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MANAGING CONTINUITY AND CHANGE: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS EXCELLENCE

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ABSTRACT

Continuity and change in strategy discourses has been traditionally treated as mutually exclusive, as an either – or situation. However, in the last two decades, the waves of change have compelled businesses to evolve a more “flexible approach” giving rise to a growing interest in the concept of “confluence of change and continuity”.

Organizations striving for Business Excellence, too, can no longer afford to manage change alone. Instead of only focusing on diminishing the forces against change, it is imperative for businesses today to embrace stability and learn to manage continuity if they want to survive and excel in the long run. ‘Sustainable Business Excellence models’, thus, need a strategy that does not require a change in organization’ key strategic strength. The idea is “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water”. Hence, what is called for in today’s age of turbulence, is the strategic management of the confluence of continuity and change i.e. managing Change & continuity simultaneously.

The paper not only explores in depth the literature on continuity – change confluence and traces the evolution of the concept of business excellence , but also proposes a strategic framework for a sustainable organizational excellence.

Keywords: Change, Continuity, Business Excellence, Strategic framework , Sustainable, Confluence.

Introduction

Continuity and change in strategy discourses has been traditionally treated as mutually exclusive, as an either – or situation. Till 70’s and 80’s when the environment was relatively stable and the pace of change was comparatively slow, organizations focused on “incremental strategies” (Quinn 1978, 1980) with greater thrust on continuity. The organizations used to form strategies so as to survive and grow by maintaining continuity in their business domain.

However, in the last two decades, the waves of change have compelled businesses to evolve a more “flexible approach” (Volberda 1998, Sushil 2000) to managing change and transformation.

Despite the plethora of literature on strategic change and transformation – the voyage of change has not been smooth enough for a large number of leading organizations with strong legacy – who have actually ended up in greater turbulence and chaos.

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This has given rise to a growing interest in the concept of “confluence of change and continuity” (Sushil 2005), i.e. managing continuity and change simultaneously. Apparently it may seem paradoxical but there is ample research evidence of application of such a concept in spheres like corporate governance, organizational identity, industrial relations etc.

Organizational Change

Definition

Organizations are dynamic fields of complexity challenged by ever present demands of ‘change’ (Burke&Trahant ,2000; Pettigrew et al,2001).Organizational change is typically conceptualized as moving from the status quo to a new, desired, configuration to better match the environment. Change, could therefore be seen as a departure from the norm, or alternatively as a natural response to environmental and internal conditions. (Leifer, 1989). Various types of changes - revolutionary, episodic, radical, incremental etc- emerge, flow, wander, evolve, and disappear over time. (Burke 2002, Leana &Barry 2000, Orlikowski 1996). Protagonists of change literature have examined the ‘what’ and ‘How’ of change and have thus put forward various theories or models of change. The contingency approach to change based on the assumptions of static model of organization is giving way to contextual framework which permit models of change to be visualized as dynamic rather than static.

Models of Change

Static models of change –which focus on content or substance of change-are being displaced by dynamic models which reflect the discontinuous nature of organizational change. (Nelson, 2003) The dynamic model of change argues that change should not be conceptualized as a linear exercise in moving from A to B. Given the turbulence in the environment, the issue is how to conceptualize change showing the modification of strategies necessary to keep pace with and adapt in order to realize future intentions. The four models of change described below in the table captures the essence of *dynamic model of change*.

Table 1: Dynamic Models of Change

➤ Pettigrew’s (1985) framework for change depicts the context and process of change. The components convey the idea of movement and variability, which precede outcome.
➤ The framework by Dawson(1996) highlights the determinants of organizational change as –context, politics, and substance of change.
➤ Greenwood and Hinnings (1988) , however, directly address the issue of change dynamics in their discussion of design archetypes and tracks. Their framework suggests the interdependency between the three areas-contingencies, power dependencies, and pattern of commitment –which together influence the central “archetype” or organizational configuration intended by the change process.
➤ Nelson(2003) further depicts the change process as an interdependent system within which the three determinants-substance, stewardship, and context interact.

