Change as a Leadership Strategy in Small to Medium Enterprises

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Abstract

In a knowledge driven society the one thing that remains constant is change. Organizational development and change management are growing industries within organizational management. The new leaders appear to embrace change and strive for organizational learning in order to retain a competitive advantage. Will this type of strategy work successfully for small businesses leaders as well? Often overlooked, Small and medium business enterprises (SME's) are found in every town across the country. This paper will review the literature on leadership and strategic change theories presented by Lewin, Schein, and Senge that apply commonly to larger organizations to determine if the same theories apply in SMEs. For the purpose of this paper, SMEs are considered small businesses that do not have a public offering, are owned by individuals, and employ less than fifty employees.

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Background

Although there is no official definition, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) according to the Small Business Association (SBA), can be defined based on number of employees, value of assets, and levels of turnover.   The SBA website states "Currently, global strategies are mostly discussed only for large firms. In most cases such strategies cannot be adopted by SMEs because of different preconditions. Entrepreneurs may be forced to the conclusion that a SME is not only a smaller type of large firm." (www.sba.org) Upon review of the literature this paper will seek to determine if this is indeed the case. Do SMEs embrace leadership and change the same manner as larger industries? Is there empirical evidence that shows change and leadership theories apply to both large and small organizations? Leadership and change theories are available in abundance. Four theories will be discussed and the question of whether these theories apply to businesses of all sizes is the issue to be reviewed.

In 2004 the Department of Labor (DOL) embraced a detailed study on the importance of small business to the economic development of the United States. The findings of the study show that small businesses combined "employ the vast majority of workers, serve as a critical entry point to the workforce for most Americans, and provide significant skill and training and workforce experience that help workers advance in the labor market." (p. 6) The study indicates that one of the key factors for the success of the SME is the leadership aspects of the small business. "Leadership must articulate a new vision to employers and the general public, and create an environment that fosters entrepreneurial behavior." (p. 12) The study also shows that SMEs represent more than 99.7% of all employers; employ over half of the private sector employees; pay 44.5% of the total U.S. private sector payroll; generate 60%-80% of new jobs annually; and create more than 50% of the nonfarm gross domestic product." (p. 11) Although

these statistics are impressive, they do not indicate whether SMEs use the same methods for governing as does large industry. They simply show that SMEs are an important factor in the U.S. economy. Perhaps a review of some of the key theories of leadership and change will provide a better insight for the question. The first strategy reviewed is that of Kurt Lewin.

Review of Literature on Leadership and Change

In the Beginning - Kurt Lewin's Change Theory

"If you want truly to understand something, try to change it" Kurt Lewin (1890-1946) is called by some "the father of social psychology." Lewin's influence is everywhere in contemporary management: running meetings, work design, training, team development, systems change, leadership styles, participative methods, survey feedback methods, consultation skills, change theory and action research. The foundation for Lewin's change model is based on a three step procedure: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Step one or "unfreezing" means that the shell of the organization must be broken open and the internal workings disrupted. Management must determine the best method to go about accomplishing this step. Because each organization has a different type of culture it is important to understand how the actors will respond to such a stir up. This step basically entails eliminating the beliefs, ideas, biases, and stereotypes that are associated with the individual's past belief systems and then replacing those beliefs with new ideas. Once former belief systems are removed the vision and change processes can begin. This step would be considered "moving," or "rebalancing" where the process of actually making the desired changes begins. Here, the group begins to exhibit the desired behavior and moves closer to the desired level or goal. "An important new means of rebalancing continuous change is the use of logic of attraction, which is the counterpart of the logic of replacement in episodic change" (Weick, 1999). Step three or "refreezing" allows the new ideas and desired behaviors to

become the new norm that is "frozen" into place. "New behavior must be to similar to the rest of the behavior and personality or it will simply set off new rounds of disconfirmation that often lead to unlearning the very thing one has learned." (http://www.solonline.org/res/wp/10006.html) Refreezing works best when everyone involved in the change process learns together. "Refreezing that embeds the new behavior and forestalls relapse is most likely to occur when the behavior fits both the personality of the target and the relational expectations of the target's social network" (Weick, 1999).

