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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Prof. Shalva Weil
Research Institute for Innovation in Education
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Mount Seopu
Israel

Rosefet Academic Publication
iirasjrnl@gmail.com

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TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT: "BUT WHO PAYS?"

Mukoro, Dick
Department of Accounting
Covenant University, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.
mukst2000@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

We want to encourage and help managers to become more innovative in their problem-solving and decision-making, so that the commitment of today's resources to the future leads to the achievement of appropriate long term strategies for their companies. It is inevitable that this paper can attempt to cover only a small area of the ground and it would be naïve to offer solutions which should in situation all determined. The objective of this paper is to help develop analytical skills and the ability to "home-in" on the relevant pieces of information. The paper recommends that apart from stating general hypothesis regarding possible causes of the lack of innovation in a business, although there still remains the question of whether they are valid. It would certainly be worthwhile to examine the strategies of the learning and problem solving process referred to earlier not only in formal learning situations such as those provided by courses and seminars, but perhaps more importantly in the on-going work situation.

INTRODUCTION

How can we encourage and help managers to become more innovative in their problem-solving and decision-making, so that the commitment of today's resources to the future leads to the achievement of appropriate long-term strategies for their companies? It is inevitable that this article can attempt to cover only a small area of the ground, and it would be naïve to offer solutions which should be situationally determined. However, we feel that consideration should be given to such important issues as

- a) Are managers sufficiently aware of environmental issues which impact upon their companies, departments and jobs? In other words, is the analysis stage of the problem-solving process sufficiently rigorous?
- b) Are some managers encouraged to depend too much upon their bosses, which lead to "acceptable" solutions but not necessarily the right ones? These issues and others are considered together, with a perspective of the role which education and training can play in improving levels of innovation.

BASIC PROBLEMS OF MANAGEMENT

The manager's role in the future will undoubtedly become more uncertain, particularly when faced with shifting ideas about managerial responsibilities, and the gradual change in values and attitudes from what might be described as the protestant (compliant) ethic towards a social (more permissive) ethic. However in a rapidly changing and turbulent environment it is the manager who has a responsibility to initiate change, and to help others to adapt to change in order that businesses remain viable.

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Unfortunately a complicating factor is that the signals a manager receives to indicate necessary or desirable change in such policies, products, processes, procedures and organization structures are often unclear and contradictory. Competing demands from situations and individuals or groups, both inside and outside business, sometimes confuse managers and complicate the problem-solving process. In future a manager will have to work with others on increasingly complex problems, the solution to which may have far-reaching consequences. The highly structured problem with known parameters, which can be solved by the individual expert, will become less common. Furthermore today's complex issues are influenced by competing interests, which can either encourage innovation or stifle it. Some interests demand innovative design and new organizational approaches. For instance, those represented by society, customers, subordinates and sometimes the manager's personal motivation require speedy and innovative approaches to improve products, the quality of work or even the quality of life itself.

On the other hand, some interests can exert a restricting influence to maintain the status quo; an example here can be the perceived expectations of the manager's superior(s), which can be seen as discouraging innovation – or at least confining it to well-defined limits. Finally there are some managers who, by virtue of their conditioning by family, work and society, are reluctant to test new ideas – particularly when they feel that the outcome is likely to influence their personal survival.

In terms of coping with change, it is unlikely that a manager will be effective if he relies solely upon past experience to provide indicators of how to perform in the future. A few years ago orderly experience and general predictability were the order of the day – now a manager experiences complexity, ambiguity, uncertainty, conflict, and competing objectives for limited resources. Increasing symptoms of such factors will significantly complicate the manager's job of designing and operating an economically sound business.

For reasons already stated, it is exceedingly difficult to predict an appropriate future strategy to encourage and accommodate the change role of management.

Nevertheless, a useful starting point might be to look at some key issues which must be addressed:

- a) How does a manager operate effectively in a constantly changing environment, when the signals and expectations of various interest groups are contradictory or confusing?
- b) What are the types of demands which the manager might expect in the future?
- c) How can we encourage to be more innovative, not simply in terms of problem solution but more importantly perhaps in terms of problem identification and definition?
- d) How will skill requirements be altered over the course of a manager's career?
- e) Who shares responsibility for helping the manager to adapt and move towards becoming a more effective change facilitator?