Strategic Change- A Micro Level Analysis

The shift from an episodic perspective of change (from A to B) to an understanding of strategic change as incremental is well established(Quinn 1980, Mintzberg and Waters 1985). However, recently there has been a proposition to shift the object of study from organizational level to a micro-level analysis in order to gain a fuller understanding of the dynamics of strategic change.(Jhonson et al 2003, Wilson and jarzabowski 2004, Whittington 2004)

In fact the micro strategy literature emphasizes that in order to understand the embedded process of strategic change, there is a need to incorporate the lived experience of the strategists in the analysis. (Samra Fredrick,2003)

Strategic Change –A Core Business Process (CBP) Approach

According to Ellen Hart (1993), “change is a process of creative destruction”. Companies must recognize and address three distinct elements of change-restructuring, revitalizing, and reframing. The Core Business Process Approach(CBPA)—used to design a more responsive and adaptable organization-can provide a unifying force in the context of change.

Strategic Change – Success or Failure?

The record of change success is startlingly low. (Kotter 1995, Beer & Nohria 2000, Sturdy & Grey 2003). Surveys of European firm show only 20% reporting “substantial success” with change and another 63% claiming only “ temporary success “. (Economists 2000). Large(1994), further explores why change interventions often do not work? According to him , the basic problem lies in the structure of an organization which generates behavior just as the banks of a river channel the flow of water. He identifies two types behaviors caused by structures-Resolving and Oscillating. Oscillating behavior- which is like a rocking chair leading to nowhere-often results in structural conflict thus obstructing change. One such structural conflict for change arise due to two competing tensions-The “Desire for Change “ and the “Desire for Continuity” which is required to be adequately balanced for a successful change. In fact , Hart(1993) points out that “Continuity” is an important element of a successful change process(other elements being commitment, clarity, consistency, & communication)

Strategic Change & A Case for Continuity.....

The organizations must realize that people are not Chameleons- they cannot change stripes and colors at the drop of a hat.(Hart, 1993).Most people have past accomplishments of which they are proud of and valuable strengths to bring forward. If they feel they are being told those things are discardable, they will not support the change efforts. According to Tanenbaum & Hanna(1985) , changes in organizational identity has been experienced as painful and have been resisted by organizational members. Stability in organizational identity is seen as providing members with psychological anchors in times of change(Gustafson & Reger,1995).It has also been established that sense of sameness over time is necessary for psychological health.(Albert & Whetten1985 and Shamir 1990).

Christensen & Cheney (2000) indicate that spokespersons need to show that organizations are stable yet responsive entities with an inspiring history and a reliable presence. Gloria(1998) further suggests that research should explore how change is balanced with the need to maintain a connection to past conceptions of the organization.

Thus , every organization needs some stability or continuity or if everything about an organization were to be always in flux , it would be crippled by chaos. (Volberda, 1998) Yet some aspects of the organization must change so that it can survive, and even exploit the shifts & turns of the environment.

Continuity and Change – A Need for Confluence

Continuity ,Change , & Managerial Rhetoric.....

An analysis of management literature on change and transformation reveals that restructuring discourse is highly dependent on the rhetoric of “turbulent times”(Thompson & Dvidson,1995).

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Authors demonstrate the gap between managerial rhetoric and business reality. *Eccles & Nohria (1992)* point out that management writers and practitioners talked of turbulence and transformative changes even in the supposedly past and less competitive context of the 1950s. They further demolish the rhetoric of Drucker and Tofler for making the same stirring announcements of impending change in nearly all their writings spanning decades. *Hyukzinski(1993)* observed that all the gurus gained the currency for their relevance to the changing times. Thompson & Davidson(1995), too, strongly refute the claims of such managerial rhetoric and state that there is no paradigm shift or complete break as these modern gurus ably demonstrate. Bureaucracies continue to evolve and develop new forms of hierarchy, rules, and control. They further establish that it is in fact important to retain a sense of 'continuity'. Several other researches too, have pointed to the need for both 'change & continuity' in organizations. (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Barney et al, 1998).

The 'Why' & 'How' of Continuity & Change.....

