's approach to strategy is informed by the recognition of uncertainty as a fundamental experience of any entrepreneur and manager (Knight, 1921). The presence of uncertainty renders any attempt at an abstract, general and context-independent theory of strategy futile.

According to Spender, strategizing is not a purely theoretical endeavor but an "empirical concept about overcoming real-world difficulties that derive their meaning from the specific situation's particulars – this chosen objective in this context, at this moment" (Spender, 2014, p. 13). Spender emphasizes the following:

The interplay of identity, intention, and context in strategizing, which is analyzed to uncover and identify knowledge gaps. This analysis cannot be carried out in a general sense; it requires engaging with specific practices and particular uncertainties. Engaging with uncertainties necessitates leveraging (building upon) existing knowledge, and selected knowledge presences. Ultimately, profits arise from leveraging the known to address knowledge gaps that can be connected (Spender, 2014, p. 38–39).

In Spender's vision, three important features characterize the strategic work: (1) human agency (identity and intention), (2) nonlinearity (context, history, events) and (3) sense-making (meaning).

1.1 Human agency

Unlike positivist approaches that tend to marginalize managers in the field of management and overlook the agency of strategists, Spender (2014) emphasizes the central role of managers and leaders in the strategic process. His perspective aligns with Simon's (1957) concept of bounded rationality and Archer's vision of "being human," which recognizes humans as agentic, reflective beings with the capacity for care, discernment, deliberation and dedication (Archer, 1988, 2000, 2003). It is the solution to the problem of the "creeping impersonalism" of the strategic management theory (Powell, 2014).

1.2 Nonlinearity

Strategizing is neither a linear nor a smooth process. It involves breaks, tensions and difficulties. In this regard, we can draw a parallel between Spender's perspective and Paul

Ricoeur's insightful analyses of "time and narrative." Both Spender and Ricoeur built upon Aristotle's *Poetics*, while the latter demonstrated that the action of a story (or history) is never a simple "concordance," in which events seamlessly lead from one to another. In a story, there is always a combination of concordance with discordance (Wood, 2002).

1.3 Sense-making

Spender places a strong emphasis on the role of interpretation and judgment in strategizing. He highlights that strategy work is "firm-specific" and relies on a practical language or jargon through which entrepreneurs can articulate and communicate their vision to those with the necessary skills (Spender, 2014, p. XII). Drawing on Boltanski and Thévenot's *On Justification: Economies of Worth* (2006), we distinguished six worlds or "economies of worth" that people use to make sense of their actions and decisions in various social contexts (market, industrial, fame, civic, inspired, domestic).

We juxtapose the three features of strategic work identified by Spender with the concept of *polarity thinking* and *polarity management* by Johnson (1992, 2014, 2020). This concept is a heuristic that serves as a bridge between theory and practice and thus resonates with Spender's "practical concept" of strategizing. Johnson demonstrates that polarity thinking differs fundamentally from problem-solving, in which we choose one option over another (x OR y). In the case of polarities, we cannot resolve the issues but continually manage them, as each pole has its advantages and disadvantages (x AND y).

Barry Johnson defines a polarity as an interdependent, opposing pair of perspectives that give rise to conflict. Supporters of each pole often fail to recognize their dependence on the representatives of the opposite pole. They also tend to overlook the shadow (disadvantages, limitations, negative outcomes, downsides, etc.) of their pole and the value (advantages, positive outcomes, upsides, etc.) of the other pole. This misrecognition leads to getting stuck in their pole and becoming consumed by both the hidden shadow of their field and the disadvantages of the other field they sought to overcome. The unintended outcome of their actions is a negative feedback loop.

The goal of polarity management is to create a positive feedback loop that leverages polarities, allowing us to benefit from the advantages of both poles without being overwhelmed by their shadow. A practical application of polarity thinking is the use of a polarity map, which bridges the polarity between map and territory, time and space, dynamics and static.

2. Methodology

The empirical data analyzed in this article comes from 11 in-depth biographical interviews with founders and leaders of successful Polish furniture firms (Corvellec, 1997; Fillis, 2003, 2006; Czarniawska, 1997, 2004). The interviewer was Tomasz Hryniewicki, who is the editor-in-chief of "meble.pl," the foremost media group dedicated to the furniture sector. The publishers released the collection of interviews in the form of two extensive volumes, namely *Wizjonerzy i biznesmeni* (Visionaries and Businessmen, 430 pages; Hryniewicki, 2015) and *Wizjonerzy i biznesmeni, część II* (Visionaries and Businessmen, Volume II, 382 pages; Hryniewicki, 2018).