Lewin's (1939 & 1948) work in the field of leadership made a huge impact on academic studies in business by describing the idea of democracy in leadership and group structure. His work describes the different types of leadership styles including democratic, autocratic and laissez-faire. Since this concept is taught in undergraduate courses there is no need to go into detail on the three different styles. The end results however, show that a democratic leadership style placed the organization in a position of openness eventually positioning the company to embrace theories such as being a learning organization.

> "The goal of the democratic leader in this transition period will have to be the same as any good teacher, namely to make himself superfluous, to be replaced by indigenous leaders from the group…Lewin and his colleagues never developed their definition beyond this rough sketch." www.infed.org/thinkers/et-lewin.htm&pid=275630

However, Lewin's work on democracy in groups laid the foundation for theories by academics such as Edgar Schein and Peter Senge. Lewin explains "The goal of the democratic leader in this transition period will have to be the same as any good teacher, namely to make himself superfluous, to be replaced by indigenous leaders from the group." (p. 39) The

assumptions in the work of Lewin is that change is a process and leadership works best in a democratic organization. Lewin's change theory provides a logical view of the process of change. The theory itself does not indicate a preference for the size of the business. The underlying assumption is that it works for businesses in general. Can it be applied to both the SME and large industry? If we look at the steps of unfreezing, moving and freezing it appears feasible that any organization could utilize these steps for change no matter how large or small. Perhaps John Kotter can provide a better understanding of leadership and change and its application to the SME.

Kotter's eight Stages for the Process of Change

John P. Kotter is a Professor of Leadership at the Harvard Business School in Boston, Massachusetts and is the author of The New Rules: How to Succeed in Today's Post-Corporate World (New York: Free Press, 1995), Corporate Culture and Performance, coauthored with James L. Heskett (New York: Free Press, 1992), and A Force for Change: How Leadership Differs from Management For each of the stages in a change process, there is a corresponding pitfall.

Kotter's list for change is a step by step process that entails 1) Establishing a sense of urgency, 2) Forming a powerful guiding coalition, 3) Creating a vision, 4) Communicating the vision, 5) Empowering others to act on the vision, 6) Planning for and creating short-term wins, 7) Consolidating improvements and producing still more change, and 8) Institutionalizing new approaches (Kotter, 2000).

A sense of urgency suggests that unless the urgency rate is high and management is completely convinced that the change must happen, change will fail. A guiding coalition entails

that management must influence and convince everyone involved that the change is necessary for success. "Therefore he or she must develop a shared commitment to the renewal" (Kotter, 2000). A logical and understandable vision will eliminate confusions and resistance among employees. According to Kotter if a vision cannot be communicated in five minutes or less then the work will not be completed and the change process will slow down or stall. Therefore communicating the vision often and repeatedly is necessary to accomplish the goal.

Removing obstacles from the vision means getting rid of both inanimate and animate objects that may obstruct the change process. Systematic planning for the creation of short-term wins will reduce resistance in the change process and convert doubters that the change is for the greatest good and worth the trouble. However short-term wins should not be confused with victory, which if declared too soon can cause the entire process to backfire. Finally, according to Kotter the changes must be anchored to the corporate culture if they are to work. Therefore "a conscious attempt must be made to show people that the new behaviors and approaches have improved performance. Also, make sure that the next generation of top management embodies the new approach" (Kotter, 2000).

In his article "What Leaders Really Do" Kotter (2001) explains that leadership is "about coping with change. The real challenge is to combine strong leadership and strong management and use each to balance the other." (p. 1-2) Change is constant and as long as this is the case then leaders must adjust to the change. "Major changes are more and more necessary to survive and compete effectively in this new environment. More change always demands more leadership. Kotter (1999) combines his change theories and leadership success. He states "High-performance organizations with strong leadership create effective internal change

processes that cope with external change." (p. 1) The assumption in Kotter's writing is that leaders lead by change if they want to maintain a competitive advantage.

