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Cultivating strategic thinking in organizational leaders by designing supportive work environment!

"Leaders, like plants, thrive in supportive environments." Vicki Whiting

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Abstract

Management leader´s capacity to think strategically is a key to exceedingly higher performance level. Broad work knowledge combined with extensive work experience is a right recipe to develop strategic thinking ability. Organization´s internal environment coupled with allied organizational elements can either support or restrict the higher cognitive process of the individual which is responsible for smart thinking. Leaders, considered as the builders and reformers of the organization´s internal environment, possess the ability to enhance and establish stronger connection between organizational processes and the team workers´ ability of learning to think strategically. The collection of activities including; specialized training, skill enhancement and learning initiatives can provide leaders with the skills to enhance the strategic thinking of the work teams they lead.

Keywords: strategic thinking, management learning, leadership development, organizational processes

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1. Introduction

Management experts of today agree that the corporate internal environment or the organizational culture (Goldman E.F., Casey. A 2010) and the allied processes are the determining factors in any organization´s success or failure in near future. Few examples of the successful companies with strong cultures are Microsoft, Google and Toyota. Due to the current over challenging global economy, huge number of underperforming and struggling companies search for strategies to help them survive and perform effectively. To develop the opportunities offered by the challenging external forces and change it is necessary for industry leaders to comprehend and interpret the future using a systematic, cognitive approach to strategic thinking, relying less on the wisdom of experience and intuitive guesswork (Oelkers .G, Elsey .B 2004).

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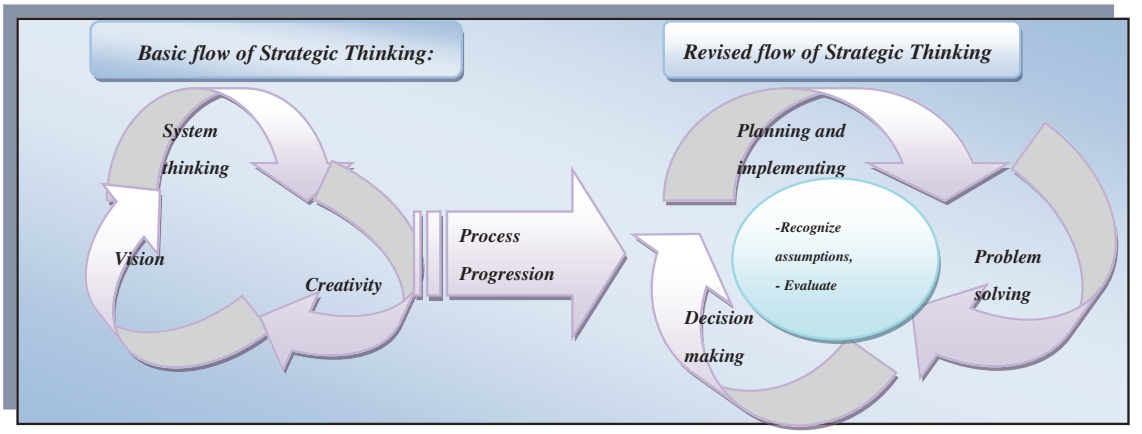
Strong management leaders work effortlessly to align the company´s strategy to its culture so that the work teams can comfortably adjust to corporate mission (Kazmi,; Naaranoja; Takala, 2013). However, it has also been noted that organizational culture can create serious hurdles and restrict the corporate strategies which are contrasting to the organizational shared beliefs among policy formulators regarding the organization's goals, proficiencies, and environment (Lorsch, 1985). Moreover, transformational leadership supports crafting strategic vision, dissemination of such corporate vision through the use of metaphor; model the vision by walking the talk and acting consistently, and finally, to build thorough commitment towards that corporate vision (Avolio, 1999). Strategic thinking is understood as the person´s ability (Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg, 1978), though the procedure of its development is very less known.

There is very limited work being done on how to develop individual, group and contextual factors that play part in developing strategic thinking. In this paper, we will see in detail the significance of factors that help the management leaders to foster strategic thinking within the organization. In this article the authors will attempt to propose a model suggesting that how strategic thinking can be cultivated. In the process, the authors will explore organizational culture and allied factors that support the learning process of strategic thinking. The paper will throw light on ways to educate and develop organizational leaders and team members the art of performing organizational tasks through the application of strategic thinking.

