



Diverging into the future

Sheila Moorcroft, Research Director at Shaping Tomorrow, interviews **Kate Hopkinson**, Managing Director of Inner Skills:

“If companies are to survive and thrive in turbulent times, they need to embrace divergence.” says Kate Hopkinson.

What is divergence in this context?

Divergence is the capacity to navigate in the unknown, a range of ways of thinking that can be seen as a set of ‘tools’ for exploring problems and ideas in new ways; of challenging assumptions and seeing things differently; of identifying what might be, rather than what is. They are part of a wider, complex set of ‘inner skills’, which I call the **Landscape of the Mind**.

Why is divergence so important now?

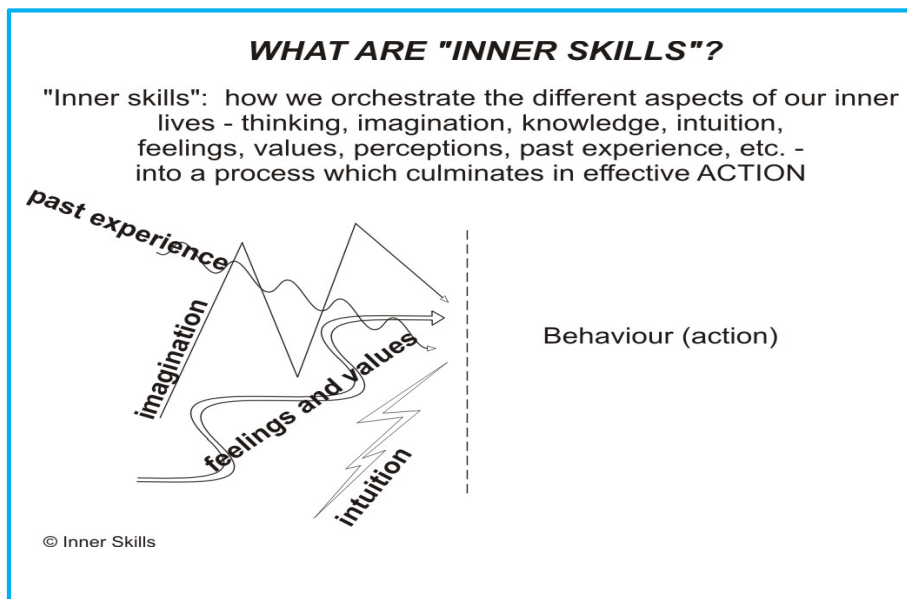
The old ways of doing things and solving problems aren’t working anymore; it was Einstein who remarked that you can’t use the same kind of thinking to get you out of a hole, which got you into it in the first place. So we need a fresh perspective: divergent inner skills are about finding new solutions, developing strategic options, shaping a route to the future – a vision of what could be, rather than just an extrapolation of what has worked in the past. In times of uncertainty and rapid change, such as we are experiencing, companies need to be able to be agile and flexible, and acutely aware of the space of possibilities around them. This makes divergence more important than ever.

Divergence is also important at the start of any new project. Unfortunately, we are usually under time pressure to get results, get things moving; consequently, it is very easy to jump straight in with tried and tested approaches without taking the time to stand back and look for fresh options, to see if a different approach might be more appropriate. As a result, organisations get locked into repeating the past rather than finding solutions relevant to their future. Again, with the scale of technological and economic changes occurring, flexibility and forward looking ways of working are critical to survival, let alone success.

What is the Landscape of the Mind model?

Landscape of the Mind (LoM) is a distinctive way of thinking about psychological functioning. Based on the principles of complexity science, it has many years of research and practical testing behind it. Unlike Myers Briggs Type Inventory (MBTi), for instance, the LoM dimensions are specifically related to work performance contexts. It covers the whole range of skills and thinking styles that we need to live, work and play in today’s complex world. There’s no such thing as a “good” profile or a “bad” profile – it depends what you’re trying to achieve. The real interactive skill is to orchestrate them effectively, just as a conductor helps an orchestra work together effectively, so that the sound is balanced and appropriate to the mood and the music. In the case of LoM, it is ensuring that the inner skills are appropriate to the task and the circumstances. Otherwise, expect trouble to result.

Figure 1: What are “inner skills”?



There are three main dimensions to the model, divergence, convergence and evaluation, within each of which there are numerous specific inner skills. All of these three main skill sets occur in two modes, which I call ‘cool’ and ‘warm’, which – simplifying - you can see as head versus heart. All inner skills are equally valuable and important, but they are needed in different ways at different times, so being aware of which are in play can make a big difference to effectiveness.