Leana & Barry(2000) argue that tension between stability and change is inevitable and is a part of organizational life. Others suggest that change leadership must balance continuity and change (Burke & Trahan 2000; Pettigrew et al 2001). Bianco & Schermerhorn(2006) reiterate that organizational leadership should allow for coexistent states of both 'continuity & change'. Strangelman (1999) further demonstrate this through his case study on British Rail that many reform minded managers and policy makers (who understand the emotive & political importance of nostalgia) deploy nostalgia as a proactive change-directed discourse rather than as reactionary force.

Sturdy & Grey(2003), elaborating on how to manage continuity & change state that, "continuity and change be managed not as alternative states but as co-existent ones". They further add that it is imperative for managers today to embrace stability and learn to manage continuity if they want to survive. What can be a better testimony than the statement of a CEO cum change agent of a 125 year old retail giant in his narration on the transformation of his company (Sears Roebuck & Co.) in which he admits that "Managing change and continuity simultaneously – is a task far more delicate than managing change alone". Martinez(1997) further suggests the questions to be posed in order to identify the elements of continuity or things to be preserved. To quote Martinez, "*Two important questions had to be answered. First, What was there to preserve from the core? What were the historic values that could help us rebuild the heart and soul of our company going forward? And second, how do we stimulate change at the same time?*". To focus on things to be fixed and continued, he went on to identify 'Five strategic Principles' that would remain consistent throughout.

Continuity, Change, and the Journey to Organizational Excellence

The concept of "organizational excellence" has evolved synonymously with the "change literature". Despite being enormously addressed since last two –three decades, "business excellence" still remains an open questions (Hiley, 2000), because of the difficulty in defining it in the context of changing conditions. (Hermel & Pujol, 2003)

The journey towards organizational excellence was consciously introduced in the management practice way back in 1982 with Peter & Waterman's book on "*In Search of Excellence*". Excellent companies identified by them, however, encountered deep trouble few years later. This led them to re-visit the definition of "excellence" five years later in "*Thriving on Chaos*" (1987) recommending two main competencies for survival and excellence - quality and flexibility.

Further with change recognized as a constant Peter Senge's "*The Fifth Discipline*," (1990) added an important dimension to the concept of organizational excellence. "Systems thinking

was considered to be the fifth discipline (besides building shared visions, personal mastery, working with mental models and team learning) and critical for acquiring insights into organizational complexity and hence for “organizational learning.” He suggested that quality is both the foundation of learning organization and a building block of excellence. He further emphasized that “profound learning is the main base for excellence sustainability.”

With excellence models strongly related to quality, prizes were institutionalized to recognize the organizations that excelled the implementation of quality practices – e.g. Deming prize (Japan) , Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award (MBNQA – USA) and EFQM Excellence prize (Europe) etc. Despite the operational benefits of such excellence models, quality gurus and current management thinking seems to be divided on the issue of effectiveness of these models. (Leonard & McAdam , 2002). Garvin (1999) clearly points out those issues such as organizational change and learning organization which are of importance to the future of the company development are not explicitly included in any of the four major quality awards. Such criticisms and debates gave way to a new wave in the evolution of excellence concept – innovative integrated development, fundamentally viewed as a combination of strategic management and change.

Pursuing integrated development through continuous change, however, is a difficult discipline because forces against change emerge continuously. (Hermel & Pujol, 2003). For this Senge (2000) proposes the idea of sustaining change by working on diminishing the forces against it. In this process, however, the organizations become too change centric, thus neglecting their valuable strength which requires continuity. Hence, it maybe hypothesized that a confluence of change and continuity be managed strategically in order to strive for a sustainable business excellence .

Flexible Strategic Framework for Managing Continuity & Change

Although hosts of management writers have tried to draw attention towards the issue of change & continuity, very few of them have actually attempted to present a framework for managing it. After an extensive literature review, two pioneering contribution in this area has been put forward by Henk Volberda(1997,1998) and Sushil(2005).

Volberda's(1998) Strategic Framework for Resolving the “Paradox of Flexibility”

The ‘paradox of Flexibility’, according to Volberda(1998), refers to the simultaneous need of an organization to manage “change & Continuity”. The basic premise of his framework is that every successful organization should combine change and stability. This however is possible only if the firm is adequately “flexible”. The amount of flexibility needed depends on the degree of environmental turbulence- the three main causes of which are- Dynamism, Complexity, and Predictability.