1.1 Strategic thinking and leadership

Today´s organizations are focusing rigorously to understand the role of strategic leadership and its application on organizational leaders that how they shift their and their whole organizations´ focus to transform the entity (Yukl, 2006). In many industrial studies, conducted across numerous countries, it has been noted that the senior managers' inability to apply strategic thinking create serious hurdles in firms´ performance (Bonn, 2001; Essery, 2002) as well a research on managers who derail team support, Mintzberg's view is that those who fail to do is mainly because of personal incompetency factors to shift from a technical to a strategic approach (Yukl, 2006). Strategic leadership is considered as the spirit of organization thinking process, taking smart actions, and the power to inspire individuals and teams to attain the competitive advantage (Hughes; Beatty, 2005).Following are the figures that can explain the basic and the successive flows of strategic thinking process:



(Figure 1: Reflection of Strategic thinking process progression from basic to advanced Model formulation)

Figure. 1 reflects the basic cycle of strategic thinking, combining system thinking, creativity and vision that can further progress into the cycle combining, planning and implementation, problem solving and decision making circling around the key ingredients of assumption recognition, argument evaluation and drawing the conclusion. According to Nasi (1991), strategic thinking refers to the formulation as well as the execution of strategies by organizational leaders and to the strategic performance of the total enterprise. It covers the aspects of strategic analysis, planning,

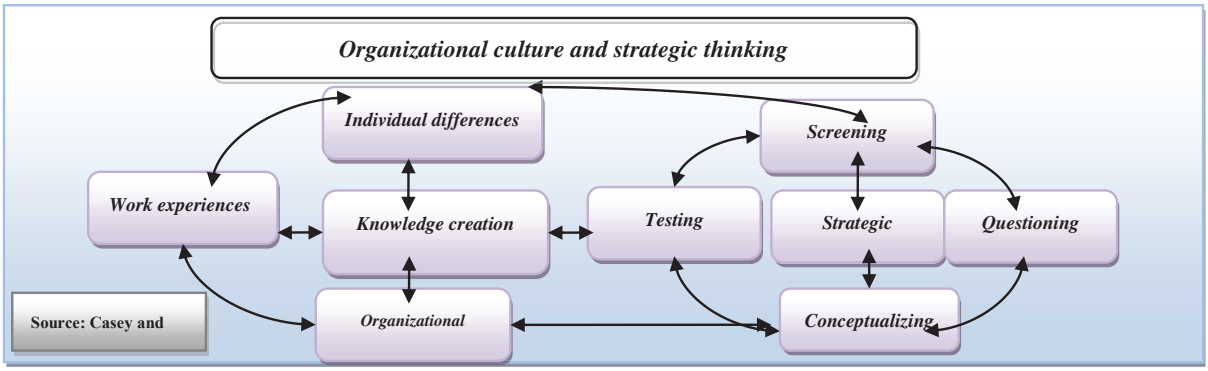
organization, controlling as well the concept of leadership. So much so that the concept of strategic thinking engulfs all such attributes which can be termed as strategic.

1.2 Strategic thinking in organizational team development activities

According to Bonn (2005), both leadership and strategy theorists have consensus on the opinion that strategic thinking is needed at multiple organizational levels. The organizational elements that support refine and boost the strategic thinking capacity of the work force by combining numerous team´s as well as the organizational practices, specifically highlighting the human collaborative work patterns compatible with the work environment (Casey & Goldman 2010). According to Wheatley (2006), the requirement for information and thinking skills which were once considered as the key skills for the top leaders is now moving deeper into organizations, since currently it's the requirement of every employee to be able to interpret complex information and explore their own realities.

1.2 Strategic thinking and team supportive environment building

Strategic thinking doesn't come naturally since most of us are static thinkers who tend to make decisions only for the limited period, strategic thinking skills have to be learned, cultivated, practiced, and applied. By employing the strategic thinking term means that the leaders combine elements like; analysis, exploration, understanding, defining a multifaceted situation and then develop planning actions that will bring the greatest possible positive impact towards a pre-defined goal (Avolio, 1999).Community or group´s needs assessment is a strategic process which links separate loops to gather, combining the various steps together in a systematic manner to arrive at the final community´s needed solution (Burton; Merrill, P. 1991). Corporate planning is defined as simply the tip of the iceberg or the part of the greater process of strategic thinking (Essery, 2002). Joseph S. Nye, Jr.,(2011) defined contextual intelligence as an intuitive diagnostic skill that facilitates and support a leader to match up the best suited tactics with the aim to intelligently designing innovative ways to cope with the new environments and settings. Contextual intelligence is a key factor for the reformers and leaders to alter their working style and strategies in accordance with the environmental context as well as the followers´ needs and aspirations (Kazmi, A., Kinnunen , T. 2012).