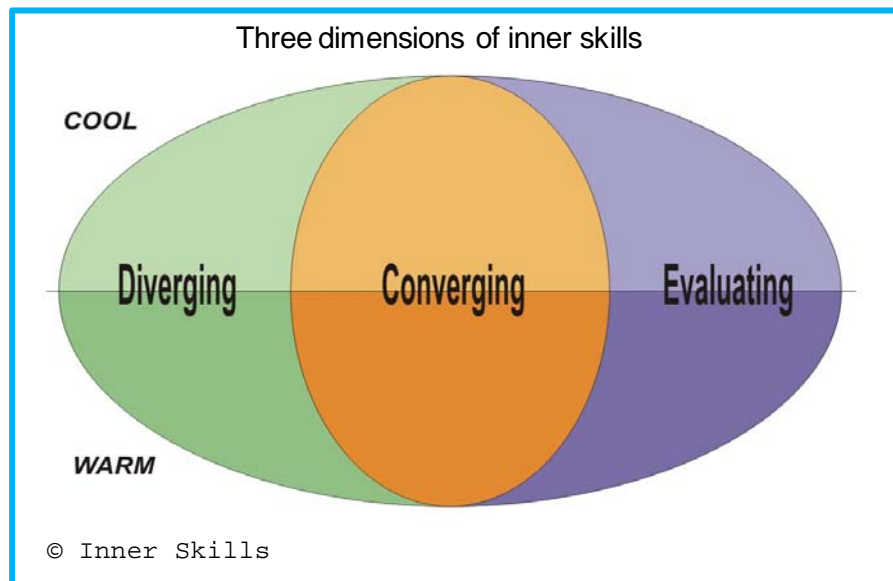
Convergence

Convergence is about focusing on what is known, finding the right answer. Analysis, facts, evidence, but also reading the mood of a meeting or the shifts in public opinion – all are important in convergent thinking. These skills are well known and understood, and well rewarded. In the model they are represented in the centre, by warm and cool gold. Convergence is essential – it is at the heart of financial performance and market analysis; critical to understanding where the company is today. Without it companies would go bankrupt, but overused, it can become paralysis by analysis.

Evaluation

Evaluative skills are about choices, judgements and decisions – both the cool, dispassionate judgments of the law, but also the passionate beliefs and arguments of the campaigner. They tend to be anchored in past experience – case law being a prime example. But again, they are essential. We need to make decisions, to be able to sift through the evidence and select what is important, and past experience can be an important guide in that. But here too, overuse can result in ‘doing what has worked in the past’ but is unfit for the future (a cool evaluative approach) - or of rushing to make a decision and get on with things, without considering other options, or indeed, the facts (a warm evaluative approach).

Figure 2: The **Landscape of the Mind Model**



Divergence

Then there is divergence – a distrusted outsider, in most contexts. Divergent thinking is about exploring possibilities, creating a vision, a long term strategic direction, noticing change in the external environment. It is essential to invention, outwitting the competition, seeing the opportunities ahead of the game – getting to the future fast, as Prahalad called it. Although there is often lots of rhetoric about the need for continuous innovation flying around, the reality is that the skills which make this possible are often undervalued, even ignored – or worse squeezed out, because divergent thinkers will make waves, rock the boat, challenge the status quo, come up with strange sounding options and alternatives.

Do companies pay enough attention to divergent thinking?

In a word, no. There are gross discrepancies in how the different sets of inner skills in LoM are recognised and rewarded. Often, the ones companies need most are least rewarded and practised. There are of course several reasons for this, but comfort with the familiar is a strong element.

Recruiting similar minds, whose approaches are a 'good fit' is widespread. Companies rightly place a strong emphasis on analysis and financial returns; critical yes, but when the game changes without warning, they are not enough. People with strong divergent skills meanwhile are often seen as too close to the awkward squad (they end up prickly because their contributions are so little valued); or not serious, even flaky because they keep coming up with 101 ideas and alternatives which do not necessarily seem practical. But in turbulent and unpredictable times, divergence is absolutely at the core of good leadership, for example.

Occasionally, there are flashes of recognition of this. One key strategic divergent inner skill is "analogue". The Harvard Business Review (April 2005) published an article suggesting that the ability to draw parallels between different situations is much more central to strategic thinking than is generally appreciated. Leaders who are a trying to implement change or take a company through

difficult times, also need to communicate regularly and effectively – and vivid analogies can make such messages much more meaningful. A simple example of an analogy is the use of the word ‘virus’. It started as a medical term, but nowadays has become part of the vernacular of computing life, and if I said I had a virus, you would probably immediately think of a computer virus not a medical one. It has mutated further, to maintain the analogy, so that we now also talk about viral marketing.

How does divergence relate to foresight?