“Flexibility “in an organization, however, is generated or depends on the interplay of two basic things—mangers’ capacity to exert dynamic or variable control within the organization (called ‘Dynamic Management Capabilities’) and the responsiveness or “controllability” of the organization. These two dimensions are at the heart of Volberda’s analysis of flexibility. When DMC’s are applied in the organization, three basic type of flexibility are produced—Operational, Structural , and Strategic. The degree of flexibility required by an organization depends on the degree of turbulence the organization has to contend with. To cope with greater turbulence the organization should have yet another flexibility called ‘mataflexibility’-which refers to the creation, integration, and application of flexible capabilities.

Volberda, finally suggests a framework for strategic management of flexibility by integrating

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management capabilities and Organizational design to match environmental turbulence level. Together with flexibility mix and the controllability of the organization he defines four main types organizational form-Rigid, Flexible, Planned And chaotic

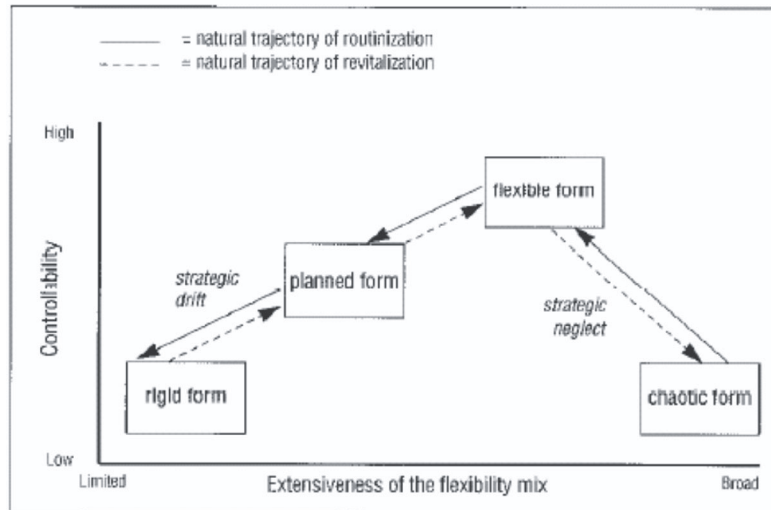


Figure 1: Four Types of Alternative Flexible Forms – Flexibility Pathways

Source: H.W.Volberda (1998)

The 'rigid' form', according to Volberda, with low DMCs and controllability is fragile & vulnerable when faced environmental changes. The 'planned' form relies primarily on operational flexibility and copes well with anticipated changes only. The 'flexible' form has a high degree of structural and strategic flexibility and has sufficient mastery of its environment to strike a balance between change and continuity. The 'chaotic' form with high degree of flexibility and low controllability is always in a state of flux. *Volberda, further stresses that none of the four forms permanently resolves the tension between change & continuity.* He then describes Flexibility Audit and Redesign (FAR) method for revitalizing over rigid organizations and routine-ising excessively chaotic organizations.

His work further culminates into categorization of firms into various types depending on the way they manage "continuity & change" or trajectories undertaken to resolve the perennial tension between planning & flexibility.

Out of the four types of organization(Network, Dual, Oscillating, & Balanced) , Balanced corporations manage change & continuity simultaneously.

Source: H.W.Volberda (1998)

Sushil's (2005) Flexible Strategy Framework for Managing Continuity & Change

While Volberda's ' Strategic Management of Flexibility' indirectly approach the issue of continuity & change, Sushil's 'Flexible strategy framework for managing continuity & change' is comparatively more bold & direct attempt to resolve the continuity & change paradox.

