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Learning, Innovation, Flexibility and Entrepreneurship: Key Processes for Organization Vitality

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Abstract

Since last two-three decades, a drastic change has been seen in the business environment. Many of the organizations that were leaders before two three decades are no more in existence. The reason behind that may be due to decrease in their vitality level with respect to time. The organizations that fail to adapt the environmental changes might fail to even survive or grow further. A flexible and entrepreneurial attitude helps organization to manage the changes. Continuous learning in the organization generates new innovative solutions, which helps in fulfilling the changing demands. This study focuses on the vitality issue and the process of achieving high vitality. Learning, innovation, flexibility, and entrepreneurship are the key pillars for gaining and sustaining high vital state. The study is based on review of literature and caselet study of different organizations. Secondary data method has been used for this study. Finally, a "LIFE" mantra has been purposed as a vitalization process for continuous organization vitality.

Keywords: Change, Entrepreneurship, Flexibility, Growth, Innovation, Learning, Survival, Vitality.

Introduction

During 1990, in one of the study it was found that within last fifteen years nearly one third of the Fortune 500 companies have disappeared. The average lifetime of the largest organizations has been defined as less than 40 yrs (Senge, 1990). The question which becomes important is to know the reason why some organizations survive and grow for a longer period of time while many fail. What is the cause of these failure and what are those processes or forces due to which organizations may survive for a longer duration (Senge, 1990).

Darwin's principle says that those who can adapt the changes will survive more. The same is supposed to be true for the organizations as living systems. Organizations which change themselves with respect to the environment are expected to survive for a longer period than those which cannot. It is the vitality state of the organizations because of which it survives more than others. Shimizu (1991) defined the organizational ability to cope with change in environment as one of the prime factor of high vital organization.

In the highly turbulent environment it is required to establish a good fit between the organization and its environment and management is supposed to take care of this (Eppink, 1978). The

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overall long term fit is often defined as strategy that can further broken down into shorter plans. Dutch Postbank in Netherlands was facing the problem due to emergence of new technology and service in banking services. Initially it was using the old technology but to fit with the environmental changes it developed flexibility mix and welcome the new and innovative service in its work culture.

Organization vitality has been defined as organization health or growth. Financial, intellectual and creative growth of the organization is the determinant factors for measuring the vitality (Vicenza and Adkins, 2000). Organization vitality is enhanced by the number of new possibilities competing for survival (Loverdo, 2005). Reimann (1982) has defined sales growth, profit growth and customer service as one of the key dimensions of organizational growth. Agrawal (2004) considered customer service as one of the important aspects of long term survival of the organization.

Aggressive competition change (tends to directly and strongly challenge its rivals to achieve entry and develop position to out perform industry competitors in the marketplace) is crucial to the survival and success of organization (Allred and Swan, 2004). Firms that successfully achieved the competitive aggressiveness can perceive excellent competitiveness and greater business outcomes.

As an entrepreneurial revitalization process, Philip Semiconductors transforms itself from a bureaucratic and conservative company into an innovative and responsive one. Development of autonomous task groups, organizing social events, creating interdisciplinary teams, providing some special training etc are some of the parts of its transformation process.

To remain vital in a competitive era, an organization has to change itself with respect to the environment. To remain competitive, Unilever has considered vitality as its new mission which says "add vitality to life". Vitality should be evolved into the business itself and into the people who are working in the business. Delivering vitality is one of the five pillars of the strategic goals defined in Unilever. Research and development and acquisitions have been given more importance for achieving the required goals i.e. high vital state.

Organization vitality has been classified into four types: i) operational, ii) intellectual, iii) emotional, and iv) spiritual. Organizations are like human beings, as human beings required a proper diet, life style, mental and physical exercises to remain healthy; in the similar way organizations also require some kinds of life ingredients to become and remain a vitalized organization (Sushil, 2005). These life ingredients for the organizations are the processes which are critical for long term organizational survival and growth. These processes are the continuous vitalization process required to remain healthy for a longer period of time.

