

EDITORIAL

The Lasting Impact and Intellectual Legacy of H. Igor Ansoff, the Father of Strategic Management

Perspectives in Strategy: Mintzberg on the Influence of Ansoff

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Received: 26 April 2025 | **Revised:** 20 January 2026 | **Accepted:** 12 February 2026

1 | Introduction

In the history of strategic management thought, few intellectual rivalries have been as enduring, or as illuminating, as the dialogue between Igor Ansoff and Henry Mintzberg. One championed systematic planning, the other warned of its limitations. One codified strategy from practice, the other sought to reveal how it truly emerged in organizations. Together, they shaped a field still wrestling with their questions: Is strategy best designed from the top, or does it grow from the ground up?

In April 2025, Henry Mintzberg reflected on his encounters with Ansoff with the guest editors, recounting four stories that ranged from missed research opportunities and serendipitous sabbaticals to spirited debates and a poignant final meeting. What emerges is not only a portrait of two towering figures, but also a reminder of how ideas evolve through both conflict and connection.

1.1 | Story One

1.1.1 | A Thesis That Might Have Been

So, I had a doctoral student who is struggling to find a topic for his thesis. I said, don't worry, because I didn't have a clue what I should do for my thesis and struggled for 6 months to find a topic, so don't worry. I wasn't sure what to do, but *Corporate strategy* (Ansoff 1965) had just been published and was making quite a hit. And so, I thought it was really about diversification decisions. I guess diversification and development decisions. I thought, why don't we generalize this model and I could study a company and do that strategic planning kind of generally.

But, you know, I wasn't in contact with people in companies very much to make that big an offer. So, I proposed it to the new dean, Bill Pounds,¹ at the MIT Sloan school where I was. He very kindly turned it down. And so, I dropped that idea. The head of NASA, the space agency, wanted to be studied and approached some professors at the Sloan school at MIT to do that, and I was the only professor remotely interested in general management or strategy. Just like Igor was the only professor at Carnegie who was remotely interested in general management or strategy, I was the only doctoral student who could conceivably do that. NASA arranged for an airplane to take some professors on a tour to see various parts of the space agency's work, including Cape Canaveral and meeting Werner von Braun in Houston (Texas) and all this kind of stuff. So, I ended up doing that. Except, Webb² got embroiled in some political problems and so I ended up studying five other people. The interesting side of the story is, given that I subsequently wrote a book called the *Rise and fall of strategic planning* (Mintzberg 1994), where would my career have gone if Bill Pounds had agreed for me to do that? But anyway, I was caught up in Igor's book, like other people. So that is my first story of Igor.

1.2 | Story Two

1.2.1 | Networks in the Provence—Igor's Invisible Hand

Then I took a job at McGill University (1968) and took a sabbatical 7 years later and ended up in Aix-en-Provence (as a visiting professor at Université d'Aix-Marseille from 1974 to 1976), which is in the south of France. I had just spent a semester at Carnegie in the spring of 1973, because of the famous Carnegie Tech organization theory stuff. It was a very

Highlights

- Ansoff's book *Corporate Strategy* shaped Mintzberg's early intellectual direction.
- In the early 1970s, Ansoff catalyzed the field by connecting European strategy scholars.
- His institutional groundwork culminated in the Strategic Management Society (1980).
- Mintzberg never engaged with Ansoff's holistic school; in interviews he seemed puzzled and never revised his own strategy schools framework.
- Beyond debate, Mintzberg remembered Ansoff with respect and affection.

strange visit because, you know, I went to the cathedral where management education (or business education) began; with all these famous people, Ansoff and March and Simon and everybody. And they had all been gone in different ways. March had gone to Stanford, Cyert had become the dean, Simon had gone off to psychology. And here are all these Scandinavian students there to get the word about Carnegie Tech organization theory. I was the only one who could help them. And I had only been a professor for a little while. I defended my thesis in 1968 and this is 1973. They turned to me because there was no one else.