These are some of the issues which need to be explored to build up some sort of inventory of the capabilities and limitations of the manager who faces a future of

guaranteed, but often unpredictable, change. Finally, what role does education and training play in the resolution or partial resolution of these complex issues?

THE ENVIRONMENT AND INTEREST GROUPS

In the interest of both corporate and personal survival, it is becoming increasingly important for managers to carry out their own environmental scanning insofar as it affects their own jobs, sections, departments, and companies. However in doing this, which involves the relatively easy task of identifying the interest groups whose influence is likely to impact upon the business, there is the much more complex task of identifying the current and future strategies of these various groups. The complexity is further increased because of the interdependence of strategies to produce outcomes, and the "knock-on" effect which exists in many situations.

This seems to indicate that the breadth as well as the depth of scanning is important, although the attention given to each dimension will vary according to the level in the organization where scanning is being done. As far as interpretations of the signals received from the environment are concerned, these have to be considered when drawing up the strategy issue plans for companies, which should include contingency plans if certain assumptions about the environment (including markets) come to fruition. In the latter context, particularly, it will be the ability to respond reasonably quickly to rapidly changing situations which will determine commercial success or failure.

The pro-active role in this context will be the drawing up of appropriate contingency plans, incorporating the most likely influences to occur in a given period of time, and not being caught with one's pants down. Finally, in strategic issue management scanning on a fairly continuous basis and at all levels, to identify the significant developments in the environment, and using the information appropriately in the decision-making process, seems to be a sensible way of organizational life. To achieve this, however, is far from easy.

Moving to the point about contradictory or confusing signals from and expectations of the various interest groups, this is nothing new; but what is changing is the number (either direct or indirect) or accountabilities to these groups which we have as managers. This obviously complicates the decision-making process; but if the problem has been identified, together with the various interest groups and their strategies which are pertinent to the particular decision, then the optimum decision should have examined all the conflicting interests and potential problems.

It is relevant to note that if this process is done as thoroughly and as effectively as possible in the interests of the company, then it demonstrates a high degree of integrity in the decision-making process which, together with the achievement of commercial criteria, will be a major ingredient for success in the future since business ethics are assuming increasing importance.

DEMANDS UPON MANAGERS IN THE FUTURE

A major demand, already covered, will be for managers to become much more aware of their environment and to use the information or assumptions appropriately. Another

important demand which will probably become increasingly evident will be the necessity to involve many more people within the organization, particularly non-managers, in the management process. The implication is not that this is either a good thing or a bad thing, but that it will become increasingly necessary in the changing social/political/economic environment.

Furthermore this involvement will probably have to move from a superficial and sometimes passive level, which has been done in companies for years, to an action level; although responsibilities and accountabilities for managing the business should still remain with the management team, however that is defined. Obviously this change may affect the attitudes of some managers who have relatively rigid views about what their prerogatives should be.

Another important demand for the future will be the recognition that within a company many different sectional interests, not simply functional ones, exist; and it is how to manage this coalition of interests which will have implications for the leadership role of the future. A current example, amongst many, with which we are gaining a great deal of experience is the collectivism of middle management in terms of salaries, conditions of service, etc. The risk here is that there may be a mismatch between a manager's personal objectives and those of the company.

Probably strongly linked with the environmental scanning demand issue will be the demand to manage effectively in an increasingly complex and ambiguous world. This has implications for tolerance towards ambiguity, increasing complexity, managing the boundary conditions between different functions and sectional interests, and taking a more conceptual view of organizational life rather than a blinkered one, where one person's objectives can easily become another person's problems.

Finally there are the demands on the manager outside the work situation, which have implications for career aspirations and career development. These include the dual-career problem, education of children, reluctance to accept potentially more stressful roles, etc., which are symptoms of an increasing tendency for managers to examine their different life roles and the relationship between them. While this has implications for management development in the broadest sense, it is outside the scope of this publication to deal with it in depth; but it is worthy of mention in terms of a demand which is likely to increase in the future.

HOW CAN WE ENCOURAGE MANAGERS TO BECOME MORE INNOVATIVE?