According to Sushil(2005), the "continuity ' forces hold back an organization from change by creating inertia in the current business domain. In the context of SAP framework(Sushil,2001)the continuity forces are generally linked with the actors and processes. Some important 'continuity

forces' are: large customer base, huge infrastructure, investment in technology, well established culture, core competence, supply chain and distribution network and higher level of business performance.(figure-3)

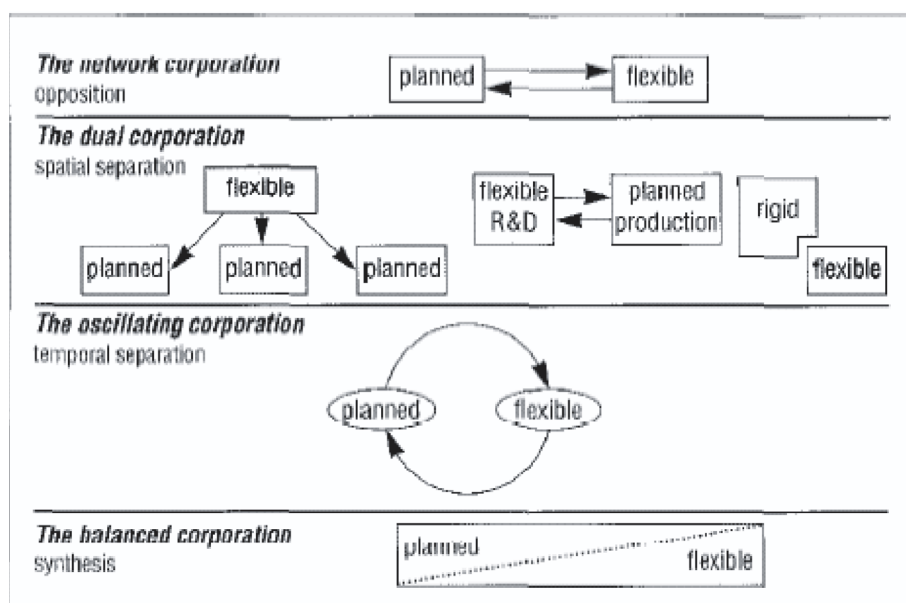


Figure 2: Ways of Combining Flexibility and Planning

Besides the forces of continuity, the author also identifies the major forces for change which largely emanate from change situations. Some of the significant change forces that have been highlighted by the author, include, globalization, new opportunities, changing competition, changing customer needs, new technology, e-business models, Mergers and Acquisition (M&A), and changes in government policy and legislation.(Figure-3)

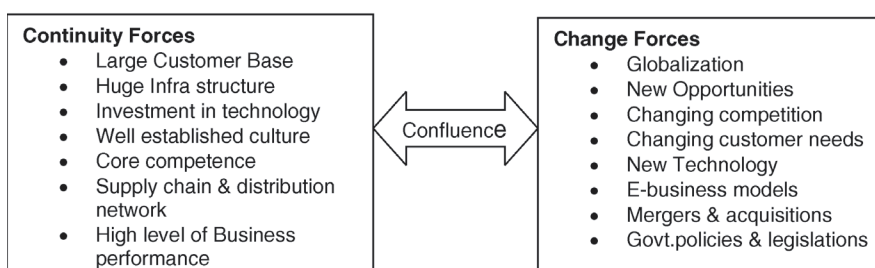


Figure 3: Major Continuity & Change Forces (Source: Sushil (2005))

The continuity and change forces, according to Sushil, would be different for different industries and business organizations. The author further proposes Continuity–change(C-C) matrix(Figure-8), depicting four possible combinations, metaphorically named according to the characteristics of that category.

The C-C matrix provides a flexible strategic framework to evolve various strategy options depending upon the mapping of continuity and change forces. Flexible strategies for different continuity change combinations are depicted as follows.