Hryniewicki's explicit intention behind the project was to capture both leaders' business accomplishments as well as their unique character and personality (Hryniewicki, 2015, 2018, p. 7). As the stories of leaders' lives became the stories of their companies, Hryniewicki created a semi-structured type of interview which combined strategic focus on a company with a biographical focus on life. Thus, we might call them strategic-biographical interviews.

The entrepreneurs that Hryniewicki interviewed included:

- (1) Ryszard Balcerkiewicz (RB; the founder of Balma and Noti; the interview conducted in May 2015; Hryniewicki, 2015, pp. 19–89).

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- (2) Jerzy Krzanowski (JK; the co-founder of the Nowy Styl Group; the interview conducted in May 2015; [Hryniewicz, 2015](#), pp. 93–169).
 - (3) Marek Liberacki (ML; the founder of Libro; the interview conducted in April 2015; [Hryniewicz, 2015](#), pp. 173–223).
 - (4) Jan Szynaka (JSz; the founder of the Szynaka Group; the interview conducted in May 2015; [Hryniewicz, 2015](#), pp. 225–291).
 - (5) Piotr Voelkel (PV; the founder of Vox; the interview conducted in June 2015; [Hryniewicz, 2015](#), pp. 293–347).
 - (6) Leszek Wójcik (LW; the founder of Stolpły; the interview conducted in April 2015; [Hryniewicz, 2015](#), pp. 349–427).
 - (7) Tomasz Defratyka (TD; the founder of Deftrans; the interview conducted in August 2017; [Hryniewicz, 2018](#), pp. 9–61).
 - (8) Jan Lenart (JL; the founder of Dig-Net Lenart; the interview conducted in August 2017; [Hryniewicz, 2018](#), pp. 63–141).
 - (9) Janusz Mikołajczyk (JM; the founder of Mikomax, the interview conducted in August 2017; [Hryniewicz, 2018](#), pp. 143–231).
 - (10) Ryszard Rychlik (RR; the co-founder of Profim; the interview conducted in August 2017; [Hryniewicz, 2018](#), pp. 233–341).
 - (11) Wiesław Wajnert (WW; the founder of the Wajnert Meble; the interview conducted in August 2018, pp. 345–379).

The analyzed material is rare and unique. Sociologically speaking, it is a part of an internal conversation within a field ([Bourdieu, 1977](#), p. 11) interviews with the sector’s “celebrities” published by the industry’s professional publishing house and distributed mainly among the furniture industry stakeholders. Moreover, the volumes open with an introduction from Tomasz Wiktorski, a prominent industry consultant. The awareness of these facts informed our critique of the text. We assumed that the facts have been rather accurately accounted for – facing the interviewer and the future readers familiar with the industry-specific conditions and constraints, one is not likely to risk bluffing. On the other hand, life stories told with the awareness of the potential audience are likely to be smoothened and deprived of potential controversies or very personal details. Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract from the material’s value for our specific purpose.

Biographical narratives are known for reflecting the interviewees’ basic intentions and sense-making attempts as well as their life trajectories ([Stanley, 1993](#); [Silverman, 1997](#); [Bednarz-Łuczewska & Łuczewski, 2012](#); [Thompson, 2000](#)). The analyzed material shares no distinction in this regard. Hence, the data correspond to the theoretical framework focusing on the agentic, nonlinear and sense-making dimensions of strategic work and the polarities and paradoxes within them. Through an analysis of existing interviews with business leaders made available to the broader public, we trace the path paved by [Hatch, Kostera and Koźmiński \(2006\)](#), who delved into the essence of leadership using interviews sourced from the Harvard Business Review.

3. Human agency

Spender emphasizes that managers bring their unique perspectives, knowledge and skills to shape strategy. Even when they employ various “positivist” methodologies, such as SWOT analysis or life cycle assessment, they adapt these tools to their specific context, using

judgment to assess which approaches best illuminate their organization's situation (Spender, 2014, pp. 62, 93). By acknowledging the significance of agency, Spender emphasizes the critical role of the human element in strategizing.

There are many ways in which this purely human aspect manifests in strategizing. In the accounts of the entrepreneurs, we observe two central polarities that govern their strategic work: life and business, and knowledge presence and knowledge absence.