Two perspectives for a vital organization have been identified as survival and growth aspects of organization. This study further explored these two issues in organizations and discussed how these two issues are affected by some of the organizational process. Growth perspective has been defined as a vital indicator of any thriving firm (Gilbert *et al.* 2011). The key processes for achieving long term survival and growth have been discussed with real life implementation examples based on the secondary caselet study.

Methodology

This study is based on the literature review and caselet study method. The caselet study has been done using secondary data in documentary format. The review of literature has been done first related to the organizational vitality to identify the perspectives of vitality in any organization. Survival and growth perspectives have been identified as two perspectives of vitality. Further

the review has been done to identify the key process which effects the survival and growth of organizations. These key processes and its linkages have been discussed with suitable caselets describing the real implementation of these processes in the organizations.

Four Pillars for Long Term Survival and Growth

The review of literature on organization vitality raises two issues of a vital organization i.e. survival and growth perspective in the emerging uncertain environment. Four processes have been found as important one for organizational survival and growth. Learning, innovation, flexibility and entrepreneurship have been defined as four processes for long term survival and growth. These four processes are defined as the four pillars for long term survival and growth of any organization. These four processes are further discussed in the subsequent sections into two parts based on their interrelatedness with each other. The first part discussed about the learning and innovation issues while the second part discussed about the flexibility and entrepreneurship process.

Learning and Innovation

Garrat in 1987 has first coined the term learning for the organizations that experimented new ways of conducting business in order to survive in uncertain and highly competitive markets (Ortenblad, 2004). Organizational learning is an essential element for successful competition in a global market (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). Learning Organization develops the ability to renew and adapt the changing conditions and requirements in a continuous manner (Sushil, 2004).

Organizational learning is a prerequisite for organization well being and survival. Failure to learn is the prime reason behind the failure of organizations and long term survival (Senge, 1990). The learning should not be limited within the organizational boundary but it should focus on the learning from the external environment also. Learning form environment help organizations to know about the external changes and also to know about itself (its capability to deal with the changes) in a much better way. This kind of learning is not a one time process; it's a continuous process (Epstein, 2003).

CNGC was facing the problem during one of its project of acquiring new customer in Whale Industrial Park in Taiwan. The organization takes this problem as learning opportunity and learned from the internal as well as external environment both. This learning helps CNGC to predict about the future and serve the customer in a better way. It communicated with its customer directly to develop more trust. This kind of learning attitude helped organization to react proactively towards crisis or to minimize the loses incurred.

Organizations have always been connected with learning over time. The primary need for the organization is to know the process of learning. Learning how to learn is considered a basic need for any organization that wants to survive in the business world. It starts first from individual learning and then transferred to the organization through a certain process which is not completely known until now (Molina and Callahan, 2009). This learning process may be different for different kinds of organization.

Pascale (1991) has defined two kinds of learning: i) little "l"; and ii) big "L". The distinction between this has been defined using learning in General Motors (little l) and Honda (big L). General Motors learning was focused on the incremental improvement over previous performance. On the others side, Honda demonstrates the quality of both kinds of learning. The focus was on quality, enduring values, trust, empowerment, conflict management, and innovation. Some of the initiatives taken like idea contest to inspire the people to come forward with their ideas,

developing a culture of problem finding and having trust on others. These kinds of initiatives improved the agility and adaptive quality of Honda.

Organizational learning is not only the way in which learning occurs at the collective level, but it also includes the surrounding environment that facilitates collective learning (i.e. an organizational learning culture) (Molina and Callahan, 2009).

Effectiveness of learning organization depends on the combination of organizational learning (continuous improvement, continuous questioning of how to do things and how to improve and develop awareness), work learning (on the job training), learning climate (set an environment), and learning structure (organic) (Ortenblad, 2004). Adaptation through learning process contributes to the organizational ability to survive (Gorleck, 2005). Organization vitality and adaptive nature of an organization depends on the learning capability of that organization (Pascale, 1991). Permanent learning capacity helps organization to adapt the changing situations (Diez *et al.*, 2005).

