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WHAT MAKES ORGANISATIONS SUCCEED?: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT AND VISIONARY COMPANIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the characteristics of "excellent" and "visionary " companies. Based on secondary research data a multiple cross company analysis has been conducted to identify some of the common themes in successful organisations. In a dynamic business environment organisations built around their core competence with flexible structures are critical factors leading to organisational success. However, the driving force of most companies seems to be in the area of customer satisfaction. Other success factors include, entrepreneurship, a home grown management team and people centered organisations. In consideration of the above, certain implications for managers have been appropriately identified.

WHAT MAKES ORGANISATIONS SUCCEED?: AN EXAMINATION OF SOME OF THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EXCELLENT AND VISIONARY COMPANIES

PURPOSE

Leading companies are never caught off guard by unanticipated activity in the external environment. Instead, they continually scrutinize the competitive, technological, consumer and regulatory environment for any variation. Thus prepared, progressive companies foresee critical events, make well informed decisions and implement timely responses. Corporations that succeed will be those that can learn to be economically rational while marching in that primordial step. In this paper I have endeavored to identify some of the characteristics of "successful" and "visionary" companies. I have further attempted to understand the nature and concept of organisational fit and failure, and discuss the research implications for managers.

Certain types of failures result directly from faulty managerial decisions and behaviors. Often, managers cannot foresee and thus prevent some form of organisational failure (Miles and Snow 1994). There are also situations of failure and misfit that are beyond managerial anticipation and/or influence. However, *organisational success depends not just on avoiding the wrong things but by doing the right things well and getting them right the first time.* It is from this perspective that I have examined organisational success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This article is based on the research performed by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman Jr, for the purpose of their book, *In Search of Excellence* (1982). Some common themes of successful companies have been identified as has the criteria for success been compared with the study of visionary companies, a decade later by Collins and Porras for their book, *Built to Last* (1995). Several articles on related topics have been referred to during the course of this paper. It is around the theory of Organisational Fit developed by Miles et al. in their book Fit, Failure and Hall of Fame (1994) that this article has been developed. Further, extracts from appropriate literature have been used throughout this article as indicated.

RESEARCH ISSUES

Excellent companies as defined by Peters & Waterman, "were the continuously innovative big companies" and thus, few firms in their sample had annual sales of less than $1 billion or life histories shorter than 20 years. However, considerable emphasis was placed on financial performance to support the "halo of esteem" of these excellent companies. Consequently Peters and Waterman chose six measures of long term superiority (three are measures of growth and long term wealth creation over a twenty year period) the other three are measures on return on capital and sales. In order to qualify as a top performer, a company had to have been in the top half of the industry in at least four out of six of these measures over a full twenty-year period. Further, all the companies were hands-on operators not holding subsidiary companies nor were any of them conglomerates. And while not every plan succeeds, in the day to day pursuit of their business these companies succeeded more often than they failed. A list of excellent companies is detailed in Annexure 1.

Collins and Porras have identified eighteen visionary companies, which have an average age of nearly 100 years and have outperformed the stock market by a factor of fifteen since 1926. Theses visionary companies have prospered over long periods of time, through multiple product life cycles and generation of leaders, however, these companies do not have perfect unblemished records. Yet, these companies have displayed a remarkable resilience to bounce back from adversity. A unique aspect of their research has been the "comparison company", which was founded in the same period as the visionary, and pursued similar products, services and markets. A list of visionary and comparison companies is detailed in Annexure 2.

INTRODUCTION

Today's leaner organisations are likely to have eliminated layers of management and trimmed head quarter count. Strategy has become the responsibility of every worker. There is less emphasis on analysis and more emphasis on implementation, and a greater realization that successful implementation requires both vision and commitment. A back to basics movement in strategy began when Peters and Waterman revealed that the best managed companies, " stuck to their knitting ", i.e. avoided diversification.