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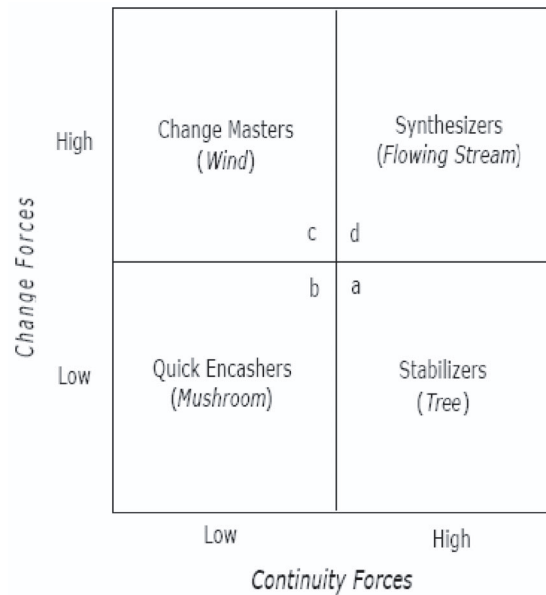


Figure 4: Types of Organization Based on Continuity –Change Matrix (Source: Sushil, 2005)

The strategy proposed for managing a situation of high continuity & change is metaphorically stated as '*Flowing Stream Strategy*'. A 'flowing stream', seems to a very apt analogy, as it continuously changes its course, and at times radically, while maintaining its continuity at the same time. The strategy frontier, however, should be explored further for a right balance and synthesis of opposing forces, so as to divert their inertia on new frontiers without losing the benefits of continuity.

Types of Organizations	Strategic Path	Metaphorical Strategy	Position in C-C Matrix	Example
Stabilizers	Incrementalism & Evolution	Tree Strategy	High Cont & Low Change	Petrochemicals Steel, fertilizers
Quick Encashers	Freewheeling and Experimentation	Mushroom Strategy	Low Cont & Low Change	Coaching, Small scale & Tiny industries
Change Masters	Strategic Renewal & Transformation	Wind Strategy	Low Cont & High Change	BPO, ITES
Synthesizers	Strategic Flexibility for integrating opposites	Flowing Stream strategy	High Cont & High Change	Electronics Automobiles Telecom

Figure 5: Flexible Strategies for Continuity –Change Combination (Source: Adapted from Sushil,2005)

Proposed Framework for Managing Continuity– Change Confluence: A Strategic Path to Sustainable Excellence.

To achieve business excellence, organizations are required to appreciate its imperfections and dedicate itself to attain perfection. The journey to organizational excellence starts with embracing the principles upon which the frame work is based, visualizing the road map and then turning

the ignition key on. . (Ramanan , 2002).

Against the backdrop of the discussions on change, continuity, and business excellence , the following strategic framework maybe proposed to manage the confluence of continuity-change as required by the organizations aspiring for excellence.

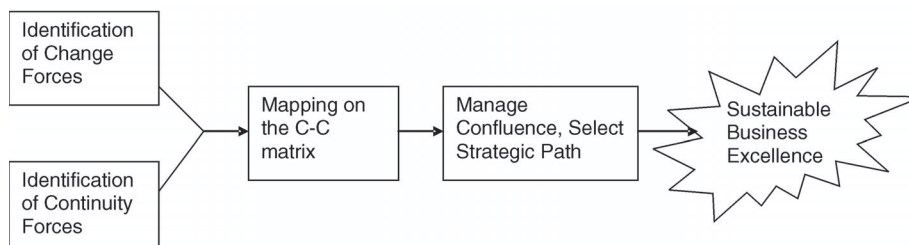


Figure 6: Framework for Managing Continuity –Change Confluence: Strategic Path to Sustainable Business Excellence

Thus, organizations striving for Business Excellence can no longer afford to manage change alone. Instead of only focusing on diminishing the forces against change, it is imperative for businesses today to embrace stability and learn to manage continuity if they want to survive and excel in the long run. “Sustainable Business Excellence” need a strategy that does not require a change in organization’ key strategic strength. The idea is “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water”.

Hence, what is called for in today’s age of turbulence , is the strategic management of the confluence of continuity and change i.e. managing Change & continuity simultaneously. This can be done by identifying the forces driving change & continuity , mapping them on the continuity-change matrix, and finally selecting the appropriate strategic path as depicted in Sushil’s(2005) framework. For this, however ,organizations need to be adequately “flexible”- operationally, structurally, and strategically- by developing ‘Dynamic Management Capability’ as proposed by Volberda(1997). Undoubtedly, managing “change and continuity simultaneously – is a task far more delicate than managing change alone” Martinez(1997), but definitely seems to promise a sustainable business excellence model.

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