I would say divergent skills are central. Futures techniques such as horizon scanning and scenario development rely very heavily on divergent inner skills. First, they are asking “what if?” not “what?”; they are trying to see the world differently, to see emerging ideas or create radically different views of the world. They are looking round corners rather than in straight lines, trying to give space to the potential of the future often based on minimal information and even less ‘evidence’. Secondly, they are often visual, using analogies, and drawing on storytelling and imagination.

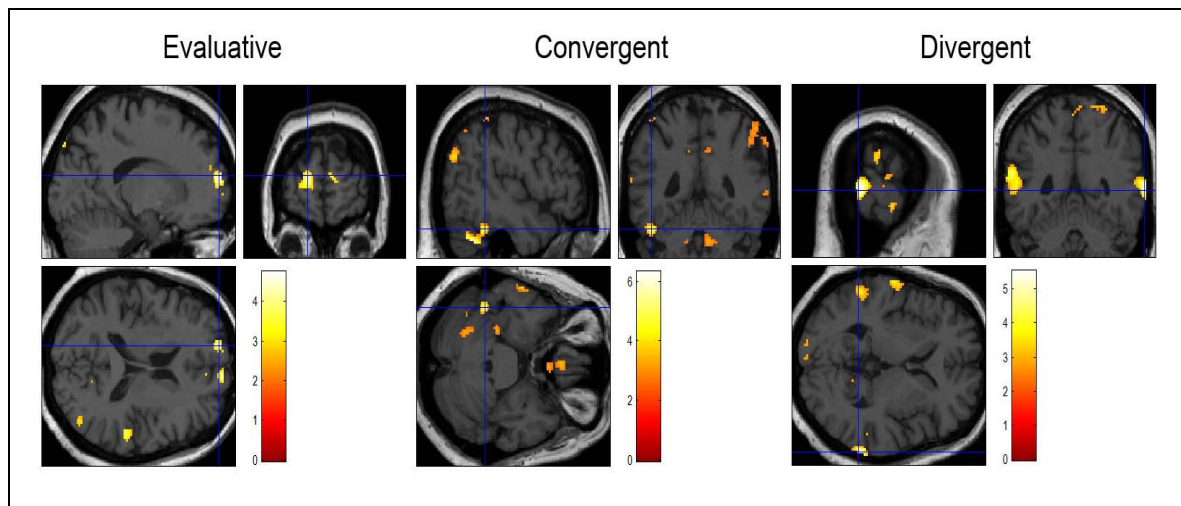
But, just as with any complex task, one set of tools is not enough. The divergent skills of ‘what if?’ need to be complemented by convergent and evaluative skills. The array of options that are generated need to be evaluated against a range of criteria to select the best ones; the likely cost of the opportunity needs to be calculated, as does the level of risk; the determination to see the project through and find ways to overcome barriers that will be encountered on the way to market will need to revisit divergence and then go back to convergence and evaluation. It requires inner flexibility and orchestration. There also needs to be a vision, an object of desire that can inspire and engage the wider population in the organisation, to provide them with a sense of direction so that they can work together to achieve it – generating the vision needs divergence; communicating it needs warm convergence.

We hear a lot about recent advances in brain imaging technology. Is there any evidence that the concept of inner skills is any more than just a convenient conceptual label?

We have only got preliminary data so far, but yes, in a pilot research study we did with the Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, there seemed to be a connection between what kinds of inner skills were in use, and different patterns of brain activation. Although this needs to be backed up with much more work, it was certainly very intriguing. Some subsidiary hypotheses were also supported, for instance:

- Brain structures known to be associated with processing emotions (such as the amygdala), would be more active when warm inner skills were in play; and
- Areas known to be implicated in visualisation, (like the occipital cortex), would “light up” when divergent inner skills were in use.

Figure 3: Brain images of different inner skills strategies



There is a section of the LoM film about this study, including images of actual brain scans. Taken together with recent findings about how flexible the brain is in adapting to change, the implications of this fMRI work could be enormous – since it implies that with practice, even people who do not show up as having high levels of divergence, could get much better at it.

Can you illustrate how some of your clients have used divergence effectively?

Obviously the details of projects with clients are confidential, but I can give general outlines. Some clients have kindly agreed to be interviewed for the film we have made, and so that information is in the public domain, as is information about projects where we've given joint seminars with the clients concerned, at the London School of Economics, where I am a Senior Research Associate: (<http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/complexity>).

The first step is usually to profile the Board, CEO and top team, or whichever group we will be working with, using the LoM questionnaire. We also interview key people from the organisation, and then reflect back our findings at a workshop. The project then emerges from the discussion which ensues. We work collaboratively – not via reports and recommendations – because it's essential that the client owns the “diagnosis”, the plan and the outcomes.