This theme was also visible in the works of later authors most notably Michael Porter (1980). Hamel and Prahalad (1996) further stressed that the unifying thread in successfully diversified companies - what they termed the strategic intent, was the sense of a shared vision that ultimately drives implementation and competitive success. These important trends reflect significant changes in the business environment.

WHAT IS SUCCESS?

Miles & Snow (1994) described achieving organisational fit as a desired strategic goal of an organisation. Thus, the strategy of successful firms is to achieve fit with the marketplace. Over time, successful firms relate to the market and the broader environment with a consistent approach that builds on their unique competencies and sets them apart from their peers.

Some firms achieve success by being first, either by anticipating where the market is going or by shaping the markets direction through their own research and development efforts. It is the type of drive that led Walt Disney to bet its reputation on Disneyland with no market data to indicate the demand for such a wild dream. It is the drive for progress that pushed 3M to continually experiment and solve problems that other companies had not yet even recognised as problems, resulting in such pervasive innovations as a waterproof sandpaper, Scotch tape and Post-it notes. It was this drive for progress that led Boeing to undertake the boldest gamble in business history, to build the B-747 in spite of a highly uncertain market demand.

The drive for progress in a highly visionary company can never be satisfied under any condition, even when the status quo is working well. As reiterated by Henry Ford, "we can always do better, we can always go further, we can always find new possibilities".

Peters & Waterman observed certain basic principles common to all "excellent" American firms in the late 1970s and 1980s. We shall now critically evaluate each of these principles.

A Bias For Action

The concept of organisational fluidity is not new, however, what is new is that excellent companies seem to know how to make good use of it. According to Peters & Waterman " Whether its their rich ways of communicating informally or their special ways of using ad hoc devices, such as task forces, the excellent companies get quick action just because their organisations are fluid."

The nature and use of communication in the excellent companies are remarkably different from those of their non-excellent peers. Excellent companies develop vast networks of informal and open communication systems. The patterns and intensity cultivate the right people getting into contact with each other regularly and the chaotic, anarchic properties of the system are kept well under control simply because of the regularity of contact and its nature.

"The intensity of communication is unmistakable in the excellent companies. It usually starts with an instance if informality", Peters *et al* 1982. Some of the examples cited by them in their book, In Search of Excellence, describe that, at Walt Disney Productions each employee from the President downwards wears a name tag with his first name on it. Further, companies like IBM and Levi Strauss spend a great time implementing their, *Open Door Policy*, where their chairmen continue to answer queries that come to them from any employee. The *HP Way* and *Management by Wandering About* and *Visible Management* are all a part getting management out of their offices and contributing to informal communication exchanges. Such principles are closely followed by excellent companies, for example at HP, "We aren't really sure which structure suits us best. All we know is for certain that we start with a high degree of informal communication, which is the key and we have to preserve that at all cost" HP spokesperson in Peters et al.

Companies like Digital, 3M, Texas Instruments and McDonald's are different from the traditional bureaucratic model; at such corporations there is no paper pushing, rule driven layers of work flow, but taskforces that are working the way they are supposed to. The task force's membership was limited and voluntary, and the seniority of its members was proportional to the importance of the problem. Documentation is informal and scant, since "task forces around here are not in the business of producing paper, but solutions."

There is no more important trait among excellent companies than an action orientation. These companies don't give in and create permanent committees and task forces that last for years. They don't indulge in long reports, or formal matrix structures. Despite their large size these companies are seldom stymied by over complexity. These companies are flexible and are not transfixed with organisation charts or job descriptions and authority - responsibility relationships. In Australia, one of the few large companies with an excellent labour record is ICI, with its managing director Dirk Ziedler attributed this success to its interlocking teams and small groups structure, whose true power lies in its flexibility. At 3M, new product teams are formed anywhere and nobody worries very much about whether or not they fit exactly into division boundaries, similarly TI's Chairman Mark Shepherd calls his company "a fluid, project - oriented environment".

Close to the customer

In observing the excellent companies and specifically the way they interact with customers, what is most striking is their consistent presence with obsession. Excellent companies are better listeners, they get a benefit from market closeness. Most of their innovation comes from the market.

