

Chapter 13

Why the Zebra's Stripes are Important: Protecting the Core Competences of the firm

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ABSTRACT

This article progresses the argument that the core competences of the company must be created, diffused, and distributed and protected, to effectively exploit the market. Companies compete on what they know best and in management theory organizations draw a repertoire of multiple resources and skills to effectively differentiate the business in vying for market leadership. The core competence or capability of the firm can be described as talent and a special ability that allows the enterprise to produce the goods demanded by customers exceptionally well. The core competences can also be referred to as explicit practices constituting measurable or observable knowledge, skills, abilities, and behaviors critical in meeting the needs of clients. The capability should be crafted in a manner that makes imitation by similar entities impossible.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is spread out in four parts. The first provides an introduction and offers a definition of some of the key dimensions applied in the discussion. The second part reviews a selected literature to appreciate the management of knowledge in its various forms including core competences and how they can

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1961-4.ch013

be applied to make ends meet in successful organization. In the third part, a synthesis of the literature is provided to craft a conceptual model that characterizes organizational core competences critical in sustaining the organization. A conclusion is drawn in the fourth part mentioning the limitations of the arguments presented.

BACKGROUND

A Selected Literature Review: Some Dimensions in Knowledge Creation

Many scholars argue that a company needs to create its own practices that are unique to the environment in which it operates. For example, Menon, Bhardwaj, Adidam & Edison (1999), propounded that an internal assessment of the firm's strengths and opportunities was antecedent to the development of organizational strategy. The model they proposed was hinged on discovery-approach yielding a multifaceted conceptualization of strategy that can be implemented taking cognizance of the capability of the enterprise to succeed. Menon et al allude to the need in organization to create diffuse and distribute explicit knowledge to cognitive areas where the knowledge can be converted into practices to enhance sustainability.

Core Competences are a Construct

In an article that has become a Harvard Business Review classic entitled the *Core Competence of the Corporation*, Prahalad & Hamel (1990) suggested that what constituted the essential capacity of an enterprise were the ability to access markets successfully, produce and deliver the goods demanded by customers and Should make a significant contribution to the perceived customer benefits of the end product. Zook (2001) found that nine out of ten companies had succeeded because they had focused on their core competences. Those that did not had diversified operations into areas they did not have specific talent. In later research Zook & Allen (2016), proposed that there were at least three principles: Managing the business and responding to the necessary cues to enable efficiency and effectiveness to occur; solving problems; and focusing on productivity. Zook & Allen viewed this three-step approach as antecedent to growth of the firm. Solving problems enabled the firm to be effective and efficient. Zook & Allen argued that managers spent most of the time in efforts to understand why profitability was hard to achieve and sustain.

Core Capability is a Social Construct

In Burnes & Cooke (2013) the field force analysis technique developed by Kurt Lewin in 1943 has remained viable as a proposition in strategy management. Force-field analysis is an influential development in change management which provides a framework for looking at the factors (forces) that influence behavior in organization. It looks at forces that are either driving movement toward a goal achievement or blocking movement toward a goal. This proposition has been republished by the APA (1997) and remains in use today. Following this assumption managers spent a considerable time developing strategy using this technology commonly referred to as environmental analysis. Zook & Allen argued that executives managed their companies as if the solution to problems lay in the external environment such

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