In a similar manner to Lewin's theory of change, Kotter provides and excellent understanding of the components of leadership and change. However, once again there is no indication of the size of the business in which the theory applies. Therefore, once again, the underlying assumption is that the theory works for business in general and change management appears to apply to all sizes of business. Perhaps a deeper look into the mental wellbeing of the organization will provide a better understanding of change and leadership strategy by discussing the concept of the learning organization as it is presented by Peter Senge.

Peter Senge- Leading Learning Organizations

Peter Senge holds the honored title of Strategist of the Century' by the Journal of Business Strategy (1999) for the twentieth century. The author of "The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook) Senge is the creator of the "Learning Organization." According to Senge, the learning organization must possess systems thinking, Personal mastery, Mental models, Building shared vision, and Team learning.

Systems thinking, according to Senge (1994) "is more powerful as a language augmenting and changing the ordinary ways we think and talk about complex issues." (p. 88) This means that it does not involve "top-down or bottom-up" commitment; it is an all encompassed process in which everyone is a participant. The entire system is interdependent. What happens in one part of the system ultimately affects the outcome of another part of the system. The idea is to be able to view the entire system as a whole to understand the dependence that each of the subsystems has on each other. A high performing executive team creates a

company that is an open system. Open systems recognize that a change in one area may effect a process in another area. According to Senge (1994) "At its broadest level, systems thinking encompasses a large and fairly amorphous body of methods, tools, and principles, all oriented to looking at the interrelatedness of forces and seeing them as part of a common process." (p. 89) Systems thinking allows an organization to departmentalize in a manner that connects each area to the system as a whole. Departments are interconnected by the system.

Personal mastery, Senge (1994) explains "If learning is related to a person's own vision, then that person will do whatever he or she can to keep learning alive." (p. 193) The idea here is to align an employee's own vision with the vision of the company. This encourages the individual to embrace growth and change rather than resist. Therefore if the individual continues to learn and change, then and only then, can the organization learn and change. This concept sets the tone for the leader to lead by coaching which creates a supportive environment that hones critical thinking skills, ideas, and behaviors about a subject.

Senge (1994) writes that "Mental models are the images, assumptions, and stories which we carry in our minds of ourselves, other people, institutions, and every aspect of the world." (p. 235) The beliefs and biases that formed early in life make up a part of the mental model. The concept of learning critical thinking skills falls into place with mental models. Senge explains, it entails "slowing down our thinking processes to become more aware of how we form our mental models." (p. 237) Quite often the process is difficult even for the most seasoned leaders because it forces the individual to look beyond and outside their individual comfort zone.

A shared vision according to Senge (1994) is "Creating a sense of purpose that binds people together and propels them to fulfill their deepest aspirations." (p. 299) The goal is to build a vision that everyone within the organization can embrace. This entails not just creating a

vision, but conceiving a vision that everyone has a stake in creating, reinforcing, and achieving. A learning organization does not provide a "how to map" on the vision, rather it provides a catalyst for both personal and organizational alignment towards a vision.

The final area that is central to being a learning organization is that of team learning. Team learning, according to Senge(1994) "Unlike team building…is about enhancing a team's capacity to think and act in new synergistic ways, with full coordination and a sense of unity, because team members know each other's hearts and minds." (p. 352) There is a strong emphasis on creating collaboration in teams along with cohesion without falling into the notorious area of "group think."

Senge's Fifth Discipline provides a detailed understanding into the mental workings of the organizational environment. As with Lewin and Kotter, the theory does not specifically define the size of the organization. Once again the underlying assumption is that the theory is for business in general. The Learning Organization falls into alignment with the Organizational Development concept of process and culture and its champion Edgar Schein which will be discussed next.

Edgar Schein – Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein is the founder of the concept of corporate culture. Born in 1928, Schein continues his research into Organizational Development and currently teaches at MIT Sloan School of Management. Schein's (1992 & 1999) work on process intervention creates an avenue to understand the processes that lead up to the actions, decisions, behavior and ultimately corporate culture and norms. Organizational change, according to Schein (1994) brings about two different types of anxiety:

"Anxiety 1 or the fear of changing based on a fear of the unknown. Anxiety 2,

the uncomfortable realization that in order to survive and thrive I must change,

and that unless I change and learn how to learn I will fail. (p. 2) In order for

change to become a strategy, the anxiety level 2 must be greater than the level 1

anxiety.

