

Generalists and Specialists

Unraveling the Mystery

Fred Nickols

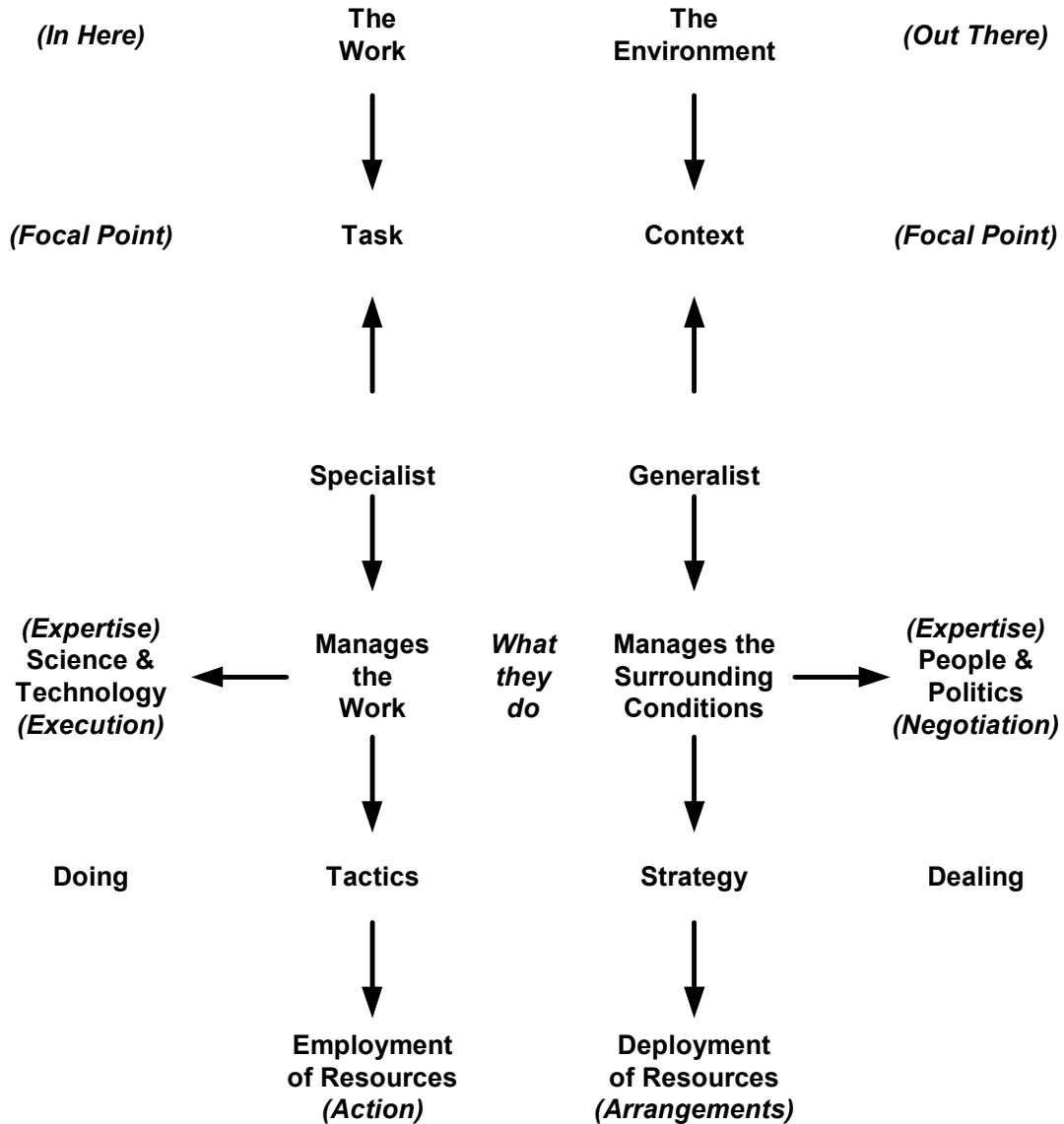
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Almost 25 years ago I wrote and published a brief piece titled “Generalist vs Specialist: Whom Do I Consult?” Recently, that article led a fellow who was looking into the distinction between generalists and specialists to contact me. We exchanged some emails and telephone calls, and then he sent me a paper from two U.K. researchers who had been looking into the distinction between general managers and functional specialists in the context of developing senior managers. That paper triggered some thoughts on my part and everything spilled forth in the form of a diagram. That diagram and some explanatory text form the content of this paper. I hope others will find the diagram and its explanation helpful when thinking about generalists and specialists.

Let’s begin at the top.



All organizations are concerned with their work and their larger environment, with what goes on “in here” and what goes on “out there.” This same basic relationship applies inside the organization as well, where work takes the form of tasks and the environment becomes the context for those tasks. Task and Context offer two focal points. Specialists focus on the task and General-

ists focus on its context. Put another way, a Specialist manages the work and a Generalist manages the conditions under which that work is performed. Naturally, this calls for two different kinds of expertise. The Specialist's expertise ties to science and technology. The Generalist's expertise ties to people and politics. For the most part, the Specialist's expertise manifests itself in execution and the Generalist's expertise manifests itself in negotiation. The domain of the Specialist is tactics as befits a focus on doing. The domain of the Generalist is strategy as befits a focus on dealing. In summary, the Specialist is concerned with the employment of resources (i.e., actions) whereas the Generalist is concerned with the deployment of resources (i.e., arrangements).

If all that seems an oversimplification, it might well be, but remember this: the root of the word "strategy" is the Greek *strategos*, which refers to the art of the general. That art takes the form of arranging conditions before battle so as to meet the enemy under the most favorable conditions. However, once the enemy is engaged, the focus shifts to tactics. One does not get to be a general without having first demonstrated a mastery of tactics. A Generalist, then, in the military or outside of it, is someone who is skilled in execution and in negotiation, in doing and in dealing, in tactics and in strategy, in deploying and in employing resources. In terms of the diagram that popped full-blown into my mind one night, a Specialist is skilled in all that lies on the left-hand side of the diagram and a Generalist is skilled in everything on both sides. Not all Specialists can or will become Generalists but all Generalists have demonstrated competency as Specialists.

References

1. F. W. Nickols (1981). Generalist vs Specialist: Whom do I consult?" *Performance & Instruction*. Washington, D.C.: National Society for Performance & Instruction.
2. J. Sturges & D. Guest (1997 November). Generalist vs Specialist: Developing senior managers of the future. London: Careers Research Forum Ltd.

About the Author

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