In the hypercompetitive environment having continuous and unanticipated changes, learning capability of an organization make the firm capable to cope with the changes and compete effectively. This learning capability has been considered as the strategic capability of the firm (Jitnom and Ussahawanitchakit, 2010). Strategic learning capability has a positive influence on firm performance both ways; directly and indirectly and firm performance is positively associated with sustainable growth. The learning inside the organization should be either equal to or greater than the changes outside the organization otherwise the survival may be problematic (Schwandt and Marquardt, 2000).

To survive and prosper in the current economic climate, organizations will need to develop learning process faster than its competitor which helps it to stay ahead of the competition (Zhao, 2005). According to Schwandt and Marquardt (2000), within the next 10 years only the organizations which will develop learning process will survive.

Due to globalization the competition has increased drastically and companies are supposed to be innovative for long term survival. Learning and innovation has been defined as a linked concept (Sushil, 2004). Successful companies produce 75 per cent of their revenues from new services and products which was not in existence five years before (XU *et al.*, 2011). Resource-based View (RBV) of the firm establishes the importance of innovation and the creation of new knowledge for company growth (Gaudamiles *et al.*, 2008). Organization's ability of creating something new for commercial value gives it new strength for the long term survival and growth (Sushil, 2004).

A positive way to learn faster and stay ahead of the competitor is to unlock the creative power of organizational members and to engage staff in improvement and innovation process. Survival means creating new business practice that is better than accepted industry best practices in both customer care and product value perspectives (Zhao, 2005).

In Teletechnics (An U.S firm operating in the area of development and manufacturing of a wide range of highly advanced communication systems) creativity, learning and innovation are the central theme to company strategy. It has developed a new performance management system with key focus on enhancing the learning and innovation in the organization. Creativity, knowledge creation, personal growth, mutual support, and development of new learning strategies were the central issues in the organization.

The continuous learning in the organization develops more creativity and leads to more innovation in organization. Creativity and innovation are the source of strength and competitive vitality in an organizational system (Vicenzi and Adkins, 2000). For promoting innovation, organizations

have to use their learning in an appropriate way to make them effective like through total quality management practices etc. (Hung *et al*, 2010). This kind of initiative is strongly associated with effective innovation in the organizations.

Learning organization can stay ahead of the competition through innovation by using the knowledge gained from different kind of learning processes (Chermin and Nijhof, 2005). Innovating firms grasp the new opportunities in the industry, attract new customers and by venturing into new markets helps to achieve growth and profitability (Michael and Pearce, 2009).

In the changing environmental conditions, innovation process in the organization integrated with flexibility, make it easy for the organization to manage the changes. Liao (2008) has defined these two processes as the key for long term survival and success. Innovation can be enhanced in the organization if flexibility issues taken as a concern in the communication process. This allows top-down, bottom-up and lateral communications within organizations and promote the innovation process (Egbu, 2004).

3M has developed a culture where employees have been given flexibility to use their time in some innovative process other than their regular work. Further a successful innovation works as a catalyst for other employees to work more in a flexible manner for contributing more. 3M has culture which supports learning and experiment in the organization. It brings people together (using different tactics like organizing activities like technical audits of the various labs regularly etc) from diverse background that generates more new ideas. Its well-known 15 per cent rule has supported the growth of innovation process a lot. In 3M, Money and time has been considered as two basic requirements of innovation.

The vision of JAC “providing better products for a better tomorrow” itself says its dedication about the innovation in the organization. In the first phase of its learning it set a team for learning organization project to link the learning organization theories to the core values of the company. Its “40+4” program during the second phase led to a learning environment in the organization and motivate employees to innovate. The program says that besides the 40 hours of working time, everyone was encouraged to come for training every Sunday. This kind of flexible approach promotes learning in the organization.

Innovation and entrepreneurship are complementary to each other. The combination of both is vital to organizational success and sustainability in current dynamic and changing environment (Zhao, 2005). Entrepreneurship and innovation are closely interrelated and the former one stipulated the later (Michael and Pearce, 2009). Entrepreneurial attitude provides more resources and promote risk taking in the organization which fosters the innovation process and performance of organization (Molina and Callahan, 2009).