1.2.2 | Meeting for the First Time

Well, I don't recall when I first met Igor. When I went to Carnegie he wasn't there. So, I might have met him at the Academy of Management conference. I don't recall that though. I do remember Dan Schendel right from the very beginning. But the first Academy of Management conference that I went to was in 1972. So that was shortly before I left for France. I faintly recall visiting the Institute (EIASM) when I was there in Brussels. I probably met Igor then. We met each other at different things that were going on. Remember, he was the senior guy; I was going to imitate his thesis, his book, right? Who was I? I don't recall meeting him that much; I certainly recall having contact with him, maybe through mail or phone calls, or whatever. But we probably met at some conferences. But I don't remember the first time.

Well, you could not even get a phone in France at that time. People who wanted to see me where I was would knock on the door because it was a 2 year wait to get a telephone. Believe it or not, I could call Geneva more easily than I could call Paris. I don't remember the specifics, but I do remember how prominent he (Igor) was in putting people together, including myself.

I still have the article *Research on strategy-making* (Mintzberg 1972). That had about six papers³ presented in the Planning division; I think it was called the Planning division (note: The full name is Division of Business Policy and Planning, Academy of Management). That's where all the papers were presented. Today you have to choose from hundreds.

Igor wrote *The concept of strategic management* (Ansoff 1972) around the same time in the *Journal of Business Policy*.

Oh yeah, that was that book, published by...I can't remember who. Yeah, I'm in there (Mintzberg 1979) and he is in there (Ansoff 1979b), too. Yes, so that was a bit later. So, we met at the Pittsburgh conference in 1977? That would almost certainly be the first time that I met him.

1.2.3 | Laying the Foundation of Strategic Management

Igor was memorable and phenomenal in what he did. I'm not sure if he left Carnegie permanently, maybe temporarily, but went to the Institute for research in management in Brussels (European Institute for Advanced Studies in Management). I arrived in 1974 and spent 2 years on sabbatical. Igor had done a phenomenal job of bringing together all the professors who were interested in strategy in Europe. The Strategic Management Society (SMS) did not start in America, but it really started with Igor pulling all these people together. From Italy, Claudio Demattè,⁴ Derek F. Channon from England, and all kinds of people, and I became part of that network. He really did something quite fantastic. Toward the end of my stay, I ran a conference in Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume (Mintzberg 1977) and all these people were invited, including Derek F. Channon and Dan E. Schendel from the States. I'm not sure if Igor was there, but he must have been. I have to look it up.

So, we brought all these people together. That is where Dan met Derek and that was the start of the SMS. It really started because Igor had set up all of the relationships that made that conference possible. Andrew Pettigrew was another one, all of them well-known writers. So, that led to the Strategic Management Journal (SMJ). Dan Schendel came up to me 1 day, a few years later, and said he'd like to do a journal, but being the head of the Planning division at the Academy of Management, they are not allowed to start a separate journal. I said, Dan, the division is not allowed to start a separate journal, but Dan Schendel is allowed to start a separate journal. So, he went ahead and did what became *Strategic Management Journal*. Igor was basically behind all that. None of that would have happened or would have taken longer and happened differently if not for Igor Ansoff. And that was the conference at Saint-Maximin-la-Sainte-Baume. There are two issues of the *International Studies of Management & Organization* on that conference (Vol. 7, Iss. 2, 1977 and Vol. 7, Iss. 3–4, 1977). Igor republished his paper *Strategy formulation as a learning process: An applied managerial theory of strategic behavior* (Ansoff 1977).

1.3 | Story Three

1.3.1 | And Then There Were the Debates ...

Let's go back to the seminal time of the original strategy schools debates with Igor in *Long Range Planning* and *Strategic Management Journal* (1990–1994). Alright, this is what I remember about the debates preceding *Learning 1—planning 0* (Mintzberg 1991). Derek F. Channon ran the first SMS

conference in the late 70s. I ran the second one. There was a kind of starter; we did not have too many people (about 400 in the second one), which was quite good. Richard Pascale, who had written a book about the art of Japanese management, was on the panel. He presented Honda (B). It was not called Honda (B) officially, but Harvard had written this case⁵ about how brilliant Honda had been in capturing the motorcycle market in the United States. That is a key part of this. He (Pascale) went in to interview the executives and it was a complete fallacy. Nothing like BCG had conveyed it in that case. He presented Honda (B) for the first time, and that was the alternate view of what really happened at that conference. The next morning Michael Porter appeared; he was presenting. As is with Mikey, he flew in, presented, and flew out. But after Pascale had completely debunked this whole thing, Porter mentioned the beautiful case and people in the audience were snickering because they already heard Pascale's view from the other side. So, this became an interesting thing.