Change comes in three different forms according to Schein (2002) these include 1)

Natural evolutionary changes which include the normal learning processes that a company

experiences while it tries to adapt to new environments; 2) Planned and managed changes which

are changes that are introduced purposely into the environment; and 3) Unplanned revolutionary

changes which are changes forced into the organization such as new technology. (p34)

Schein (1983) provides an interesting perspective on both large and small companies

pertaining to leaders in the beginning versus leaders in the end and explains "The ultimate

organizational culture will always reflect the complex interaction between (1) the assumptions

and theories that founders bring to the group initially and (2) what the group learns

subsequentially from its own experiences." (p. 14) This theory brings the differences between

SME's and large organizations into focus because it explains why the two different types of

companies naturally change.

The change process progresses from the views of the founder to the views of the culture

and the company. In 1986 Tushman et al explain that the founder influence on small business

does evolve, however the process is slow and arduous because of the autocratic leadership styles

found in most small companies. (p. 29)   Research of this type verifies that indeed SMEs tend to

function differently than large organizations and also confirms the need for additional research in

the area of small business development. However, the theories included in this paper do appear

to have elements that should work in a SME environment. These elements are discussed in the next section and a synthesized theory offered for the areas of leadership and change as it applies to SMEs.

<div align="center">A Synthesized Theory</div>

In 1996 the Journal of Private Enterprise conducted a study on small businesses as defined by the SBA. The findings of the study indicated (1) there are serious deficiencies in knowledge of entrepreneurship; (2) there is clear recognition of the need for education in entrepreneurship; and (3) there is strong interest in entrepreneurship. (p. 7) Taken at face value, these findings would suggest that SMEs operate by a different set of rules than large industry. If, indeed the findings are correct, then the addition of educational resources could and would align SME operations with that of their "Big Brother" organizations. Change, then as a leadership strategy could theoretically be learned by the SME leader or in most cases founder.

For the purpose of this paper the proposed model will take elements of each of the theories presented above to create a new theory affectionately titled "The Change Action Model." This model looks at the underlying causes or "Precepts of Change" within the organization and focuses on two motivators for change. (figure 1) The first is "Reactive Change" and is brought on by a lack of both internal and external environmental scanning. The absence of scanning leads directly to resistance, resentment, and errors as the ultimate outcome. This outcome is based on the fact that no interventions were conducted in the process of managing change within the organization.

 The alternative to "Reactive Change" is "Strategic Change" which entails continuous scanning processes from which the company creates a strategic change environment initiated and

supported from the top down. Two types of scanning are conducted from this perspective, technology and Knowledge.

A decision made without the appropriate knowledge about a subject also considered "shooting from the hip" can have a negative effect on the success of the organization. Environmental scanning on a regular basis provides updated information that may be necessary to the decision making process. Trainfield (2003) et al explain "A key management task is one of enabling and managing the knowledge creation and deployment processes associated with innovation. This development of "dynamic capability" has been highlighted by a number of writers who see the challenge as being more than the simple accumulation of technological competence." (p. 1) Also, lack of knowledge may lead to identifying the incorrect problem.

How knowledgeable are the stakeholders that make up the company? Is knowledge readily accessible? Is the company a Learning Organization? Does the company actively encourage growth among its own? Trainfield (2003) et al suggests that management of knowledge is central to the success of a company. The authors state "A key management task is one of enabling and managing the knowledge creation and deployment processes associated with innovation. This development of "dynamic capability" has been highlighted by a number of writers who see the challenge as being more than the simple accumulation of technological competence." (p. 1)

Figure 2 focuses on the elements that are scanned in the area of knowledge which consist of skills, industry, psychological and instinctive. Knowledge Skills, at the most fundamental level include process, education, performance, interpersonal, competencies, comprehensive, strategic, service, and experience (which is found in several of the knowledge scanning areas). Industry knowledge includes product, market, competition, human capital, legislation, and once

again experience. Psychological knowledge focuses on behavior, motivation, critical thinking, compassion, morale, and relationships. And instinctive knowledge includes safety and survival as well as experience. Experience is works its way across the chart due to the fact that learning is based on experience. The idea of experiential learning is based on repetition. We do one thing long enough, eventually we perfect what we are doing. As Levinthal and March explain "such experiential-based knowledge can be an important basis of competitive advantage," (p. 96) and creates a foundation for change management.