3.1 *First sequence: life and business*

Management literature examines the work–life balance of business leaders, with a particular emphasis on female entrepreneurs (Rehman & Roomi, 2012; Agarwal & Lenka, 2015). The most common focus of research in this area is performance outcomes (Beauregard & Henry, 2009; Cegarra-Leiva, Sánchez-Vidal, & Cegarra-Navarro, 2012) and life quality (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003). Kalliath and Brough (2008) review six conceptualizations of work–life balance found in the literature: (1) multiple roles; (2) equity across multiple roles; (3) satisfaction between multiple roles; (4) fulfillment of role salience between multiple roles; (5) a relationship between conflict and facilitation; and (6) perceived control between multiple roles. The polarity thinking framework is closely related to the fifth approach, but it differs in two ways: it shifts the focus from internal and psychological aspects to behavioral and strategic ones, and it emphasizes the role of proper management of the relationship between private life and work. The tension between the two spheres might resolve into polarization and conflict or into positive spillover, where work and private life enhance each other.

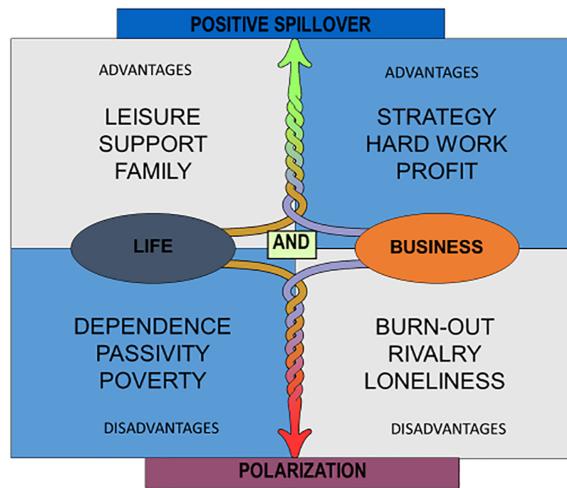
At home, in the upstairs bathroom, we had a darkroom where we could develop photos using the traditional method. . . . At one point, we even started experimenting with colors, although it was not straightforward with the chemicals. However, we had an uncle who handled insurance claims at PZU [Polish Insurance Company]. . . . He said, 'If you want to earn some extra money, I'm willing to pay you this much for the photos.' . . . We had quite a few orders because every car required a certain number of photos, and we could make quite a decent amount of money doing it after hours (JK: 95–96).

This is how Jerzy Krzanowski, an icon of the Polish furniture industry, recalled his first decent job that he took on with his brother, Adam, during the last years of primary school. Later on, he emigrated to Israel where, without language skills, a place to stay or money, he started working at a restaurant.

I had only one day off per month. Just one day. There were even times when I didn't get an hour of sleep for forty-eight hours straight. That taught me that I was not afraid of work. In fact, I've never been afraid of work because we had a small farm, and there was always something to do, weeding, digging potatoes (JK: 109).

In 1991, when he returned to Poland, Krzanowski attempted a series of unsuccessful businesses (an ice cream stall, fast-food bar, wedding dress rental and real estate agency). When his brother started working in the furniture company, Whyte, in the US and sent him a poster, Krzanowski wrote back saying that it could be a business in Poland. He suggested giving it a try (JK: 119).

These fragments capture well the initial polarity all entrepreneurs had to face, which is the tension between their personal life and business. Krzanowski's case exemplifies this tension to the extreme: a life of hard work since early childhood, constant work without any days off and even working 48 hours without sleep. Figure 1 depicts these tensions. It appears that Jerzy Krzanowski and his brother wanted to leave the disadvantages: Communist "poverty," "passivity" and "dependence" (on the state, family, milieu) and invested so heavily in "strategy," "hard work" and "profit" that they risked radical polarization between their life and business. There was a risk of viewing life merely as a "problem" to be overcome and



Source(s): Own elaboration

Figure 1.
Polarity map: life and business

dissolved in the pursuit of business success. However, without family, leisure and support (of extended family and friends), they would have been consumed by the negative consequences of this extreme focus, such as burnout, rivalry and loneliness. This negative feedback loop could eventually result in passivity, dependence and poverty, which they initially wanted to escape.

However, all the interviewees mentioned the crucial role of the family. The private life was not only a ball and chain that prevented the young men from fully developing their business potential. Neither was their business a force that would drag them away from their loved ones. The founders' private life shaped and enhanced the companies in question and sometimes even enabled their existence. Let us enumerate the strategies for leveraging the life–business polarity, which enabled the leaders to benefit from the advantages of focusing on both life and business (leisure and strategy, support and hard work, family and profit):