The word *innovative* has emotive overtones, conjuring up in some people's minds the stereotype of the scientist trying to be more creative by using such techniques as brainstorming, morphological analysis, or synectics. In some circumstances a greater level of innovation can certainly be derived from the appropriate use of such techniques but, for the purposes of this publication, *innovation* can be defined in wider terms as the ability to successfully demonstrate new or different approaches to old or new problems; not simply by extrapolating past experience but by applying sound analytical, creative and judgmental skills in the problem-solving or decision-making process. Furthermore by

definition this also involves a greater degree, perhaps, of calculated risk taking. What are some of the factors involved? The most important are probably:

- a) Does the company encourage innovation or, more specifically, will individuals or groups take risks in situations where failure is seen not as a learning opportunity, but as a "black mark" with consequences for career development and personal survival?
- b) Does the company encourage unwittingly, a compliant relationship between bosses and subordinates because success may be seen primarily as the effective provision of what the boss wants? Is innovation sometimes stifled when success is achieved by a subordinate in direction which is at variance with the wishes of the boss, and is seen by the latter as a threat?

These questions are not intended to be value judgments of individuals within a company; but since individuals and groups become conditioned by the environment in which they work, are there any organizational issues which should be examined to improve innovation?

- c) Is there the right mix of problem diagnosticians, solution developers, and action implementers in work groups? Should managers possess an appropriate balance of these abilities?
- d) What types of thinking are appropriate for problem diagnosis and solution development? Should it be deductive (where theories are applied), inductive (where theories can be developed), convergent (analytical), or divergent (creative)? It will certainly not be an *either or* situation; but different stages of the decision-making process will require the application of these different modes of thinking, either embodied in one person or in a work group.
- e) Finally there is the issue that in low growth situations, with pressure on margins and actions leading to smaller numbers of managers, the personal survival question could assume a high degree of importance. There is a risk in this situation that energies will be dissipated by excessive indulgence in political in-fighting, rather than some sort of balance between achievement of personal objectives and corporate objectives. This phenomenon may be more common at lower levels in the organization, where the conceptual leap between personal objectives and company objectives is too wide to appreciate clearly until it is too late.

SKILL REQUIREMENTS FOR MANAGERS IN THE FUTURE

For reasons already covered in the context of a world where the rate of change is increasing rapidly every year, one useful view of a hierarchical typology of skills (developed by D. C. Basil and C. W. Cook) to cope with the future is as follows:

1. ability to cope with increasingly complex situations
2. ability to face up to conflict situations and manage them effectively
3. tolerance towards ambiguous situations
4. ability to conceptualize (identification of synergy in the system)

5. Ability to solve problems effectively (including the appropriate use of computer based methods)
6. Ability to handle inter-personal issues
7. Developed managerial skills in terms of planning, coordinating, controlling, motivating and communicating effectively
8. An appropriate level of functional skills

Furthermore it will probably be necessary for younger people to have two or three different careers in their working life, which will be the result of changing technologies; so the task of helping people in the future to influence situations and adapt to change will be a major challenge for all managers. Whether a manager is preparing himself for a different career or trying to acquire some of the skills already referred to, the ability to learn seems an important, if not the most important skill.

HELPING TO ADAPT TO AND PROMOTE CHANGE

Ultimately the responsibility must lie with the individual manager, but this is unlikely to be achieved without attention being given to some of the following areas:

- a) a thorough analysis of the decision-making points in the organization such that some of the drama - currently experienced by more senior levels - is shared by other less senior managers, who can make relevant contributions to the strategic decision-making process
- b) agreed objectives, but discretion in determining strategy to achieve objectives
- c) development of a working environment, where managers will want to learn how to learn and will be less dependent upon superiors for appropriate actions to be taken
- d) organizational support in terms of company culture, which encourages innovative approaches to problems
- e) support from superiors, colleagues and subordinates
- f) adequate reward systems, both in material and non-material terms.

This list is not complete by any means; but whatever areas are singled out for attention, the education process must also include the fact of life that, whilst any effective management development schemes will assist managers to develop themselves, any undue reliance upon the company to look after the individual from the cradle to the grave is not only naïve but can lead to de-motivation and thus be a block to innovation. Finally this list of issues does raise a number of sub-issues, many of which have been covered; so at this stage it may be worthwhile to examine some possible courses of action.