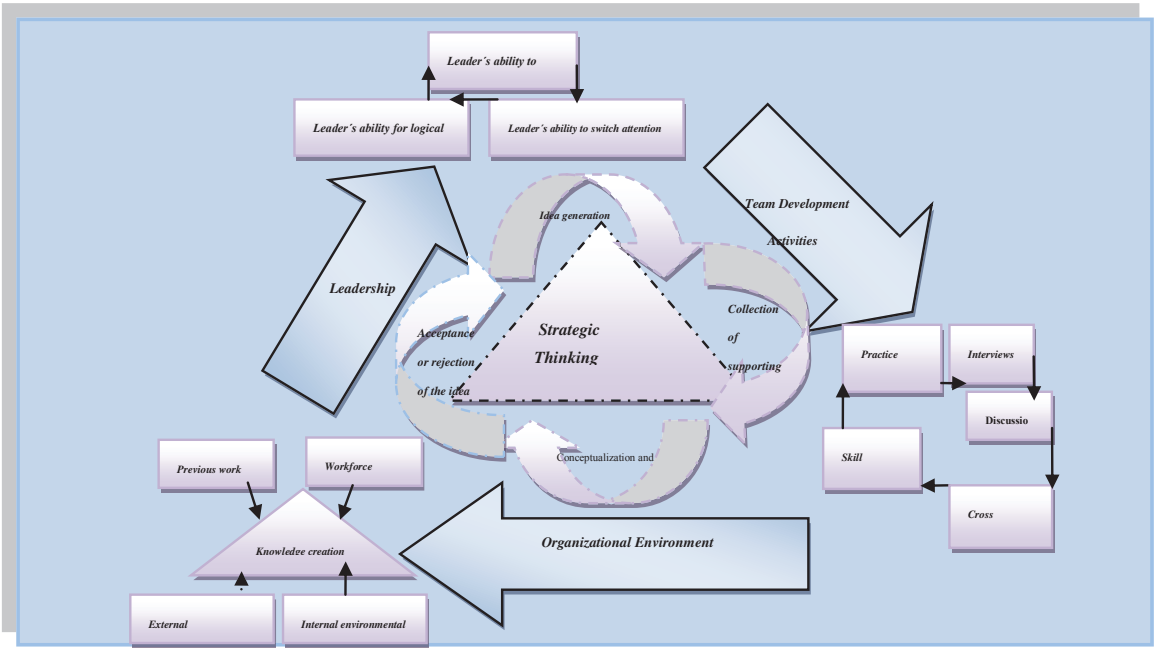


(Figure 2. Casey and Goldman ´s Model of learning strategic thinking.)

Casey and Goldman´s model (2010) at figure.2 above displays a connection between organizational cultural factors (i.e., work experiences, individual differences, and cultural influencers (Goldman, 2007) triggering the cognitive cycle of strategic thinking developmental process (i.e., screening, testing, questioning and conceptualizing (Kolb's .1984) for leadership and organizational team development through experimental learning. Blanchard (Witt. D, 2013) recommends taking a rose gardener's approach, which is an everyday household example; while walking down the road when we see at roses growing in neighbors' yards, we can understand that the gardeners with the most beautiful roses are those ones who most aggressively prune their rose bushes. Since when we trim rose bush, we provide the plant a chance to concentrate its resources to create the best-looking roses on the strongest branches. If otherwise the non-pruned rose bush will results in a diluted response and less than average flowers. The gardeners recommend more frequent and consistent pruning for perfect and clear results. The message behind the above example is that (Witt. D, 2013), 'when one is confident about where he or she is heading, it provides strong willpower to cut back on the

wasteful things which are hindering the path to reach ones goals. Scraping the unnecessary things will free up additional resources and time so to march up to the goals with more ease and even through new venues of opportunities.