Flexibility and Entrepreneurship

Flexibility has been defined as one of the key attributes and is related with learning and innovation (Sushil, 2004). The vital enterprises are more adaptable towards changing environments. Organizations adapt themselves with the changing environment by developing more *Flexibility*. Flexibility has a direct impact on customer service which has been considered as a vital area for organizational survival (Agrawal, 2004). Customers are the key stakeholders of any organization and customer service is one of the most important things and a matter of concern for any organization. The firms which are having more flexibility serve their customers in a better way than their competitors.

In the twenty-first century, flexibility has become an issue for survival of many organizations (Becker, 2001). For firms to survive and prosper in unstable and unpredictable environments,

flexibility is having its own importance. Flexibility provides a firm the capacity to adjust itself with respect to the changes and convert the changing situation as new opportunity by making it favorable for organization. It can be considered as a company-specific skill or a resource for the organization (Dreyer and Gronhaug, 2004). The current knowledge age and highly uncertain environment demands some kind of proactive and adaptive nature with respect to the changes. Incorporating flexibility in organizational process provide a kind of internal environment to fulfill this requirement.

The R&D department in The Dutch National Gas Company was facing the problem due to the complex, dynamic and unpredictable environment. Its information-processing capacity was not up to date and the R &D department was defined as in chaotic form. The department faced many failures in its new research initiatives because of unclear structures and shared values, and lack of adequate information related to work-hours, costs and technical progress report. The organization has developed a wide flexibility mix. It has defined a clearer organic structure and with a strong focus on departments core culture. To preserve a significant flexibility potential, it had started social events for creating a higher-order core culture. Managers started to provide more direction and feedback. This kind of cultural changes developed flexibility in the organization.

Flexibility is considered as the vital force of strategy development in the changing business environment (Agrawal, 2004). Flexibility is a way by which organization can increase control in highly unstable environment. Organizational flexibility is considered as a strategic option in situations where accurate expectation about the changes is not possible and the probability of getting surprises are more. As a Strategy of the organization, ASE's first focuses was on the continuous innovation, diversification, and Flexibility perspective to exceed customer expectations and satisfy their needs.

Jitnom and Ussahawanitchakit (2010) have suggested that organization can achieve a sustainable growth if it knows how it can manage its strategic learning capability to improve the strategic actions including operational flexibility effectiveness, intelligence marketing response and firm performance as mediating factors.

Flexible (and especially reduced) working time in the organizations is one kind of flexibility which is useful for many organizations. This kind of flexibility increase self motivation among the organizational members and promote knowledge building which is useful for organizational development (Brench and Sloka, 2010). Providing more free time for employees allow possibilities for professional growth without any extra investments. Part-time working has been defined as one of the fastest growing forms of flexible working while short-term contracts, although less significant in growth terms, are also described as the widely adopted forms of contractual flexibility used by employers (Mayne *et al.*, 1996).

3M has flexible working culture that provides enough time to its employees to use there time in some innovative process other than their regular work. Further a successful innovation works as a catalyst for others to work in a flexible manner for contributing more.

Customer service is one of the vital areas for any organization. Flexibility is important for providing better customer service, and this can be developed using various systems like KM systems in the organization (Agarwal, 2004). Customer demands are not unique in nature and this varies according to the customer. These different kinds of demands can be better managed by using a flexible approach.

Another kind of flexibility which is required by the organization and played an important role is strategic flexibility; but not easy to achieve. Strategic flexibility in any organization can be increased by two ways. First, organizations can try to reduce the relative impact of a

specific event on the whole organization and second, organizations can try to increase its response capacity. But these both are not an easy task to develop. Top management awareness about the need of higher degree of strategic flexibility is the prerequisite for both methods (Eppink, 1978).

Philip Semiconductors was facing the problem due to new technology, unpredictable product-market combination and lack of required flexibility. Although it was having operational flexibility but that alone was not enough. It included the structural and strategic flexibility in the organization.

