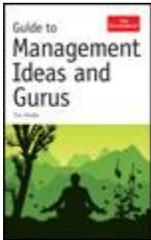


The Economist



Guru

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Pierre Wack (1922-1997) was an unconventional French oil executive who developed the use of scenario planning (see [article](#)) at Royal Dutch Shell's London headquarters in the 1970s. So successful was he that the Anglo-Dutch oil giant was able to anticipate not just one Arab-induced oil shock during that decade, but two.

By the standards of Shell executives, Wack was wacky. He almost invariably had an incense stick burning in his office and his own favourite guru was not Peter Drucker or Douglas McGregor but a bizarre bald Russian called Georges Gurdjieff.

Gurdjieff was a spiritual teacher who died in France in 1949. He studied Sufi mysticism in his youth and brought some of its ideas to the West. Wack visited him regularly during the second world war when Gurdjieff was based in Fontainebleau, south of Paris, today the home of INSEAD, one of Europe's leading business schools. After Gurdjieff's death, and while employed by Shell, Wack continued to spend several weeks a year meditating in India with another guru.

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Gurdjieff taught that with special insight it was possible to "see" the future. But he did not mean literally to see with your eyes. Wack explained this form of seeing by telling the story

of a gardener he had once met in Japan. The gardener had pointed to a thick bamboo stem and explained that if a pebble was thrown at it and it hit the trunk slightly off-centre, it would bounce off and make hardly any sound. But if it hit the trunk dead centre, it would make a distinctive “clonk”. He then said that to be sure to hit the stem in this way, it was necessary to hear the distinctive sound in your own mind in advance of throwing the pebble—and then to concentrate intensely on that sound. According to one of his colleagues, Wack believed that anticipating the future involved a similar discipline. It is, he said, “about being in the right state of focus to put your finger unerringly on the key facts or insights that unlock or open understanding”.

That is not to say that Wack was a kind of clairvoyant. He was also well versed in the facts of the real world. He analysed them and the vast range of possible futures that they presented. Then, with the help of a spiritually heightened awareness, he was able to focus on those particular facts that would help him to see, in a metaphorical sense, the future. He once described the future as “the rapids”—traversable terrain that required intense concentration on the task in hand.

Wack’s last years were spent at his home, a 14th century chateau, in the Dordogne region of France.

“Scenarios deal with two worlds; the world of facts and the world of perceptions. They explore for facts but they aim at perceptions inside the heads of decision-makers. Their purpose is to gather and transform information of strategic significance into fresh perceptions. This transformation process is not trivial—more often than not it does not happen. When it works, it is a creative experience that generates a heartfelt ‘Aha’ ... and leads to strategic insights beyond the mind’s reach.”

Notable publications

[“Scenarios: Shooting the Rapids”](#), *Harvard Business Review*, 1985