All of the above thoughts and research work by the worthy theorists, in the field of strategic thinking cultivation process among the working teams, provided strong grounds to the authors to formulate a model for strategic thinking developmental process which is as follows:



(Figure 3. Case study´s conceptual three fold framework to harness `Strategic Thinking` cultivation process.)

The figure.3 reflects an overview of the three dimensional approach (i.e, Leadership, team development and organizational environment) which the authors of the paper are suggested and used in the case study to evaluate the process of strategic thinking development.

3. Research setting

The case study is a collaborative effort between the public sector policy formulators (i.e., Ministry of Health, Finland, Industrial Management, Production Department, University of Vaasa) focusing on to suggest healthcare reforms highlighting collaborative innovation and its continuous improvement thereafter for change process maturity.

4. Methodology

In the current case study, the research method involved the process of administering a formally devised questionnaire supported by variety of team development activities, namely, interviews of the employees divided into the groups of (i.e., different targeted locations; the hierarchical cross sections-: senior executives, working staff; different work departments), brain storming sessions, formal and informal discussion sessions, feedback assessment sessions were arranged. The rationale behind the research activity was to develop and harness strategic thinking abilities among the targeted sample of the case study during the organizational transformational phase. The selected

study sample size was 21 respondents, representing different hierarchical levels (i.e., senior management, line management and staff etc.) as well as different operational setups in a multinational business concern.

4.1 Research Goal

This survey aims to highlight the reasons for validating change in the management thinking approaches, especially focusing T- shaped thinking, to harness organizational transformation for innovation and sustainability. To verify the propositions, a survey using questionnaires was conducted.

4.2 Sample and Data Collection

The survey of this study is conducted on 35 middle and senior level practitioners from the localities, for which the change process is targeted, are the Vaasa, Laihia and Vähäkyrö, situated in the north of Finland. The proposed collaborative innovative change process was injected in to the work scenarios constituting upon Physiotherapy, Dental Units, Child and mother care, general physician services at the targeted localities. Here, it may be noted that the services like, administration, physiotherapy, psychologist and supporting service are jointly managed in the two relatively distant targeted localities. The questionnaires were analyzed through percentages to view the comparative behavioral trends through the selected traits.

4.3 Tool development

A group of researchers having related knowledge on the concepts of organizational transformational process, role of leadership and worth of strategic thinking, formulized a research tool i.e., a research questionnaire representing the question items to measure the focused study fields (i.e, work leadership potential, team development and collaborative organizational environment building capability) for strategic thinking cultivation process in work team. After reviewing the above referred dimensions of the case study through the selected benchmark tools and descriptions as their guide, the team wrote statements describing the skills required for systems thinking, suitable organizational factors and leadership development terms; then sorted them into seven sub categories (i.e., leader´s ability to conceive holistic view, leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach, leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives, previous work knowledge, external environmental forces, workforce diversity effect, internal environmental pressures). In an interactive manner, the question statements were further selected or altered as a result of extensive brainstorming sessions during several feedback sessions between the policy formulators' panel and the researcher team. The conclusion of a lengthy exercise resulted in designing a formal scale. The purpose of the study was to identify and measure the level of presence and role of factors contributing to leadership effectiveness, workforce engagement, and organizational environmental suitability to harness strategic thinking development and to support organizational transformational process.

Table 1
Strategic Thinking Skills linked to the Strategic Thinking study tool

Sr. No	***Strategic Thinking supportive element s***	***Selective Key study tool items :***
1	***Leader´s ability to conceive holistic view.***	Works as an example for their working community Produces excellent results, together with others As a work-team member, I ask myself how the parts of an incomplete figure connect in certain situation.
2	***Leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach.***	As a work-team member, I think intuitively about what is unique or unusual about the certain problem situation. As a work-team member, I think about what's so important about this challenge. As a work-team member, I think about questions I am neglecting to ask.
3	***Leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives.***	Finding alternative solutions to the problem situations More people want to try more options As a work-team member, I seek different perspectives.
4	***Previous work knowledge.***	Our experts challenge their followers to think about old problems related to NPD project activities in new ways. Our experts are capable of forcing their junior team members to rethink things that they have never questioned before. Our experts are capable of helping their team members to improve professionalism.
5	***External environmental forces.***	Our company remains in regular contact with our key clients during the product development process. Our company takes full advantage of almost all forms of media to target the potential stake holders while NPD process. As a NPD team member, I feel very comfortable if I'm being fed insights by the customers and other external stake holders in NPD project.