- (1) *Family support for business.* Families encouraged hard work very early on. Moreover, there was a transfer of family capital to business. For instance, the first machines and factory lines were often constructed with the help of ingenious uncles and friends.
- (2) *Establishing a family enterprise.* Founders established all companies as family enterprises, and various family members were involved. In some cases (e.g. Tomasz Defratyka, Janusz Mikołajczyk, Wiesław Wajnert), wives co-founded the company. Moreover, as the enterprise grew, the next generation would get involved in the company, sometimes taking it over. Ryszard Balcerkiewicz and Janusz Mikołajczyk have shared their experiences of the succession process, one completed and the other ongoing.
- (3) *The emergence of extended families.* Over decades, deep bonds of trust developed within the Polish furniture industry. Families and clans run this business, and together they constitute a sort of *extended furniture family*. For instance, Marek Liberacki built his fortune with the support of Jan Szynaka. Leszek Wójcik, the owner of one of the two production halls, witnessed its destruction due to fire, along with the machines and materials. However, during this challenging time, both suppliers and workers displayed a remarkably generous attitude:

The factories producing panels, all the factories in Poland, provided the materials. They did not ask for money. . . . Everyone: Grajewo, Szczecinek, and Wieruszów plants. We didn't have a problem with the supply of raw materials, it came without payment for the invoice. . . . People cleaned up because everything was smoky, and there were ruins, just like after the war. . . . In that misfortune, as I said, a bond formed. My trust in people formed, because no one left me to myself in that misfortune (LW, 403).

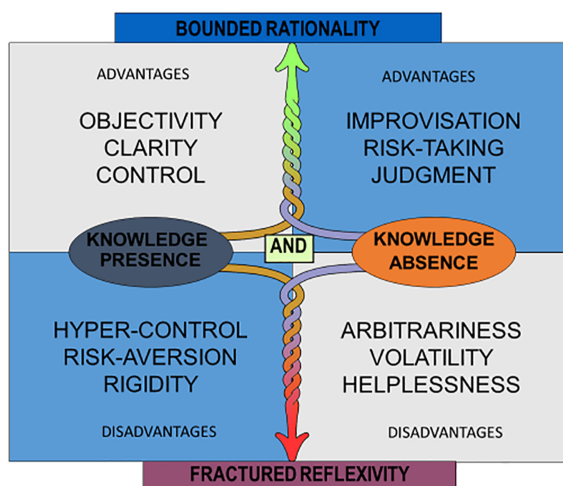
3.2 Second sequence: knowledge absence and knowledge presence

Spender (2014, p. 39) argues that strategizing involves grappling with three types of knowledge absences: ignorance (not knowing what one can know), indeterminacy (not knowing what others can do and how they can impact us) and incommensurability (not knowing how to measure). Strategists face gaps in knowledge and unexpected challenges that require them to make judgments and devise creative solutions. They must navigate through uncertainty and develop strategies that address the “surprising, incomplete, or illogical nature of what arises through our practice” (Spender, 2014, pp. 111–112).

However, the strategists rely also on their rationality and computable knowledge about the world. In this sense, some of their choices are predetermined. The space of strategist's work is woven of certainty and uncertainty; knowledge presence and knowledge absence. “Thus strategy's paradox is that it works as a middle ground between un-analyzable free choice and strategy-denying full determination even as this territory cannot be described by either” (Spender & Kraaijenbrink, 2022, p. 13). Therefore, strategizing requires the ability to leverage the fundamental polarity between knowledge absence and knowledge presence (see Figure 2).

After the fall of communism in 1989, the young Polish free market was still characterized by shortages and scarcity, from raw materials and infrastructure to capital and professional knowledge about business. Hence, leaders' knowledge gaps were vast.

Many narratives include the moments of “having no idea,” “guessing” or simply “the stroke of luck” as well as obvious mistakes made when informed, evidence-based action was not an option because of the omnipresence of “knowledge absence.” Jerzy Balcerkiewicz recounted one of the most radical examples of entering the space of the unknown:



Source(s): Own elaboration

Figure 2.
Polarity map:
knowledge absence
and knowledge
presence

The plot was empty. There was no electricity, no concept – from my side – of how to build, what to build. I had fifty thousand square meters of land. Five hectares. I bought it blindly, with money, so I could invest. Only then did the thinking begin about what to build in that place. First, I could not afford to hire a professional designer. Second, at that time there were no specialized offices that designed factories. Third, I had no idea what this factory should look like. What it should look like now, how it should look in the future. The only clear thing was that there was a piece of land, there was a business that operated in two plants in Poznań and Przeźmierowo, and we needed to quickly build the first hall in Tarnowo Podgórne to reduce operating costs (JB, 47).

Deciding to buy land, Balcerkiewicz followed his intuition, “gut feeling” rather than instrumental rationality. He took a step into the risky world of uncertainty. In the face of predominant knowledge absences, Balcerkiewicz made a leap of faith. However, his general approach to decision-making was more balanced. Whenever uncertainty was not prevalent, Balcerkiewicz would resort to various types of knowledge for guidance. In such a case, the style of narrative would change, and he would use grammatical forms that obscure the agent behind the action: “it had to be done, so it was done,” “we had to,” “it required.” Balcerkiewicz intuitively felt the quasi-deterministic power of what he perceived as objective knowledge.