Despite the complexity of trying to introduce a great degree of innovation at all levels in a company, it might be useful to view the overall issue along two avenues - which are not mutually exclusive - as follows:

- a) an examination of the learning process which managers and management should re-appraise at personal and organizational levels, in order to cope with an increasingly turbulent environment

- b) an examination of the dependency relationship between subordinate and superior which, linked with the learning process issue, may detract from an appropriate level of innovation in the business
- c) the role of training and education in the process

Furthermore, in terms of doing something along these avenues this has implication for the points of intervention in the organization for the initiation of action.

THE LEARNING PROCESS AND PROBLEM SOLVING

For many of us, and not especially related to culture, the conditioning we have experienced during our primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education have induced a view of learning which can be described only as passive. Our years in schools and universities have trained us to think that the primary responsibility for learning lies with the teacher, and we tend to become highly dependent upon his or her expertise. We accept that the responsibility for evaluating our performance and telling us what we should learn next. We also learn that learning is the process of acquiring and remembering ideas and concepts, although on many occasions and at many stages of our education we are not sure of their relevance. We therefore see concepts coming before experience.

Finally the classroom or lecture theatre symbolizes the assumption that learning is some sort of special activity, shut off from the real world and not really related to real life. In other words, learning and doing are often seen as not only separate but even unrelated activities. Despite the fact that with younger generations there is a greater tendency to question issues, which is a symptom of the more permissive value system referred to earlier, there nevertheless remain many of the above mentioned assumptions which give rise to the attitude that learning seldom seems relevant in our daily life and work.

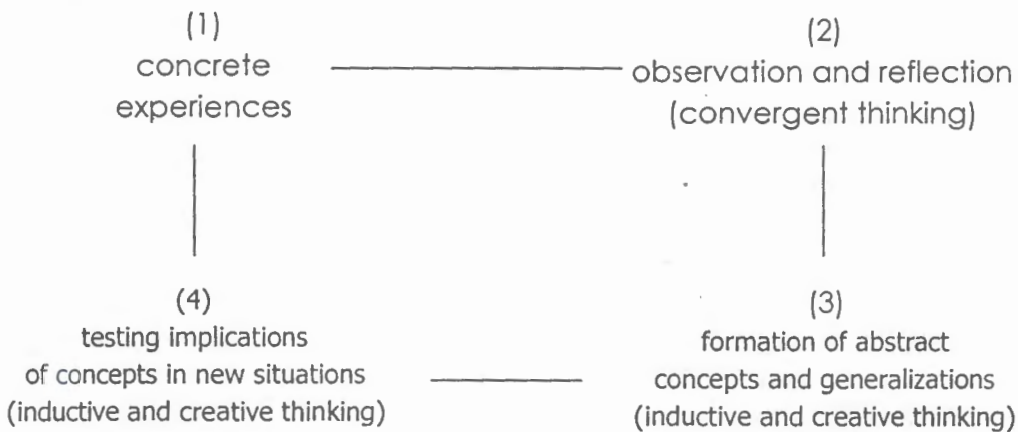
A simplistic view, although there is probably some truth in it, is that our conditioning towards learning tends to encourage the application of the formula: LEARNING = TRAINING = GOING ON A COURSE. This is a great pity, since this approach means that the opportunity provided by the primary learning process, which is continuous, for giving us new insights into the way in which issues should be tackled may be limited.

PROBLEM SOLVING

This evokes some attitudes and associations which are opposite to those referred to in the context of learning. For instance, we think of problem-solving as an active rather than a passive process. The responsibility for problem solving rests with the problem solver, who should experiment, take risks, and come to grips with the problem. Usually no external sources of evaluation are required; it is known when the problem is solved. Although general principles can emerge from the solution to a specific problem, problems are usually specific rather than general, concrete rather than abstract. The focus of problem-solving is on a specific problem felt to be relevant to the problem solver; it is, in fact, his involvement in the problem that makes it a problem. However in order to avoid the extrapolation of past experience to solve today's and tomorrow's problems, and to avoid the cliché "he's got 20 years experience but it's one year repeated 20 times", it may be