6	***Workforce diversity effect.***	Team is strong in searching for new ways of looking at product development problems. Team is cooperative in developing and applying new ideas in collaboration with key individuals from other departments. We, as a work team, are capable to cooperation with other work groups.
7	***Internal environmental pressures.***	As a work-team member, try to find a common goal when two or more parties are in Conflict. As a work-team member, Engage in discussions with those who hold a different world view. Our NPD team selects new product ideas based on their technical feasibility to design develop and manufacture.

The study was of limited applicability since the seven subscales could not be empirically derived in addition to the concern of self-reporting were not completely controlled. The research tool, having 21 items, reflecting three questions each on every subcategory asking respondents to rate the question statements in the response scale where 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree: 3 = neither Agree nor Disagree; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree. A higher value represents increased use of a cognitive proficiency. Average to above average scores on the tool suggest that the respondent is competent to utilize the strategic thinking skills; in other words, he or she is capable to work as a strategic thinker. However, the low scores on the scale confirm that the individual is an ineffective strategic thinker. In addition, the tool included three reverse scored items to cover the risk of clued answers by the responded.

4.4 Analyses and Results

Empirical analysis of tri- dimensional strategic thinking cultivation process was conducted through a formally devised research tool administered on 21 respondents. The study results collected through respondents' feedback are displayed in Table 2 which is depicting tools significance and independence. Following is the table highlighting study results identified through mean and standard deviation scores on each tool´s item.

Table 2

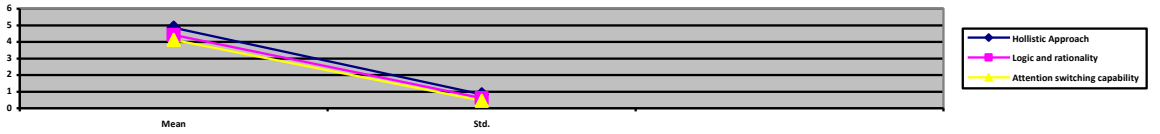
Strategic Thinking cultivation process Questionnaire

Scores on strategic Thinking Skills linked to the Strategic Thinking study tool

Sr. No.	*Three main categories*	*Seven sub-categories*	*Set of traits associated three dimensional strategic cultivation process.*	*Mean*	*Std.*
1	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to conceive holistic view.***	Works as an example for their working community.	3.66	1.19
2	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to conceive holistic view.***	Produces excellent results, together with others.	4.38	.74
3	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to conceive holistic view.***	As a work-team member, I ask myself how the parts of an incomplete figure connect in certain situation.	4.52	.60
4	***Leadership***	***Leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach***.	As a work-team member, I think intuitively about what is unique or unusual about the certain problem situation.	4.52	.60
5	***Leadership***	***Leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach***.	As a work-team member, I think about what's so important about this challenge.	4.61	.58
6	***Leadership***	***Leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach***.	As a work-team member, I think about questions I am neglecting to ask.	4.14	.65
7	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives.***	Finding alternative solutions to the problem situations.	4.85	.35
8	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives.***	More people want to try more options.	4.09	.43
9	***Leadership***	***Leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives.***	As a work-team member, I seek different perspectives.	3.42	.59
10	***Team potential development***	***Previous work knowledge.***	Our experts challenge their followers to think about old problems related to NPD project activities in new ways.	4.47	.51
11	***Team potential development***	***Previous work knowledge.***	Our experts are capable of forcing their junior team members to rethink things that they have never questioned before.	4.38	.58