Technology scanning (figure 3) focuses on three main categories including tools, equipment, and process. Tools are tangible items such as computer software, writing utensils, paper; visual tools i.e. books, periodicals, journals, furniture and fixtures. Equipment consists of computers, printers, vehicles, and production facilities. Process in this category is the make up of work flow, policies, procedures, and automation. Hambrick (1981) points out that a "technological uncertainty" can dominate an organizational environment. (p. 255) "Coping with uncertainty, not simply the existence of uncertainty, is what gives power." (p. 256) Keeping up with the technical advances will provide a huge competitive advantage for the company. However, the skill is to keep up with advances, not get caught up in advances in technology.

>"Environmental effects are central to business strategy formation including those directed at new product development. Extant research posits that firm strategy should align its organization with its environment as well as shape the organization's internal features -- functional policies, distinct competencies, structure, and processes." (Hambrick:1982 p. 159).

The concept of environmental scanning is an ongoing process. The one thing that is constant is change. Data valid today may not be valid tomorrow. Scanning as a strategy must be part of the corporate culture so that it is conducted without second thought and is embedded within the norms of the organization.
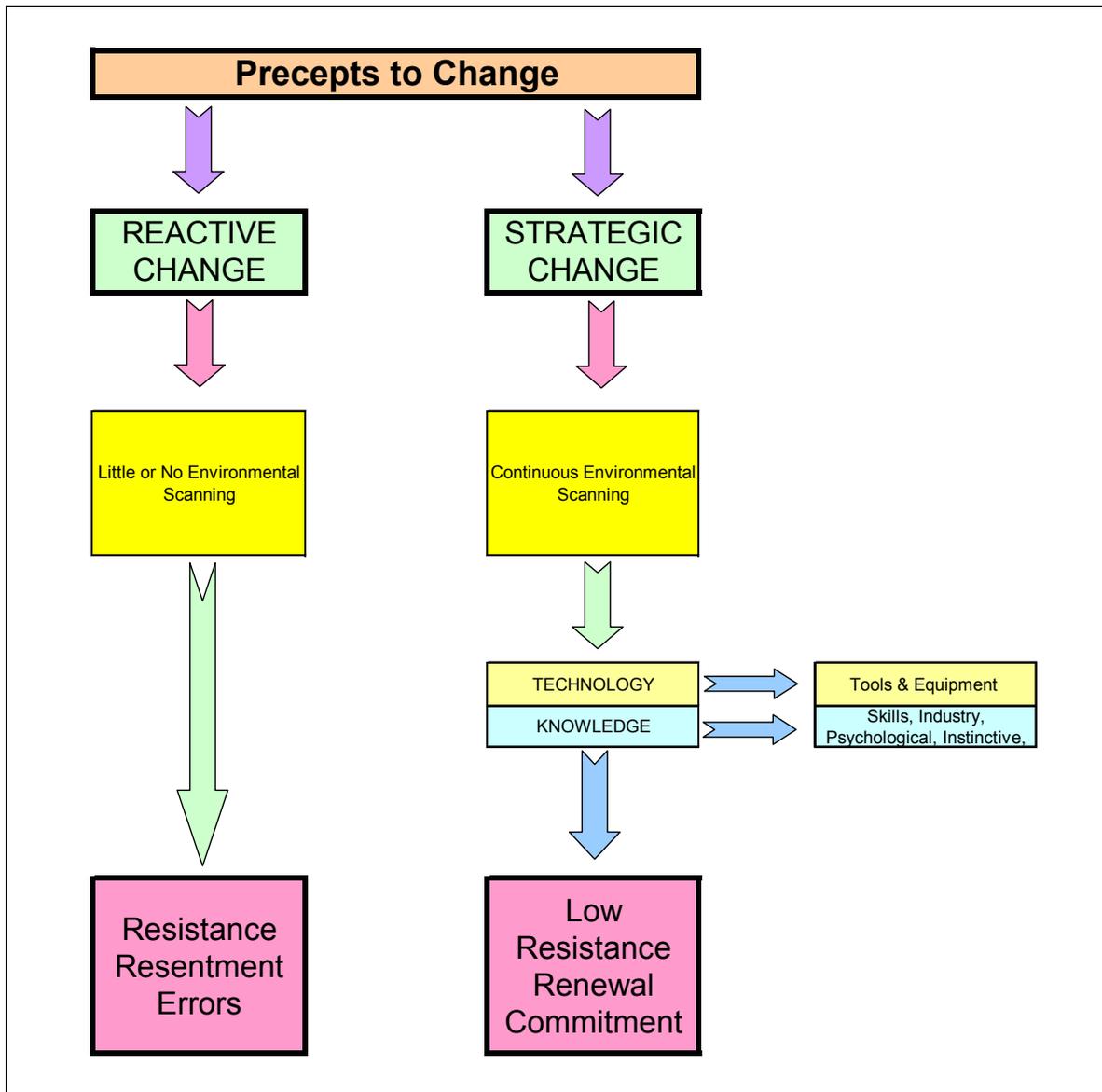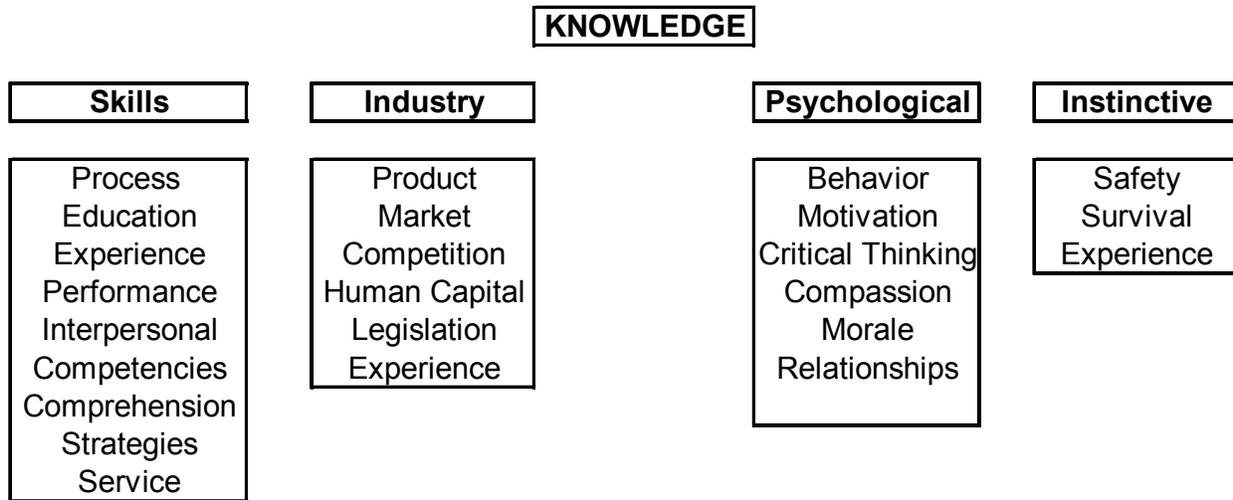

Figure 1 - Precepts to Change

KNOWLEDGE

Skills	Industry	Psychological	Instinctive
Process Education Experience Performance Interpersonal Competencies Comprehension Strategies Service	Product Market Competition Human Capital Legislation Experience	Behavior Motivation Critical Thinking Compassion Morale Relationships	Safety Survival Experience