P& G was the first consumer goods company to put its toll free phone number on all its packaging, and this customer service line is now a major source of product improvement ideas, (Abrams 1981)

Entrepreneurship

Perhaps the most important element of these excellent companies with impressive growth trends and innovation is their enviable track record is their ability to be big and yet act small at the same time. A concomitant essential apparently is that they encourage the entrepreneurial sprit among their people. Such entrepreneurship can be found in the venture teams at 3M, at TI with over ninety Product Customer.

Centres, and at J&J where their division size was such that it appeared sub optimal. However, all these companies were making a purposeful tradeoff. They were creating almost radical decentralization and autonomy. In many ways lack of coordination, internal competition and somewhat chaotic conditions lead to entrepreneurial sprit and internal competition.

A special attribute of the success oriented, positive and innovative environment is a substantial tolerance for failure. According to James Bruke, CEO, Johnson & Johnson, " you've got to be willing to fail". Tolerance for failure is a very specific part of the excellent company culture.

Productivity Through People

One of the most fundamental lessons that may be drawn from the excellent companies is that they treat their people as the primary source of productivity and gains. It is by treating employees as the most important assets that productivity and financial rewards can be maximised. According to Collins and Porras, there was hardly a more pervasive theme in the excellent companies than the respect for the individual. What makes such a value driven system work tirelessly is a plethora of structural devices, systems, styles all reinforcing one another so that the company, unusual in its ability to achieve extraordinary results through ordinary people. However, most of these companies have a tougher side as well. These people oriented companies are performance driven, and high on expectations. (Davis, Stanley 1984)

Hands on, value driven

Every excellent company studied by Peters and Waterman, was clear on what it stands for, and takes the process of value shaping seriously. Some of the common attributes of these companies despite their very different values are that most of set of values are stated in qualitative rather than quantitative terms. Accordingly, they identified the following dominant beliefs in excellent companies:

- a belief of being the "best"
- a belief in the importance of the details in execution
- a belief in the importance of people as individuals
- a belief in superior quality and service
- a belief that most members of the organisation should be, innovators, and thus management should support, "tolerable" failure.
- a belief in the importance of informality to enhance communication
- a belief in and recognition of the importance of economic growth and profits.

The idea behind this seems to be that profits are a natural by product of good value driven objectives, and thus are not an end itself. Another common attribute is perhaps the effort to inspire the people at the very bottom as well as have innovative people at all levels of the organisation. These companies have realised that growth through innovation is not just limited to its employees in the R& D department, but across all processes. Another common theme visible in these companies is their informal communication patterns, which perhaps is at the heart of the *HP Way* and *managing by wandering around*. By keeping communication channels informal and avoiding the chain of command, keeps maximum fluidity and flexibility to the communication structure, (Ricardo Semler 1993)

Stick to the knitting

Both the qualitative guiding value (people orientation, innovation and quality/service) and the hands on approach "are at war with diversification strategies." Since most diversification strategies dilute the guiding qualitative themes - since acquired institutions have a different set of shared values. The findings of Peters & Waterman reveal that organisations that do branch out (by acquisition or internal diversification) but stick very close to their knitting outperform others. The most successful of all are those that diversify around a single skill or bonding technology like at 3M. Another group, which may have a high success with its diversification strategy is of companies that branch out into related fields, like GE, from electric power generation turbines to jet engines (another form of turbine). And as a rule, the least successful diversification would be with those companies which are in a wide variety of unrelated fields (Malkiel 1995).

In a study conducted by Rumlet in 1974 for the Harvard Business School, of leading Fortune 500 companies over a 20 year period, during the fifties and sixties, the two top performing categories (related diversification) averaged 14.6 percent return on equity, 12.4 percent return on capital. Accordingly, the worst performing categories (unrelated passive diversification) had a 10.2 percent return on equity (31 percent less), and a return on capital of 8.6 percent (30 percent less). According to Rumlet, these findings were of statistical significance. An extension of this study was done by Jacobs and Levy (1988) who showed that this gap in fact increased in the period 1975 to 1985.

