

Clockwork Tanks

When I was seven years old I was given a clockwork tank for my Birthday. At the time – in the early 1960's - it seemed pretty high tech. Winding it up not only drove the 2 tracks but also caused the turret to turn in an arc, for little sparks to appear in a machine gun barrel and, once primed with mum's talcum powder, for little puffs of smoke to emerge from the cannon.

I was the envy of all my mates but this tank had a couple of rather serious limitations. It had no steering and no sense of when to give up. Result? Having destroyed the enemy artillery hidden in the upturned fruit bowl, it would head for a skirting board and then exhaust itself trying to climb the dining room wall. It was destined to win the battle but lose the war.

The experience has stayed with me and I came to reflect on the way Businesses behave. It's about the extent to which Businesses set out to be learning organisations as part of their success strategy. We can all behave a bit like that little tank. Motivated by an early success we push on to tougher challenges with the same resources and no feedback loops to test whether it is working and what we need to change to be more effective. Then we just run out of clockwork.