12	***Team potential development***	***Previous work knowledge.***	Our experts are capable of helping their team members to improve professionalism.	4.19	.51
13	***Team potential development***	***External environmental forces.***	Our company remains in regular contact with our key clients during the product development process.	3.9	.53
14	***Team potential development***	***External environmental forces.***	Our company takes full advantage of almost all forms of media to target the potential stake holders while NPD process.	4.57	.50
15	***Team potential development***	***External environmental forces.***	As a NPD team member, I feel very comfortable if I'm being fed insights by the customers and other external stake holders in NPD project.	4.52	.51
16	***Team potential development***	***Workforce diversity effect.***	Team is strong in searching for new ways of looking at product development problems.	4.66	.48
17	***Team potential development***	***Workforce diversity effect.***	Team is cooperative in developing and applying new ideas in collaboration with key individuals from other departments.	3.71	.78
18	***Team potential development***	***Workforce diversity effect.***	We, as a work team, are capable to cooperate with other work groups.	4.61	.49
19	***Supportive environment development***	***Internal environmental pressures.***	As a work-team member, try to find a common goal when two or more parties are in Conflict.	4.52	.60
20	***Supportive environment development***	***Internal environmental pressures.***	As a work-team member, I engage in discussions with those who hold a different world view.	3.8	.63
21	***Supportive environment development***	***Internal environmental pressures.***	Our NPD team selects new product ideas based on their technical feasibility to design develop and manufacture.	4.52	.51

Table 2. displays the category sequence, used in the tool starting from leadership with total nine question statements. Here three items each are reflecting the sub-categories namely; 1) Leader´s ability to conceive holistic view, 2) Leader´s Ability for logical and rational approach, 2) Leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives. The highest points of deviation from the standard were i.e., 1.19 and .74 scored on two leadership items connected with the `***leaders´ ability to conceive holistic view***` (Kazmi, ; Naaranoja, 2013). In addition the lower statistical mean i.e., 3.66 further confirms the trends revealed through the standard deviation scores. The items are reflecting the individuals´ ability to co- associate each other for more proficient working. The study results revealed slight gap in actual collective working ability aspect of the respondents. Respondent's scores on two tool items linked with leadership ability i.e., ` ***to switch attention across multiple perspectives***` revealed low deviation from standard i.e, .35 and .43 on 1). The items are***; a- Finding alternative solutions to the problem situations*** and ***b- More people want to try more options***. The finding is co supported by high mean scores i.e., 4.85 and 4.09 respectively.



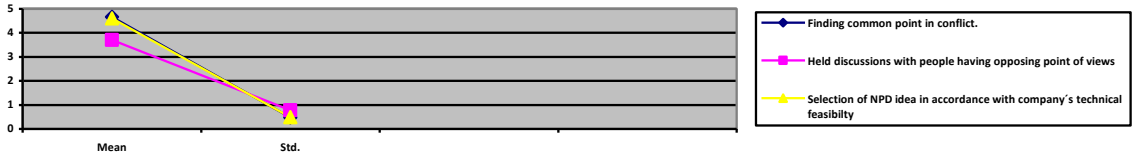
(Figure 4. Graphic representation of `Leadership` domain)

The trends revealed through the above graphic (Fig.4) confirms that the target organization´s leadership building capacity is strong in terms of installing ability in its workforce to shift and adjust attention across `multiple perspectives` while the weak area is to `conceive holistic view` but to focus on individuality. This trend points towards the company´s weaker potential to handle team´s collaboration in work operations.

In the domain of `***Team potential development***` the study results revealed the following trend;

(Figure 5. Graphic representation of `Team Potential` domain)

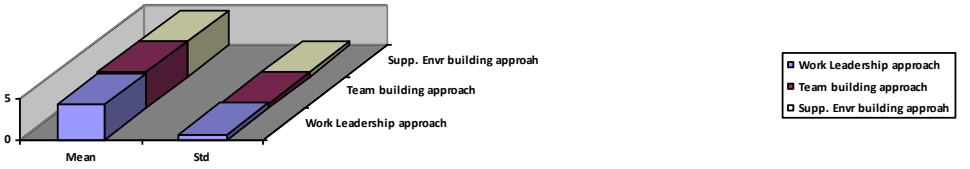
The trends (Fig. 5) judged through the three categories namely; 1) previous work knowledge, 2) effects of external environmental forces and the impact of 3) workforce diversity. The responses on two items **a**- ***Team is cooperative in developing and applying new ideas in collaboration with key individuals from other departments*** and ***b- We, as a work team, are capable to cooperate with other work groups.*** The scores were 4.66 and 3.71 as means and .48 and .78 as deviations from the standards for items placed as ´a` and ´b` respectively to once again confirming low collaborative initiatives what is considered highly essential for organizations to create new knowledge and effective working in the current day´s corporate competitiveness. The results relating to the situation for the third category of our proposed model i.e., ***`Supportive environment development´*** displays a low deviance point i.e., .51 dully supported by the score of 4.52 as statistical mean, for the potential point where it was generally agreed by our study sample that the new idea for product development process company´s technical feasibility to design develop and manufacture are considered.