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useful to combine the characteristics of learning and problem-solving and to conceive them as a single process. By examining this single process we can perhaps better understand what we can generate from our experience, concepts, rules and principles to guide our behaviour in new situations, and how we might modify our concepts in order to improve our effectiveness. The process, developed by David Kolb, can be considered as four stage cycle:



Several relevant points can be made about this model:

- a) First, this learning cycle is continuously recurring throughout our lives; and we continuously test our concepts in experience and modify them as a result of the observation of the experience
- b) Secondly, the direction in which learning occurs is determined by our needs and objectives. We look for experiences which are related to our objectives, and develop concepts and test the implications of those concepts that are relevant to our needs and objectives. This indicates that the process of learning is erratic and inefficient when our objectives are unclear.
- c) Finally, since our learning process is directed by our needs and objectives, learning styles become highly individual in both direction and process. For example, a scientist may place great emphasis on abstract concepts (stage 3 of the model), whereas an engineer may value concrete experiences (stage 1 of the model) more highly. Each individual develops a learning style which has some weak points and strong points. Sometimes we develop concepts but do not test their validity. In some cases our needs and objectives may be clear guides to learning; in others, we wander aimlessly.

A suggestion is that we should examine each of the four learning modes, or stages of the learning modes, or stages of the learning/problem solving process, to gain some idea of which learning modes we tend to emphasize. No individual mode is better or worse than any other; even a totally balanced profile is not necessarily best. The key to effective learning is being competent in each mode when it is appropriate. Although the process, or

something similar to it, is proceeding continuously for all of us, it is certain that many of us do not think about it in terms of learning potential for the following reasons:

- "re-enforcement" syndrome – we've done it like this for x years so why should we change
- fear of being more innovative, since this may influence personal survival
- perceived lack of supportiveness for innovation within the organization
- insufficient development of analytical skills (stage 2 of process)
- insufficient development of conceptual skills, which is likely to be linked with insufficient awareness of the environment, in total terms, in which the problem-solving or decision-making process is taking place (stage 3 of process)
- a reluctance to test the implications of concepts which have been developed for fear of "rocking the boat" (stage 4 of process)

SUBORDINATE/SUPERIOR DEPENDENCY

Although company culture is probably a major determinant in this dependency relationship issue, other important factors are:

- culture of the country in which the company operates
- management style of the company
- the personalities involved in terms of: attitudes, age levels, confidence levels, competence levels, status levels.

Returning to the company culture for a moment, the mix of a need to achieve commercial success together with a good image in the market place, coupled with a high level of business integrity, can be a formula for success.

Further more the continuity of management, particularly in terms of the fact that many companies tend to develop their own, has helped to evolve highly successful company cultures in appropriate directions. However it may be that this sort of philosophy towards manager and management development has unconsciously encouraged a hierarchical approach to problem-solving and decision-making which, whilst being extremely successful in the halcyon days of the fifties and sixties, may not be so appropriate when the name of the game for many companies is survival.

This is not to suggest that either the company culture or its management development policies and procedures should be changed in any significant way; simply that it may be necessary to modify it consciously by education and training over a period of years, to encourage appropriate levels of innovation and commercial success. To achieve this requires some degree of re-learning and the further development of appropriate skills at all levels in the business, with the suggestion that if change is necessary then action should preferably start at the top – namely the Boards of Directors.

At the Board level there is the significant advantage that synergy in the company, or the lack of it, can be more easily perceived than anywhere else in the business. As a starting point, the Board could ask itself the following questions:

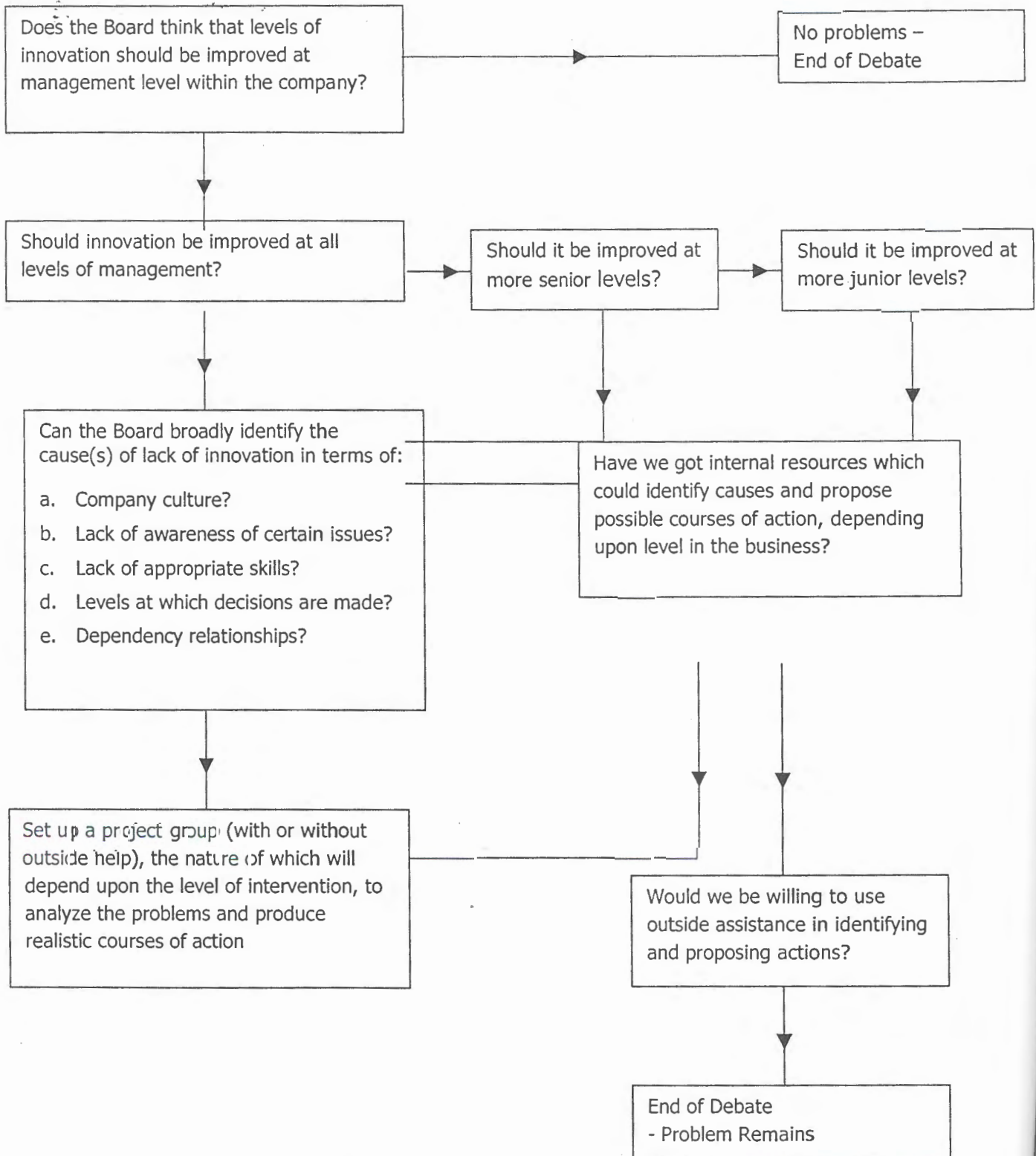
1. Could there be a link between the perceived company culture and innovative problem definition, problem solution and decision-making?
2. Does the interpretation of the company culture lead to a dependency relationship between subordinate and superior which detracts from innovative approaches within the management team?
3. Is there a misinterpretation of the company's culture, objectives and long-term strategy due to communication problems within the business?
4. Are decisions taken involving appropriate levels in the business?
5. Is there evidence of a lack of awareness of important social/political/economic issues and/or appropriate skills/techniques, particularly at senior levels in the business, which produces a lower level of innovation than is considered necessary for coping with future demands on the business?
6. Is it appropriate to initiate action, in terms of the re-learning process, at Board level?
7. Has education and training a role to play and if so, what form should it take?