Figure 2 - Knowledge Scanning

TECHNOLOGY

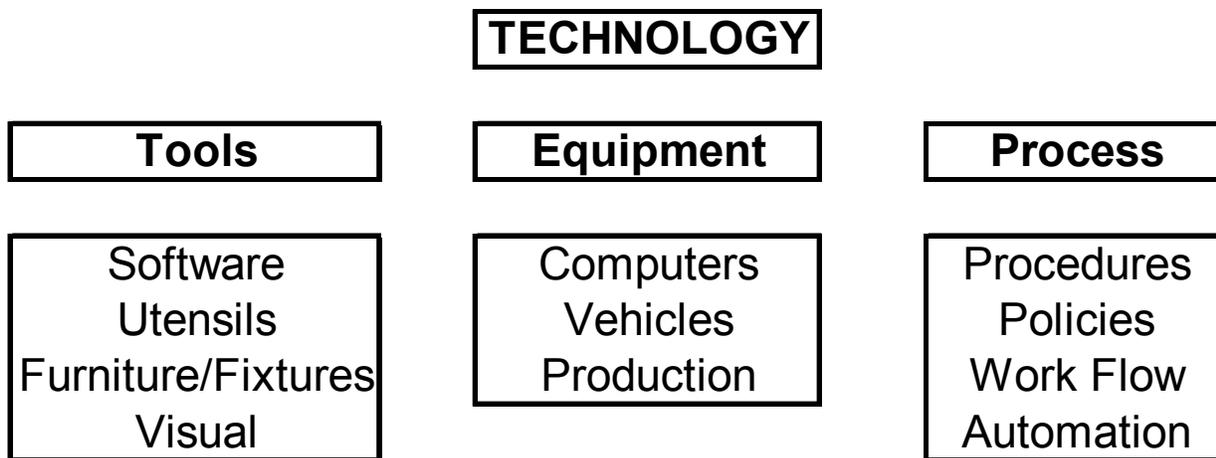| Tools	Equipment	Process
Software Utensils Furniture/Fixtures Visual	Computers Vehicles Production	Procedures Policies Work Flow Automation

Figure 3 - Technology Scanning

Conclusion

The organizational structure is in a state of continued change. Businesses globalize everyday. Talent is not only more diversified, it is smarter. As technology brings the corners of the world closer together, smart leaders recognize a need for adaptability and must continually change in order to adapt to the changes around them. This means not only do the leaders change, they must lead change. Moran and Brightman (2001) explain it as

"Change must be top-down to provide vision and create structure, and

bottom-up to encourage participation and generate support. Ultimately,

leading change is a shared responsibility of everyone in an organization,

from top to bottom. If the whole organization is not on board with the

change effort, it will fail. The whole organization must be pulling in the

same direction to achieve the change initiative goals it has set." (p. 111)

In addition, businesses that strive to become Learning Organizations understand history,

look at past experiences, share knowledge at all levels, embrace change, and are committed to

the process from the top down. The goal of becoming a learning organization entails the

organization sharing communication, ideas, and knowledge in order to grow and maintain a

competitive advantage. The organization then must be open, flatter, and team oriented to get

results so there is no room for an authoritarian leadership in a learning organization. Learning

organizations have a competitive advantage because of their efforts to continually adapt to

change.

The concepts and ideas of Organizational change, learning organizations, change

strategies, and organization development are ideas that have been conceived and developed in

the last one hundred years, relatively new ideas when we consider over two thousand years of

human behavior and interaction.   Authoritarian leadership exists all over the globe and in some

cases this leadership style remains quite successful. However, as society goes global, the

possibilities for all businesses increase with the ability to change and renew. Leaders can either

change reactively or change strategically.

Change is the one factor that businesses can count on occurring on a continual basis. It is also the one thing that can be utilized to maintain a competitive advantage in any industry.   The leader that takes advantage of change and uses it as a strategy is the same leader that continually scans the environment at all levels both internally and externally and uses change as an advantage. Perhaps the late Peter Drucker stated it best, "The entrepreneur always searches for change, responds to it, and exploits it as an opportunity." (Drucker, 1985).

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