This balanced approach to polarity prevented Balma from falling into two types of vicious circles. The first type occurs when an entrepreneur becomes so focused on the potential benefits of venturing into the unknown that they lose touch with reality and objectivity. As a result, they might be drawn into the shadow of the “knowledge absence” pole, becoming arbitrary, volatile and helpless. This, in turn, could lead to a negative feedback loop, in which they become increasingly controlling, risk-averse and rigid. In any case, the result is a failure.

To illustrate that threat, Jerzy Krzanowski recalled the moment when Nowy Styl acquired ELJOT, a company founded by Jerzy Langier, a prominent Polish designer. The furniture designed by Langier was famous for its artistry and beauty, but they never sold well. Langier took too much risk and based his business model on his judgment which proved to be misguided. He did not balance his focus on knowledge-absences and gut feeling with market research or any other knowledge source. Consequently, the shadow of his preferred pole (knowledge absences) overwhelmed him, especially the ignorance of finances. This led to arbitrary decisions, volatility and helplessness in his business.

Langier simply could not handle the financial aspect. He was so focused on his design and living in his own world that he had no control over the economic side. He eventually went bankrupt. When we took over ELJOT, it was already in the throes of agony (JK, 151).

The second type of vicious circle starts with overemphasizing clarity, objectivity and control, while rejecting improvisation, risk-taking and judgment. Although there is no trace of such a case in the interviews, we can easily imagine that the possible final outcome would be equally unfortunate. Both types of imbalance lead to strategic disorientation akin to the state described in sociology as fractured reflexivity (Bauman, 1992; Archer, 2012).

The interviewees’ accounts revealed a constant and dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown. The real strategic artistry consists in keeping the balance between the two. However, the exact shape of that balance was unique for each entrepreneur at each time. The proper management of this polarity, that is, leveraging the upsides of both poles, places the strategist in the realm of *bounded rationality*. This also means that they avoid the negative loop leading to fractured reflexivity.

There are three main types of tactics for leveraging the polarity between knowledge presence and knowledge absence.

- (1) *Learning (from scratch) by doing*. This tactic was based on leaping into the unknown (knowledge absence) to learn (knowledge presence). This type of turning knowledge absences into knowledge presences occurred especially in the years following the

collapse of Communism. Ryszard Balcerkiewicz acknowledged that he learned about design “from observing what functions a computer desk should fulfill. . . . Based on these observations and the needs of the customer, a product was created using materials that were available on the market. That is how design was done back then” (RB:39).

- (2) *Bricolage*. An extreme case of action under bounded rationality is the type of activity described by the Polish word “kombinowanie.” It is a colloquial term that can be translated as “bricolage,” “scheming,” “plotting” or “figuring things out.” It implies the act of using clever or resourceful tactics to achieve a desired outcome, often through unconventional means. It can have both positive and negative connotations, depending on the context. In the analyzed narratives, the term occurred often and in various forms, especially in the stories about the economic boom of the early nineties. Jerzy Balcerkiewicz called it “Polish resourcefulness” and recalled that in the eighties, to arrange for “twenty tons of steel,” he had to give a . . . box of chocolates. “Those who showed more resourcefulness and creativity could get the raw materials. It was not a normal market purchase, but rather arranging, connections, and relationships” (RB, 25).
- (3) *Pushing forward and improving later*. Another strategy was overemphasizing the development of the company, *knowing* that it might risk its stability and yet hoping that there would be time to make up for all mismanagement:

We always operated on the assumption that even if there were imperfections, it was better to push everything forward very strongly and then organize it at the stage of stabilization, because there is always a point of stabilization (JK, 139).

4. Nonlinearity

The life story is best described as a paradoxical “discordant concordance” or “concordant discordance” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 42). Discordance occurs when actors encounter obstacles or challenges that disrupt the flow of their actions. When they manage to overcome these obstacles, concordance is restored, and their actions continue. However, if the obstacles prove insurmountable, such as guilt, death or suffering, the action comes to a standstill, and discordance prevails. These discordances are brought about by breaks or (tragic) events that impede the realization of the protagonist’s intentions.

4.1 Third sequence: concordance and discordance

In the course of their narratives, the interviewees switched between two main modes of storytelling. On the one hand, they presented the development of their companies as a linear, concordant unfolding. On the other hand, they recounted events and tensions that were discordant.