The above analysis does not suggest that, simple is better, however what it perhaps indicates is that organisations that branch out somewhat (while still close to their central skills) outperform others (Schuster 1981).

However, core ideology alone as important as it is cannot make a visionary company. Core ideology in companies works hand in hand with a relentless drive for progress that impedes change and forward movement in all that is not part of core ideology. Visionary companies have a drive for progress and continuous improvement which is in concurrence with the underlying theme of Collins & Porras, " preserve the core and stimulate progress "(Malkiel 1995).

Simple form, lean staff

Along with bigness comes, complexity. And most big companies respond to complexity by designing complex structures. Then they hire more staff to keep a track on all their complexity and the viscous circle manifests. A simple structure allows for flexibility in responding to fast changing conditions in the environment and in dealing with the issues posed by the presence of the matrix structure. Smaller and simpler structures can be reorganised more flexibly, frequently and fluidly. Further, they can make better use of temporary forms, such as task forces and project centers, (Davis 1984).

The research of Peters & Waterman, indicates that there is perhaps only one concomitant to the excellent company's simple structural form: lean staff especially at the corporate level. The bottom line at most of these companies is fewer administrators and more operators. For example, Emerson Electric has 54,000 employees with less than 100 at corporate headquarters, Schlumberger, the $6 billion diversified oil company, runs its worldwide operations with a corporate staff of less than ninety. Further companies like 3M, HP and J&J have had no planners at the corporate level. Most functions in such organisations are decentralised down to the division level, (Waddell 1983).

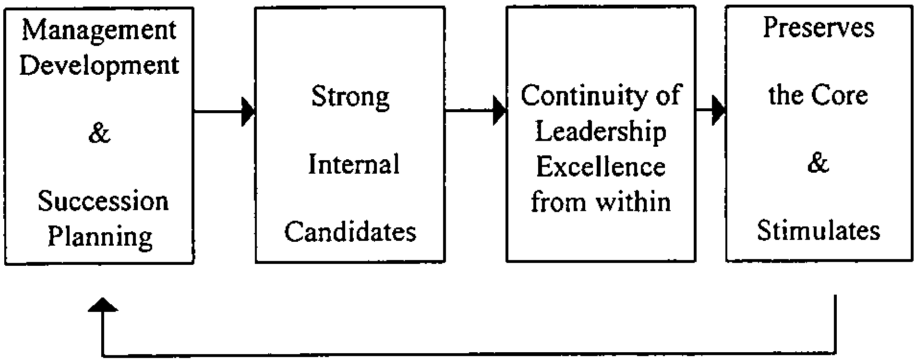
Whatever may be the structure, it would be appropriate if it responds adequately to the need for efficiency around the basics, a need for regular innovation and a need to avoid calcification by ensuring at least modest responsiveness to major threats. However such flexible structures also correspond closely to the managing systems of many of the excellent companies.

Home grown management

It would be naïve to suggest that any random person could become CEO of a visionary company, and it would still continue to tick along in top form. Visionary companies have know to develop, promote, and carefully select managerial talent grown from inside the company to a greater degree than the comparison company. Such a management style is possibly seen as a key step in preserving their core ideology. (George & Montgomery, 1983).

An analysis of the visionary & their comparison reveals, that only two (11.1 percent) ever hired a chief executive from outside the company, compared to thirteen (72.2 percent) in the case of comparison companies. Of 113 chief executives for which Collins & Porras have gathered data, only 3.5 percent came from directly outside the company, versus 22.1 percent of 140 CEOs at the comparison companies. In other words, "visionary companies were six times more likely to promote insiders to chief executives than at comparison companies" in other words "across seventeen hundred years of combined history put together in the visionary companies, there were only four individual cases of an outsider coming directly into the role of the chief executive."