1.3.2 | Henry Doesn't Recall Igor's Holistic School of Strategic Management

In the elaborate book chapter on strategy schools (Mintzberg 1990a), I attempted to illustrate each school with a leading example. Ansoff (1965) was featured in my design school, and I put Learned et al. (1965) and Selznick (1957) in the planning school. The design school is very similar to the planning school, but there is one distinction (Mintzberg et al. 2012, 57). In the same year, I wrote my article on the design school for *Strategic Management Journal* (Mintzberg 1990b).

Then Ansoff responded and said: 'Many readers will recognize that the author is a 40-year card carrying member of one of the schools that Henry confines to obscurity' (Ansoff 1991, 450). He continues by pointing out 'One of the prescriptive schools, which through the years, has stayed in close touch with the changing practice of strategic management, and in recent years has made several original contributions to the practice of management. I will refer to this school as the holistic school of strategic management' (Ansoff 1991, 452). Ansoff continued by explaining that his book *Corporate strategy* (Ansoff 1965) is a 'codification of the author's practical experience' (Ansoff 1991, 452) learned at Lockheed Aircraft Corporation. Prior to going to Carnegie, Ansoff took a sabbatical, grew a beard, and brought half a case of whiskey and contemplated about his life, while he walked on the beach (Antoniou and Sullivan 2006).

Regardless, I don't remember anything about the holistic school. Obviously, it is not included in the book *Strategy safari*, except the configuration school, maybe. The book *Corporate strategy* was clearly a planning model. So, we put that in the planning school. Whereas Andrews, and we distinguish that in the book anyway, had a much looser, but compatible view of strategy. Centered around the chief executive as architect of strategy, rather than around planners. In fact, Andrews was a heavy critic of strategic planning too.

They (note: Harvard Business School faculty in the 1960s) saw it as a personal, intuitive process in which Harvard trained people to think strategically. I don't think they ever did. You don't

learn to be strategic by sitting around and shooting your mouth off about cases or situations that you never experienced, or read 20 pages on a subject the night before. This doesn't make you a strategist. But those that came out as strategists came in as strategists. Case studies didn't make them into strategists, I think. In any event, that was the difference and Ansoff was very different from Andrews.

Don't forget I benefited from my own doctoral thesis (Mintzberg 1968), which I'm not sure if Igor ever referenced or read. I'm not saying he didn't; I just have no idea. But I benefited from watching managers and realizing that they weren't what they were supposed to be doing. To say that corporate strategy is management, Steiner (1969) is basically saying the same thing would not work for me. Management is a very different process. Andrews may have been closer, except Andrews denied anybody else's involvement, really. The Harvard trained chief executives, and therefore strategy, came from the people Harvard trained. Whereas Igor would have been in favor of a systematic process for creating strategy. And then Pascale comes along and shows where strategies essentially come from; nobody ever did that. Nobody ever looked where strategies actually come from. Actually, we started a whole series of studies. We did about 15 studies tracking how strategies really develop (Mintzberg 2008). So that is the basis for my view. And you see planning, if you can call it that, Air Canada's strategy was very planned but they weren't very visionary at all. That's where we have the entrepreneurial or the visionary school, with people who have a lot of capacity for synthesis or holism if you like; that is how strategies develop holistically, I think.

I'm just a bit stumped by the holistic school in the following sense. To call an analytical technique holistic is to deny the other face of management. Which is the face I saw when I wrote my doctoral thesis. Holistic would be much more as I wrote in *The nature of managerial work* (Mintzberg 1973).