Let us roughly reconstruct the concordant versions presented as three main trajectories of development or three main business models (BM).

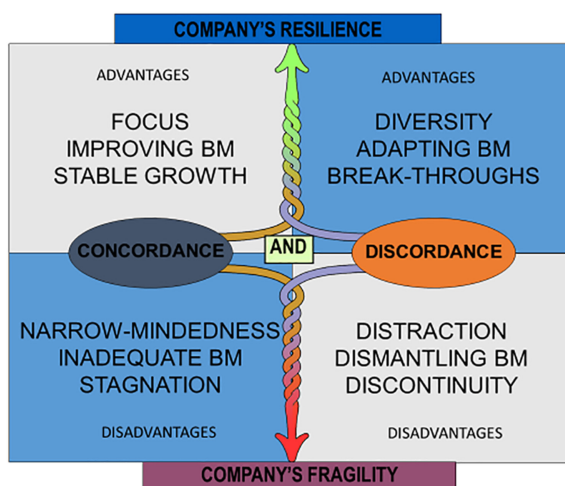
- (1) Improving BM: From *craftsmen to a large, professional manufacturer* (sometimes with domestic brand recognition) (JS, RB, ML, LW, JL)
 - Craftsman with some connection to the furniture industry, lack of previous business experience, no tertiary education
 - Turning into a manufacturer, building a production site with primitive machinery
 - Export to Russia or intensive sales at the domestic market

-
- Reorientation to the Western client
 - Intensive investment in production sites, professionalization of production
 - Subcontracting for large international players
 - Developing a brand in the domestic market
- (2) Adapting BM: From *exposure to Western business practices to building an international brand*. (JK, PV)
- Contact with Western business practices (working abroad in the early stage of life)
 - Entering the furniture market as a business decision
 - Fast learning by observing (Western factories, international trade fairs).
 - Switching between various markets (East, West, domestic)
 - Expanding thanks to subcontracting
 - Developing a brand
 - Developing a side-project (addition to the core business) or
 - Expansion, development of business model
 - Entering global business
- (3) Adapting BM: From *domestic spheres of high social capital (large firms, academia, business) to an international brand*. (RR, JM, TD)
- Founder with relatively large social capital (in state-owned business, academia, Solidarność, etc.)
 - After 1989 – the first entrepreneurial attempts
 - Entering the furniture market as a business decision.
 - Furniture import
 - Production
 - Switching between various markets (East, West, domestic)
 - Developing a brand
 - Developing a side-project (addition to the core business) or
 - Expansion and development of the business model.
 - Entering global business

Figure 3 depicts the dynamic of the discordant–concordant trajectories.

The trajectories converge at some points, but at others, they are quite distinct. All the companies in question had large or very large production capacities, which they utilized by adjusting their business models to focus more on manufacturing for large international business clients (trajectory 1) or to become more integrated along the value chain (trajectories 2 and 3).

However, the interviewers also talked about disruption in the flow of their actions or discordance. The recurrent topics included:



Source(s): Own elaboration

Figure 3.
Polarity map:
concordance and
discordance

- (1) The inflation and the rising cost of loans in the early 90s;
- (2) The closing of the Russian market to furniture import from Poland in 1998;
- (3) The sharp decline in the appreciation of the zloty against the euro in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, rendering export to the West far less profitable;
- (4) Pivots caused by disagreement with a major client.

However, proactive pivots, acquisitions, radical broadening of the product portfolio or expansion to new markets intentionally provoked some disruption, while some discontinuities were unique – a sudden stroke of luck or misfortune, discouragement, fraud and corruption, legal conflicts with business partners or bullying business partners.

On the whole, successful entrepreneurs would alternate between continuity and disruption tactics. Both were elements of their toolkit used consciously or not in their strategic pursuit. Their practical philosophy was based on the idea that strategy is never fully linear nor constantly disrupted. A resilient company is both a flexible, diverse entity that is ready to pivot and a well-calibrated machine that excels in its field.

5. Sense-making

In line with Spender's perspective, [Ricoeur \(1984\)](#) argues that stories play a crucial role in the process of sense-making. Stories allow us to organize events and experiences into a coherent plot, encompassing both concordant and discordant elements. Ricoeur underlines that sense-making is possible from the point of view of the story's conclusion ([Ricoeur, 1984](#), pp. 66–67). Thus, depending on the given conclusions, the stories will have a different meaning for the leaders. After [Boltanski and Thévenot \(2006\)](#), let us distinguish six “worlds” or “economies of worth” that provide different frameworks for sense-making.

