ABAC ODI JOURNAL Vision. Action. Outcome

Diversity, Creative Style and Problem-Solving:

A Discussion of Outcome and Organisational Implications

Ray Clapp, Vorapot Ruckthum

www. http://www.assumptionjournal.au.edu/index.php/odijournal

Diversity, Creative Style and Problem-Solving:
A Discussion of Outcome and Organisational Implications

Ray Clapp [1], Vorapot Ruckthum [2]

[1]Visiting Professor, University of Hertfordshire, Research Fellow, Occupational Research Centre, UK, Email: rayclapp@hotmail.com
[2]Lecturer, Graduate School of Business and Advanced Technology Management, Assumption University of Thailand, Email: vorapotrck@au.edu

Abstract

If innovative change is followed by more innovation, costs tend to rise, and the organisation moves towards a more chaotic form. The opposite occurs where innovation is avoided, adaptive ideas predominate, and organisations move towards a more predictable form with low differentiation between competitors. By continuing with either style to the point where profitability is affected, the organisation moves towards the lower end of performance ranking for the sector albeit by different routes. To avoid this position, it is necessary to have enough stylistic diversity available to the team or the organisation to both generate ideas and make decisions that offer a situational advantage. Without such diversity, a diminishing organisational performance can be expected.

Introduction

Many people in their place of work will have experienced situations where managers, some very senior, have asked that their staff be more creative. When these demands are analysed, it is not clear what is meant by 'being creative'. Is it being used **adaptively** to improve the general day-to-day working arrangements or **innovatively** to change performance beyond what is currently seen as possible? (Kirton, 2011). This lack of clarity usually comes about for a number of reasons. This short article identifies 6 key reasons based on a carefully selected literature in this field. Discussion of each of the reasons with critical argument and conclusions are presented as followed.

Literature Review

The Problem-Solving Context

To be creative, we need a problem to solve as well as the motivation to solve it: our lives are spent solving problems. However, before we can solve a problem, the context and expected outcomes need some consideration, and to help with this, we build a mental model of

59

the structural elements involved. These models can be used personally to manipulate possible solutions, or shared with others where the diversity of views brings different skills and knowledge to help build a shared understanding of the issues involved. Both of which opens the way for both synergistic solutions as well as organisational learning.

Creativity and the Individual

Kirton's (1976, 2011) adaptive-innovative theory relates creative problem solving to a stylistic dichotomy where individuals at one end are concerned with adaption (improvements) while at the other end with innovation (originality). At the adaptive end, ideas that result in change outcomes are concerned with 'doing things better' while at the innovative end, idea outcomes are concerned with 'doing things differently' (Drucker, 1969). Factors such as: organisational disruption, supply chain disturbance, costs, profits, time-scales, and risk, all tend to be lower for adaptive outcomes and higher for the Innovative (Ruckthum & Clapp 2014). However, irrespective of these differences, both styles of outcome are recognised as being able to provide creative ideas that match the problem-solving context. Often, creativity is (erroneously) described as relating only to the innovative end of the dichotomy, casting all adaptive contributions as being non-creative.

Creativity and Culture (Social and Organisational)

The structure of culture both social and organisational is built from beliefs of 'expected' behaviours that are associated with important situations and people in the life of the individual (e.g. strict parental control of the child may translate in later life to a preference to conform to authority). These behavioural expectations stem from social traditions, both local and those that vary from country to country, as well as those within organisational and situational settings. Markus and Kitayama (1991) described important concepts concerned with individualism-collectivism and holistic-analytic thinking that relate to the orientation of diverse social cultures. For organisational cultures, many descriptions have been used, e.g. Bass and Avolio (1994) who suggested transactional and transformational concepts, while Cameron and Quinn (1999) suggested concepts of flexibility-stability and integration-differentiation. In organisations, culture acts to provide an optimal balance between the behavioural expectations of the different functions in the organisation (e.g. freedom of action in research and the need for control in production) with the behavioural preferences of the individual. Where the balance results in residual dissonance individuals seek a better balance elsewhere in the organisation, or in an extreme leaving the organisation. An integration of the social, organisational and situational concepts with a particular focus (e.g. Safety, Zohar 2014) is perceived by the individual as "psychological climate", a set of supports and constraints of behaviour that influences both the style of problem construction as well as the ideas offered as solutions.