1.3.3 | On Managing Strategy

My favorite strategic vision or insight these days is IKEA. That on its website explains how it got into flatpack furniture. Unassembled furniture. Their story is that a worker tried to put a table in his car and it didn't fit. So, they took the legs off. Then came the strategic moment, when somebody said: 'Wait a minute, if we have to take the legs off, so do our customers'. To me, that is strategy. I can't comment on Ansoff's view later on, because I maybe didn't follow it. I can imagine that's covered. If you can say that Ansoff was drawn a little bit toward Andrews, in the sense from what you just described it sounds that he came closer to Andrews, it is still an overemphasis on the chief executive and the central leadership as the 'be all and end all of strategy'. Whereas the Honda story and the IKEA story are both about building up strategy from the grass roots.

Ansoff was more of an analyst than a manager. Maybe his experience as dean at Vanderbilt is indicative of that. He was more analytical, more systematic. To call that holistic? To me, holism means analysis plus synthesis. And synthesis is not analysis. Porter's quote, that I went after him about, saying 'I favor a set of analytical techniques for developing strategy' (Porter 1980). And I countered

that nobody in the history of the earth has ever developed strategy through analytical techniques, because strategy is about synthesis. Analysis feeds into it, and Porter did some brilliant work on the role of analysis, but analysis is not synthesis. That is where I would stand on that particular issue.

1.4 | Story Four

1.4.1 | The Last Encounter

He and I were on this panel, I can't remember what the subject was (Note: the debate was called: How will strategic management matter in the 21st century?). I expected Igor to talk about his perspective, but as it started, he was suffering from Alzheimer's and was not in good shape and was attacking me very nastily. But I understood this was a health problem. I got rid of everything I was going to say, as I recall, and turned it into a tribute for Ansoff because I knew he would never be appearing again in that kind of forum. I made it a tribute to Igor and his students who were there, maybe you too, who were very appreciative of that. That was my last—though *encounter* isn't exactly the right word—real association with Igor.

I can picture it, by the way. It's funny, I don't know if your memory works the same. I can picture certain things. I can picture sitting on the left side of the room, in the front row, looking at Igor, who was talking. I can picture where he was and I was, that is funny, eh? I'm not sure if anything happened, with regard to Igor, after that. Maybe I referred to his work in some things I wrote, but that is all I recall. Too bad that session wasn't recorded. Although it might have been embarrassing for him, because he was so nasty. I couldn't believe it, he just was sort of 'getting it out'. I remember it as 'my finest hour in my professional career'.

1.4.2 | Debating the Schools of Strategy

If Ansoff was the architect of corporate planning, Mintzberg became its most prominent critic. Their exchange crystallized around Mintzberg's classification of the "planning school", where he located Ansoff's work. Ansoff responded by articulating what he called the "holistic school of strategic management", emphasizing not just planning but also the processes and capabilities required to make strategies work. This was evidenced in Ansoff's books and work after Corporate strategy (Ansoff 1965), Strategic management (Ansoff 1979a), and Implanting strategic management (Ansoff 1984). Mintzberg, however, remained unconvinced, arguing that true strategy is more synthesis than analysis, emerging through practice rather than dictated by technique. The debate, never definitively settled, continues to echo in contemporary discussions of how organizations navigate complexity.

1.5 | Reflection

1.5.1 | Why It Still Matters

Ansoff and Mintzberg approached strategy from opposite directions, yet together they framed a conversation that remains unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable. Should leaders attempt to

design the future through analysis, or should they embrace the messiness of emergence? In practice, most organizations need both: the discipline of planning and the adaptability of learning. Their dialogue reminds us that strategy is less about choosing one school over another than about navigating the tension between them.

As Mintzberg's stories show, the field of strategic management has been shaped not only by theories and frameworks but also by the personal encounters, debates, and networks that animate academic life. In remembering Ansoff, we are reminded that strategy itself is an evolving conversation, one in which disagreement can be as productive as consensus.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

- ¹William F. Pounds was dean at MIT Sloan from 1966–1980 (Somers 2023). Full interview (Anderson 2009).
- ²James E. Webb served as an administrator of NASA from 1961–1968. More NASA history (Nelson 2010).
- ³(Kerr 1972; Mintzberg 1972; Sawyer 1972; D. E. Schendel and Hatten 1972). Note: The other 2 are unclear.
- ⁴Schendel, Ansoff, and Channon formed the inaugural SMJ editorial board (Schendel et al. 1980).
- ⁵The revised version of the Honda (A) case is available here (Honda (A) 2011).

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