5.1 Fourth sequence: instrumental and non-instrumental

We want to distinguish the last polarity between instrumental stories (market, industrial and fame economies of worth) and human, non-instrumental stories (domestic, civic,

inspired). All of these stories served as sense-making tools that informed strategic decisions about business. At different stages of life and in altering circumstances, entrepreneurs would resort to instrumental and non-instrumental economies of worth.

By definition, a business leader has to use instrumental justifications in their work. The strategic language they construct to build a firm and collaborate with business partners has to be sufficiently loaded with instrumental logic, otherwise, a leader might be (perceived as) unsuccessful, sloppy and incompetent. However, it is also interesting to see how their leadership becomes more integrated as they resort to other parts of their personalities and pursue some non-instrumental values. If they do not, they might become uncaring, imitative and close-minded leaders.

In the early stages of their professional development, the interviewees made sense of their stories as business stories, that is, they focused on sense-making derived from market, industrial and fame economies of worth.

- (1) *Industrial*. The industrial economy focuses on productive labor, expertise and the rational organization of work to drive technological progress and societal development. In this vein, industry leaders often construct narratives of a civilizational leap, starting from basic craft workshops and evolving into international players with state-of-the-art technology, design, marketing and management. For example, Jan Szynaka mentioned acquiring advanced production lines from IMA, a leading manufacturer in furniture production, to remain competitive in Europe, thanks to modern technology (JS, 286). Similarly, Jerzy Krzanowski concluded his interview by noting that apart from Nowy Styl, there are only two such modern factories in Europe. "We are no longer just a Polish company," as we have from 600 square meters to 300,000 square meters of production halls (JK, 117, 120). "The rest are old productions run by older gentlemen in their seventies, who still manage everything. However, they will never be modern" (JK, 169).
- (2) *Market*. The market economy operates on the principles of competition, supply and demand, and the drive for economic efficiency and profitability. In his account, Jerzy Krzanowski presented the company's early story as one of exponential growth. The milestones included leaving behind any domestic competition and becoming a significant player in the foreign market.

There was no competition. At that time, Italy was considered the competition, because we had grown very strongly. . . . The growth was so immense that even if some companies tried to do something similar to what we were doing, they were far behind us and could never catch up (JK, 129).

- (3) *Fame*. The economy of fame focuses on reputation, recognition and the pursuit of distinction and social status. For the interviewees, the social status was marked especially by their presence at the Orgatec fairs in Cologne, the most prestigious furniture fairs in Europe, "where companies exhibit rather for prestige and brand building purposes" (TD: 43). Ryszard Rychlik recounted that his company Profim started with a 50 square meter booth at Orgatec to present a 500 square meters stand years later. "We are already a significant partner. In fact, we have such a good reputation that the organizers visit us regularly and guarantee the same spot for us" (RR: 316).

Later on in their careers, the industry leaders repeatedly expanded their sense-making strategies beyond business narratives, incorporating elements of domestic, civic and inspired economies of worth. This enabled them to establish a dynamic polarity between instrumental and non-instrumental justifications, fostering a creative tension.

- (4) *Domestic*. The domestic economy centers around family and the values of care, love and personal relationships. Jan Szynaka expanded the factory that was established by his father. Before his father's death, Jan recalled:

When I was seriously ill in the hospital, I was making windows in the cinema in Ilawa and supervising all the work because we had an employee and several apprentices. When he was released from the hospital, he did not go home. The first thing he did was to go to the cinema to see the results of my work.

In the 90s, Szynaka bought a bankrupt company where his father used to work and "the history made a full circle" (JSz, 240). The bond with his father was not limited to their shared work but also extended to shared values. Szynaka recalled how his father fought at Monte Cassino in Anders' Army. Before his death, "he wanted to go back there, visit the graves of his comrades, but unfortunately, he never had the opportunity. When I visited Monte Cassino several years after his death, I could feel his longing. It was a very touching moment for me" (JSz: 231, 249).

- (5) *Civic*. The civic economy emphasizes citizenship, public duty and the common good. It involves norms and values associated with democratic participation and collective decision-making. It is in this spirit that Piotr Voelkel recalled that he bought a private Polish university (SWPS) for the common good of Poland.

This led to the creation of furniture for young people that teaches children how to change the world. . . . Such furniture is created through analyzing the needs of future users and studying changes in lifestyle. In collaboration with anthropologists and psychologists, we design furniture for the new generation (PV, 335).

- (6) *Inspired*. This inspired economy is based on religious or spiritual values and emphasizes devotion, faith and the pursuit of a higher purpose (see also [Palmgren, 2008](#)). In this vein, Ryszard Balcerkiewicz emphasizes that "we must leave something behind us. Not just material things, but also non-material ones. I think that helping those who are struggling or sharing what you have with those who do not have is inherent in human action" (RB, 20).