Thus, it is the continuity of the quality of leadership that matters in preserving the core ideology. Both visionary and comparison companies have had excellent leadership at certain points in their history, however the visionary companies that have had better management development and succession planning. This may be described as continuos self-reinforcing process and a "leadership continuity loop."(Senge 1994).



Source: Collins & Porras (1995), Built to Last, p174

Absence of any of these elements can force the company to search outside for a chief executive and therefore pull the company away from its core ideology. Such a discontinuity may impede progress and loss of its core ideology

IMPLICATIONS / LESSONS LEARNT

Management is being made far too complex and titles of some best selling books on the subject tell the story: *Maverick: The success story behind the world's most unusual workplace*, is about a Brazilian entrepreneur who transforms traditional manufacturing by letting the employees decide what to do and how to do on the shop floor as well as fixing their remuneration. *Made in Japan*, the story of Akio Morita's successful but UN Japanese leadership of Sony, *Zapp ! The Lightening of Empowerment,* describes how quality, productivity and employees satisfaction are best achieved by delegation and empowerment.

Based on qualitative analysis of some of the excellent and visionary companies and other literature on the subject suggests the following:

Organisation structure

Most companies like Intel, HP, McDonald's and more recently, Microsoft are companies designed like orchestras which perform with few conductors and hundreds of players, unlike armies with long chains of command (silos) and bottlenecks. Organisations should be designed with minimum levels of management between the board and the frontline employees who actually invent (R&D), Manufacturing / Production / Shop floor), sell (Marketing) and provide services customer interface). Delayering the ranks of middle management (organisational fat) in particular improves communication, lowers costs, speeds up decision making and motivates all staff to contribute. Thus, less management is better management. And according to Ray Korc's longstanding dictum, " I believe that less is more, in the case of corporate management".

The action approach

"Management is action and not a study or reflection" (Hilmer & Donaldson, 1996). Successful manages should be able to inspire, empower and lead rather than deliberate and administer. Front line employees have better instincts and customer opinions and are often the source of successful marketing opportunities. By stimulating action via empowerment managers should be able to unleash the energy and ideas that could otherwise be ignored.

Empowerment is achieved through self-directed teams. A self-directed team is a group of two or more people who share decision-making powers and responsibility for significant aspects of their individual job. Characteristics of such self-directed teams include:

- They are considered permanent
- They set many of their own goals and determine the methods they will use to attain them
- Members meet regularly to plan, report activities, discuss problems and strengthen group cohesiveness.

One of the benefits of self-directed teams is that when people participate in determining their own goals and methods, they are far more likely to be committed to their jobs and their organization. Other benefits include improvements in service and quality, cost reduction, efficiency and productivity, morale and job satisfaction, absenteeism and turnover rates, conflict resolution, as well as creativity and innovation (McEwan 1998).

Continuous improvement

Management should always be in the search of continual processes of relentless self-improvement with the aim of doing better and better. Most organisations develop a vision (what we want) and have a clear picture of current reality (where we are relative to what we want) this realisation creates what Senge calls, "creative tension "a force which to bring them together. Learning organisations are able to bridge this creative tension more easily than others.

It was not until the 1980s that "continuous improvement" became a buzzword for visionary companies. In some cases this concept is being patronized since a century. P&G first put to practice this concept of continuous improvement in 1850, Marriott embraced this philosophy soon after establishing its first root beer stand in 1927. At visionary companies continuous improvement is not just another management program, for such companies, self improvement is a long term investment in the future, for the development of employees, adoption of new and improved techniques.

Portfolio planning, value based planning, niche strategies, total quality management, benchmarking, core process reengineering are some techniques through which businesses can redirect themselves and, and stay competitive. In the modern day competitive environment, to be successful management should continuously think about.

- What business are we really in and how do we compete?
- How can we radically cut costs and waste?
- How can we provide effective sales and service support to our customers?
- How can we motivate employees to innovate and contribute above and beyond the minimum demands of the job?

Some modern companies like Microsoft have put to practice the above techniques as a proactive strategy to continuously improve their service, product line and quality, and production processes to stay ahead to competition.