In an era which is driven by accelerating change, with flexibility, entrepreneurial actions are essential for survival or any organization. Ireland *et al.* (2001) have found that entrepreneurship and strategic management process contribute to firm's growth and success. According to Sushil (2004) enhancing flexibility promotes entrepreneurship in the organization. Using the technical infrastructure, knowledge, organizational flexibility and entrepreneurship the organization can achieve high growth path (Gaudamiles *et al.*, 2008). Increased entrepreneurial activity helps the organization to remain vital. The technical infrastructure in H-Bank pushed the knowledge interchange in the organization and save money, time and organizational resources. This leads to the better customer service and satisfaction.

Entrepreneurship helps in gaining the competitive advantages by way of product, prices and market innovations. Top management plays an important role for developing entrepreneurial attitude in organization. Omerzel and Antoncic (2008) have found that entrepreneurial knowledge is critical for survival of any organizations. Successful entrepreneurs develop competences, skills and techniques in a constant manner and acquire specific knowledge for survival and innovate new entrepreneurial opportunities in their industries.

Organization can discover and exploit the market opportunities using its entrepreneurial talent (Fedrici *et al.*, 2008). Corporate entrepreneurship is positively associated with a company's growth and profit (Covin and Slevin, 1991; Zahra, 1991). Managerial practices intensity is required for successful corporate entrepreneurship. Incorporating flexibility issues in planning, use of strategic controls, and involvement of people in the process develop more entrepreneurial behavior. Corporate entrepreneurship is important for firm survival and performance (Barringer and Bluedorn, 1999). A government policy may affect the entrepreneurship by developing a policy which reduces the risk and increase the return for the entrepreneurs (Michael and Pearce, 2009).

Philip Semiconductors has gone for an entrepreneurial revitalization by transforming the firm from a bureaucratic and conservative company into an innovative and responsive one. This revitalization resulted in a hybrid form of planned/flexible. The transformation was done by developing autonomous task groups, interdisciplinary teams, less formal planning and control, organizing social events, providing some special training etc.

Gilbert *et al.* (2011) have identified some of the factors like characteristics of entrepreneur, access to resources like human capital and finance to explain why some ventures grow more than their counterparts. Growth has been defined as functions of the entrepreneurial decisions. This decision are like related to the issues like about how and where the organization should grow and the extent to which other factors are in place that enable the growth (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011).

Syndicom was established using collaborative entrepreneurship. It had assisted in creating medical device design communities which involves surgeons, patent attorneys, medical engineers, and device manufacturing firms.

Entrepreneurial people not only benefit the organization but they also play a central role in

economic growth of the countries and the availability of high quality of entrepreneurial skills influenced the potential of development, growth and innovation in the organization (Michelacci, 2003).

Survival and growth are the two key dimensions of a vital organization. Organization can survive and grow for a longer period of time if it can manage the changes better than its competitors. For this organizations should have better understanding about the changes. *Learning* is the process by which an organization can achieve this knowledge. After having the knowledge about the changes a appropriate action is required according to the change. *Innovation* is the process which is required to deal with changing demands. *Flexibility* and *Entrepreneurship* are the other key process which is crucial in the organization for developing learning and innovation and long term success. These four process are the vitalization process in organization which deals with operating characteristic of a living system, and can be taken as a measurement framework for organization vitality.

Conclusion

The current era is well known as knowledge era where environment is uncertain and changes can occur at any point of time. With this situation it is not an easy task to survive and grow without some different approach. To become successful in this kind of environment organization should be able to know and predict about the changes. A continuous learning process helps in getting this knowledge about the external changes and internal organizational capability to manage the change. Using this learning and innovating new ideas organization can manage the changing needs. Learning and Innovation combined with flexible approach and entrepreneurial attitude helps organization to survive for a longer period of time and grow faster than their competitors. These four processes; learning, innovation, flexibility and entrepreneurship can be considered as the LIFE of the organization as this boost organization capability to survive and grow for a longer period.

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Learning, Innovation, Flexibility and Entrepreneurship: Key Processes for Organization Vitality

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