Range of Solutions

For each problem, there is only a limited range of solutions that offer an effective answer. If the constraints of the problem require solutions that lie at the adaptive end of the

dichotomy where considerable gains in organisational performance are available from improvements, then little is to be gained by the manager insisting that the solution should be more innovative. Similarly, if the problem is defined such that innovative solutions are needed then all adaptive solutions will be considered as inadequate, either because they do not meet the problem constraints, or they have been tried before and found to be not sustainable (Typically, the current debate on global warming echoes these characteristics where the problem requires ideas that represent a paradigm shift, while most offered are improvements to current practises). It is not that any of the ideas associated with these differences in style are inherently poor; they may have significant intellectual merit, but still not meet the constraints of the problem context.

Managerial Implications

When considering any form of organisation, the need for people to work together is of paramount importance. Such a view promotes efficiency and synergy as well as the need for individuals to adopt interpersonal behaviour that minimizes conflict. At a minimum, this means individuals must understand each other to a level where issues that are going to promote conflict can be avoided/resolved to enable pursuit of the task in hand. However, when individuals work as a group where diversity dictates a wide separation between either their knowledge, their personal preferences, or their cultural traditions, their mental models may be so different that they misinterpret each other's views. This results in much of their effort being used to resolve their differences in outlook rather than progressing towards the problem or issue to be solved. So, while individual diversity in teams adds a wider perspective to problem solving, it also involves a management overhead to bridge any style/culture differences if both progress towards a solution and harmonious interpersonal relationships are to be maintained. Any lack of diversity means options and decisions are inclined to follow the current path, be it adaptive or innovative, rather than the wider demands of the problem-solving context.

Change and Profitability

In most commercial organisations, there is always a search for more profitable ways of using the resources and competencies available. Some of these ways will be through the more adaptive change concerned with 'doing things better'. These ideas mainly address improvement to existing systems. If they offer significant value, these improvements are quickly adopted. However, as they can be easily copied, they diffuse quickly into competitor organisations and do not offer lasting profitability or differentiating competence to the originators. Over time, much of the profitability variance between organisations in the same business sector is eroded, leading to a convergence of productivity and profit. This sets the context for a style of creativity where routes to more profit will be through more Innovative ideas concerned with 'doing things differently'. These changes offer a longer-term vision of how the organisational competencies can be used to supply goods and services that are of greater value to the customer than are the current offerings and so increase the profitability of the originating organisation. These ideas are less easily replicated as they involve higher costs and more risk due to the nature of the competencies and technologies involved. The way these

characteristics are combined by cross-functional processes involving all members of the supply chain adds to their uniqueness.

Conclusions and Recommendations

After recovery of the implementation costs, innovative ideas lead to a widening of the profitability gap between organisations in the same sector, potentially eliminating the less profitable. However, innovative ideas are rarely born with optimal efficiency (Gabora, 2018). (The development of the Jet engine from when it was first demonstrated through to its current form without change of basic concept illustrates this process). Thus, after a period of successful organisational innovation, consolidation is necessary to preserve the profitability variance for as long as possible. This change calls for low-risk adjustments to improve the efficiency of the innovative changes, in short, the more adaptive style of creativity.

References

Bass, B. M., & Avolio, B. J. (1994). *Improving organizational effectiveness through transformational leadership*. Sage Publications.

Cameron, K. & Quinn, R. (1999). *Diagnosing and changing organisational culture.* Addison-Wesley NY.

Drucker, P. F. (1969). Management's new role. *Harvard Business Review, 47*(6), 49-54.

Gabora, L. (2018). The creative process of cultural evolution. In Leung, A., Kwan, L., & Liou, S. (Eds.) *Handbook of Culture and Creativity: Basic Processes and Applied Innovations* (pp. 33-60). Oxford University Press.

Kirton, M. J. (2011). *Adaption-Innovation in the Context of Diversity and Change.* Routledge.

Kirton, M. (1976). Adaptors and innovators: A description and measure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *61*(5), 622-629.

Markus, H.R. & Kitayama S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*. 98, 224–253.

Ruckthum, V. and Clapp, R.G. (2014). Using individual creativity to improve the performance of large organisations. *ABAC ODI JOURNAL Vision. Action. Outcome Journal. 1*(1).

Zohar, D. (2014). Safety climate: Conceptualization, measurement, and improvement. In B.Schneider & K. M. Barbera (Eds.) *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of organizational climate and culture* (p. 317–334). Oxford University Press.