Raising their game re leadership: A world class engineering company

The company recognised that its operating environment was changing radically, and that simply carrying on doing better what they'd always done well, would not be enough. As engineers they were very skilled at creating and evaluating the practical, but a LoM analysis showed that senior management were not particularly well placed, in terms of their inner skills preferences, to initiate and sustain a radical change in strategic direction.

On the back of this realisation, they redesigned their young high flyers' programme to include LoM as a core element, so that the full range of inner skills would be recognised and valued, and applied effectively – especially the neglected domain of divergent thinking. At the same time, they involved all

their senior managers in using LoM to review business performance. We had already worked with their middle managers on an integration project after a complex acquisition. So all levels of management now understood when and how to apply divergent inner skills to help them shape a different future – which they have successfully done.

Making significant savings – the IT department of a global pharmaceutical

We were asked to carry out a yearlong project on changing the organisational culture of a large IT department. But when we looked at the LoM profiles of members of the department, although most of them had predictably strong preferences for cool gold and cool blue inner skills, there were a few surprising anomalies. One of these was a very high diverger, who was doing very routine, low level work. With her permission, we showed her profile to the senior management team, who knew and had worked with LoM. They took her off her routine work, and gave her a rather challenging project to find ways of making savings on their billing processes. Using her divergent inner skills, she saved them £0.25m in the space of a few weeks. This was on top of the success of the main project! Both aspects of this project are covered in the new LoM film.

Rising to a major – and unexpected – challenge – aerospace company

This company, which operated in an extremely competitive environment, suddenly won an enormous order which they had not expected to. Once the euphoria of winning it had worn off, they realised that they couldn't actually deliver it within the timelines needed, simply by jacking up their current production processes. They needed to embark on second order change (doing better things, in LoM terms) instead of just improving their tried-and-tested procedures (doing things better). However, from a practical point of view, they had no idea how to go about this, other than "brainstorming" ideas. One member of the group, who was usually seen as rather taciturn and not contributing much to the group, turned out to be gifted with divergent inner skills. He became much more engaged when others actually started to listen to what he had to say – and they quickly realised that his contribution would be crucial to solving their problem, which it was.

Identifying fresh competitive space: public sector organisation

Owing to government-imposed changes, this organisation realised that they were going to need to compete in a way they hadn't had to previously. Again, they had very little idea how to go about this (except in very obvious, but unwelcome terms, like cost cutting). We identified a number of high divergers in the organisation, and had them working together – those with dominant cool green inner skills, on short term possibilities; and those with dominant warm green patterns of preference, on longer term, strategic options. This produced lots of valuable quick wins – but the really game changing outcome, which took 2 years to bring to fruition, was a billion pound deal which grew directly out of recognition of the divergent capability of a senior manager in a very convergent role. Knowing his LoM profile completely revolutionised his sense of the kind of contribution he could make – and opened his organisation to supporting him in making it.

Enabling change: not-for-profit organisation

Seeing the world around them changing, the trustees of a successful not-for-profit organisation decided, when the time came to appoint a new chief executive, that they needed someone who would not “fit in”, but who could spearhead drastic change. They selected a candidate whose LoM preferences exactly mirrored those associated with strategic change management. Unfortunately, her senior team’s pattern of preferences, when we looked at them, were the opposite – strong in reliable delivery of a service, to a standard - but horrified at the idea of radical change. This produced a tense stand-off between the team and the new CEO, each finding it very hard to value or see the virtues, of the other. Using LoM as a language and a framework, we were able to reframe the situation as one of complementarity, not conflict, with the CEO’s drive and divergence depending for its success on their strong practical implementation skills – and vice versa. This kind of situation can so easily blow up completely, with mutual recriminations and a total breakdown in trust and effectiveness. In this case, hanging on to LoM like a life raft, the two sides tentatively set about figuring out how to work together – which they ultimately did, to the significant benefit of the organisation.

Where can people find out more?

We are launching a film, Inner complexity – an introduction to **Landscape of the Mind** - which we’ve made in conjunction with the Complexity programme at the LSE, this month (June 2011). The film is designed to be an innovative management learning resource, which can be used for many different purposes. There are three main parts:

An introduction to the LoM model

Its applications and implications – including real world case studies and examples

Interviews with users about their experiences of working with LoM in organisational settings.

You can book for the free launch event by emailing complexitygroup@lse.ac.uk

Later in the year, it will be accessible both from my own website: www.innerskills.co.uk, and via the LSE website, in the Complexity Research Programme section –

<http://www.psych.lse.ac.uk/complexity>. If you’d like to be kept informed of developments (including our forthcoming book and practitioner training programme, as well as the film), email

info@innerskills.co.uk

“Great minds don’t think alike – they think divergently“