CONCLUSION

Organisations have life and thus behave as adaptive systems." (Rummler & Brache, 1995). Typically, an organisation is a processing system which converts various resource inputs into product and service outputs. These outputs are delivered by it to receiving systems or markets. An organisation also provides financial value, in the form of capital appreciation and dividends to its shareholders. Each organisation is guided by its unique objectives but is ultimately driven by the feedback from its market. This entire business scenario is played in the social, economic and political environment. Internally organisations are built around functions and subs systems, which share the characteristics of the integrative organisation. Further, the organisation is controlled by its management, which interprets and reacts to the internal and external environment.

These reactions of the organisation are critical for it to maintain a balance with its external/internal environment. It is the prerogative of the management to make wise decisions based on its foresight and environmental feedback and pave the path to becoming a learning organisation. Organisations continuously have to pass through a series of metamorphoses in relation to their environments. Thus, it becomes necessary for companies to, have flatter and more responsive organisational structures, stay close to their customers, encourage entrepreneurial spirit among employees, form people centered organisations, and have a passion for continuos improvement in areas of people, processes and service. However, most organisations cannot optimally adapt and thus, fail.

Predicting organisational failure is at times easier than predicting organisational success. Since success is dependent on doing the right things well and not just avoiding the wrong things. Describing misfit and failure from a post mortem perspective is a learning experience for other organisations to recognise correctable mistakes early, which may help avoid them, becoming deeply ingrain and chronic and detrimental for their success.

Nevertheless over the course of business history, many companies have achieved continued success, enough to reveal a pattern of success. According to Miles & Snow, "to understand these patterns it is useful to think of success as achieving a fit. Fit is both a state and a process."

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ANNEXURE 1

AMERICAS BEST RUN COMPANIES

High Technology	Consumer goods	General industrial	Services	Project management	Recourse based
Allen Bradley	Blue Bell	Caterpillar Tractor	Delta Airlines	Bechtel	Exxon
Amdahl	Eastman Kodak	Dana Corp	Marriott	Boeing	
Digital Equipment	Frito Lay	Ingersoll Rand	McDonald's	Flour	
Emerson Electric	General Foods	McDermott			
Gould	Johnson & Johnson	3M			
Hewlett Packard	Procter & Gamble				
IBM					
NCR					
Rockwell					
Schlumberger					
Texas Instruments					
United Technologies					
Western Electric					
Westinghouse					
Xerox					

Peters T, & Waterman R, In Search of Excellence, Warner Books 1982, p 20-21.

ANNEXURE 1 CON'T

AMERICAS BEST RUN COMPANIES

Limited interviews plus 25 year literature review

High Technology	Consumer goods	General industrial	Services	Project management	Recourse based
Data General	Atari	General Motors	American Airlines		Arco
General Electric	Avon		Disney Productions		Dow Chemical
Hughes Aircraft	Bristol Myers		K Mart		Du Pont
Intel	Chesebourgh Ponds		Wal Mart		Standard Oils/ Amaco
Lockheed	Levi Strauss				
National Semiconductors	Mars				
Raychem	Maytag				
TRW	Merck				
Wang Labs	Polaroid				
	Revlon				
	Tuppaware				

ANNEXURE 2

Visionary Companies	Comparison Companies
3M	Norton
American Express	Wells Fargo
Boeing	McDonnell Douglas
Citicorp	Chase Manhattan
Ford	GM
General Electric	Westinghouse
Hewlett-Packard	Texas Instruments
IBM	Borroughs
Johnson & Johnson	Bristol - Myers Squibb
Marriott	Howard Johnson
Merck	Pfizer
Motorola	Zenith
Nordstrom	Melville
Phillip Morris	RJR Nabisco
Procter & Gamble	Colgate
Sony	Kenwood
Wal Mart	Ames
Walt Disney	Columbia

Adapted from Collins J C & Porras J I, Built to Last: Successful Habbits Of Visionary Companies, London Century, 1995.

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