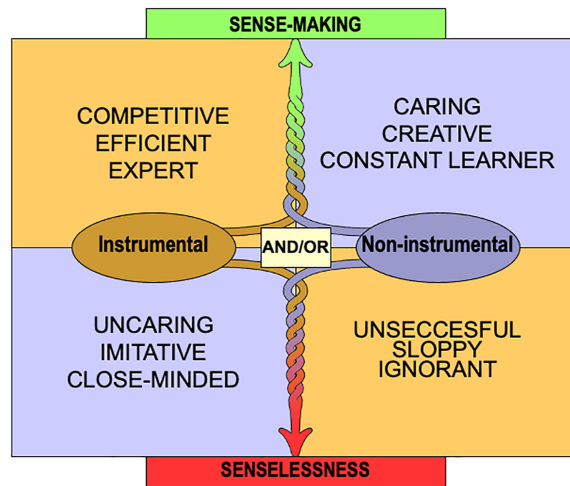
Figure 4 depicts the process of combining different sources of sense in business.

Effective leveraging of the polarity of instrumental and non-instrumental sense-making was present in all stories. It was instrumental to combine the business world of justifications with non-instrumental ones to provide market/industry/fame economies with some ultimate meaning ([Briggs & Reiss, 2021](#)). The most consequential moment in Szynaka's professional and spiritual life was John Paul II's Mass in Olsztyn, where the altar manufactured by Szynaka stood. Szynaka recalls:

The pope was the only holy person who kissed the object of my work, the product of my hands. He kissed it twice: once at the beginning of the Mass and again at the end. It is a strength given to me, my family, and everything I do. . . . All that I am telling you now are experiences that are not found in business. Nevertheless, every event I mentioned has influenced who I am now (JSz, 289–291).

6. Conclusions

The article focused on the strategic work of the top Polish furniture industry leaders. It examined the challenges they face and uncovered key patterns related to managing polarities while strategizing. The study identified four crucial polarities: the polarity between life and business, knowledge presence and knowledge absence, concordance and discordance, and instrumental and non-instrumental sense-making. These findings



Source(s): Own elaboration

Figure 4.
Polarity map:
instrumental and non-
instrumental

contribute primarily to the knowledge about the factors underlying the successful development of the Polish furniture sector. The polarity concept allowed us to see the dynamism and drama in past events, even though their end results were already known. We can view past pivotal moments as open-ended and reconstruct many of the processes and factors that led to the outcome. We depicted the skillful interplay between the entrepreneur's agency and the opportunities emerging in a time of political and economic transition.

Another implication of this study is its methodological potential. The Spender/Johnson theoretical framework, paired with the narrative research methods, opened the possibility of studying the elusive interface of human agency and material reality with its deterministic forces. Thus, our methodology combines idiographic (unique, specific, situated) and nomothetic (patterns, generalities, principles) approaches. The positivistic methods could not provide a viable and useful description of such an interface because of the incommensurability of these two realms.

While our study was conducted in the Polish furniture industry, the results have implications that go beyond this specific context. Johnson (1992, 2014, 2020) argues that polarities are universal and that we may find similar polarities in different contexts. The challenges and dilemmas that we observed in the Polish furniture industry are likely to be found in other industries and countries that share similar characteristics. Therefore, our findings could be relevant to studies of businesses that stem from craft, family businesses or firms founded in semi-peripheral but rising economies.

With its focus on the strategist's point of view, our study provides phronetic knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006) useful for management and leadership education, practical strategizing and more qualitatively oriented academic research. The narratives are inherently engaging and motivating for readers; the polarity methodology provides a framework for identifying patterns across multiple cases and thus developing critical thinking.

However, our methodology has some limitations. We may apply it when the aim is to understand a specific, situated business situation or to see similarities between some concrete cases. The idiographic element of our method is limitless in its usefulness when the focus is only on generalities. Hence, we cannot extrapolate these findings mechanically to other realities. The biographical interviews provided some insights into an entrepreneur's internal

processes, while the fact that the interviews were published and open to the field's critique ensured a certain level of conformity with facts. However, as far as exact conformity with actual events is concerned, these are only approximations, mediated by narrations. Therefore, the results are more akin to ethnographic data and such is their applicability.

Notes

1. This article is based on the results of the research project nr 2014/15/D/HS4/01173 financed by the National Science Centre in Poland.
2. Raport Polskie Meble Outlook 2022, B + R Studio na zlecenie Ogólnopolskiej Izby Gospodarczej Producentów Mebli

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