An example of looking at the same set of issues in the form of an algorithm is given in the next page.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING AND LEVELS OF INNOVATION

Apart from stating general hypotheses regarding possible causes of the lack of innovation in a business, there still remains the question of whether they are valid. Therefore until this validity is tested in the particular situation, it is not possible to propose specific courses of action in terms of education and training. Nevertheless it would certainly be worthwhile to examine the stages of the learning and problem-solving process referred to earlier, not only in formal learning situations such as those provided by courses and seminars, but perhaps more importantly in the on-going work situation. For instance, are the following stages of the process developed as highly as we would feel appropriate:

- a. Do we consciously analyze our experiences by observation and reflection? Should we become more involved in the environmental scanning process?
- b. Do we develop frameworks, models and concepts to apply in future problem-solving and decision-making situations?
- c. Are we willing to test the implications of those frameworks, models and concepts in new situations, on a calculated risk-taking basis?



Source: Association of Business Executive (pp 264) 1980.

In terms of the learning process in the work situation, the immediate superior plays a key role in acting as some sort of mentor or helper to his subordinates in order that the

appropriate stages of the learning process can be developed to meet particular situations. For instance, one strategy which is superior might adopt in this area is:

- agree task objectives with subordinate
- regularly and frequently review achievement of objectives and strategy, to achieve them with subordinate
- show an ongoing interest in strategy being adopted including advice, but try to adopt a "hands-off" policy in this context unless the risks are too great
- encourage re-learning at all stages of the process, particularly its application, so that levels of effectiveness are continually being improved
- view all interpersonal situations as learning opportunities, and encourage others to do the same.

Obviously this has implications for individuals, work groups and companies, and different strategies will have to be used to develop higher levels of innovation in different situations. Despite these difficulties, however, there are two important dimensions as far as re-learning in the work situation is concerned: REALITY AND RELEVANCE. As far as the formal learning situation is concerned for managers, the investment of time and money depends upon a variety of factors such as:

- need to improve performance of individuals in current job
- need for functional skills training (techniques, etc) to cope with present and future demands
- need for development in terms of raising levels of awareness in general management areas which can be built upon in the back-home situation, so that individuals can prepare themselves for broader and higher levels of responsibility.

Furthermore there is the point which should be made about improving performance in the current job, where relevant theories of management should dominate in some formal learning situations, particularly for younger managers. However that must be viewed simply as providing a foundation for improving the stages of the learning process, since we are in the business of developing effective practicing managers, not theoreticians.

Appropriate functional skills training is self-explanatory; so it may be useful to spend a little more time on what I consider is the potentially most important form of education/training – that related to development, since this could be a major determinant as far as future viability is concerned. In this area – and perhaps with particular reference to post-experience programmes to which we send managers – following points are relevant:

- the learning experience should be developmental and not remedial
- it should be experienced-based and not theory-based
- it should be awareness orientated and only partially skills orientated
- it should not be prescriptive

In other words, we should be seeking to provide experiences in general management areas such as:

- Organizational behaviour
- Environmental issues
- Financial planning and control
- Business policy

where, at the end of the programme, participants are much more aware of key issues and their inter-dependence and of the more pertinent questions to ask. There should be no attempt to solve individual problems for them; that is their responsibility. We should present them with a range of ideas, continually encourage exchange of experience between participants who at the end of the day have to work on those ideas or pieces of other people's experience, make judgment about what is not relevant, and validate them in the work situation. Furthermore we should encourage people to continue their own development in any of the areas covered, since I believe that self development is the key to effective learning.

As far as learning methods are concerned, a range should be used which is appropriate to the situation; but I personally favour the case method more than any other. From my point of view, the case method has particular advantages:

- a. It is realistic and relevant, since the majority are based upon real situations
- b. It helps to develop analytical skills and the ability to "home-in" on relevant pieces of information (stage 2 of the learning and problem solving process)
- c. It can be used, in conjunction with the tutor's experience and experience of other participants, to develop concepts and frameworks, and to challenge our own frame of reference (stage 3 of the learning and problem-solving process)
- d. It can be used to compare a chosen course of action with what actually happened in real life (stage 4 of the learning and problem-solving process).

By means of post-experience programmes we often try to develop a "critical mass" of managers in companies who, having learned the process of re-learning, have the potential to influence the re-learning process in their own work situation. However, pressures of work and industrial or organizational constraints often preclude achieving the rate of change required. For this reason, the learning process in the outgoing work situation should receive priority attention. As to the other important question: where do we go from here?, there could be a range of responses depending upon your perception of the need for greater levels of innovation, and the characteristics of your particular company situation.

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