(Figure 6. Graphic representation for `Supportive organizational environment building` domain)

However, once again the environment building capability of the organization is seen slight deviating from the standard points i.e., .60 and .63 dully supported by 4.52 and 3.8 on the items ***a- As a work-team member, try to find a common goal when two or more parties are in Conflict*** and ***b- As a work-team member, I engage in discussions with those who hold a different world view, respectively.***

The overall situation of the three categories is displayed as follows:



(Figure 7. Graphic representation of 3-fold strategic thinking cultivation process)

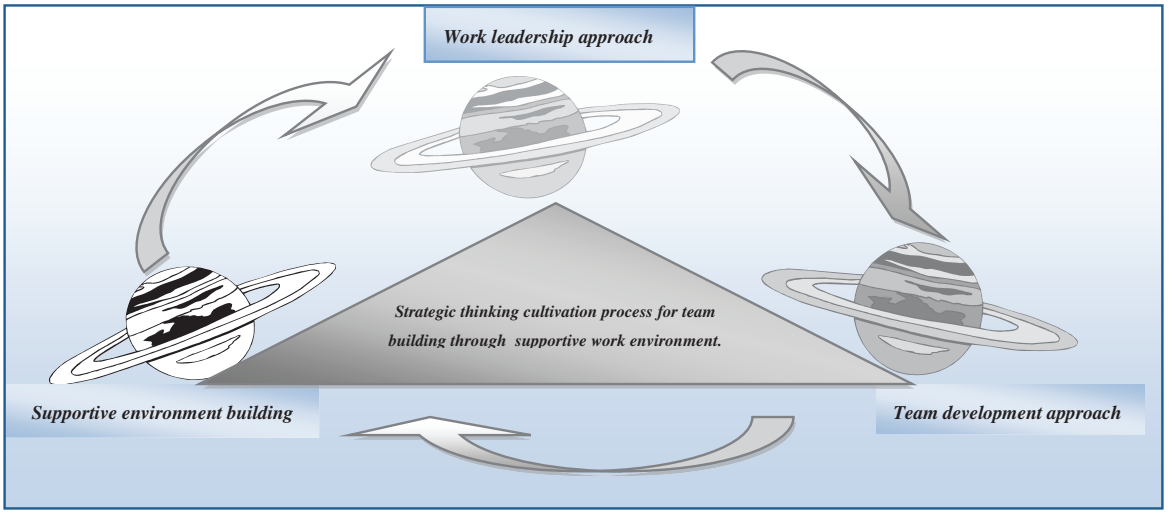
The overall results conforms figure 7. above displaying the highest deviation point at .63 for work leadership approach dully supported by an overall mean score of 4.24. The lowest overall standard deviation point is .54 dully supported with an overall mean score of 4.32 for the category of organizational team building approach. The middle range is considered for the organizational capability of creating supportive work environment with an overall deviational point from the standard i.e., .58 dully supported by an overall mean score of 4.28. This research confirmed the effectiveness of the proposed three broader and seven sub-category based model presented in our study on the basis of the supported study results. In a study, Pisapia et al. (2005) has defined systems thinking as an ability to see systems collectively, identifying the subparts of the whole in addition to focus on the interrelationships as well. The proposed category of `leader´s ability to conceive holistic view´s tool items displayed a strong correlational balance with the ability of the work leaders and organizational mangers to understanding that how work details and work team members are linked; how to judge the reasons of individual´s work patterns; how to judge and track work patterns; and how to understand and describe a work´s problematic situation by detaching the whole into small an understandable segments. The proposed tool items depicts the cognitive entity of a strategic thinker as the one focusing on the work issues not superficially but beyond the levels of facts and figures; in an analytical style; by additionally approaching the issue from the aspects which are hidden though causal and worth considering. In addition, the tool items defined a

strategic work leader as someone capable of focusing on diversified angles of the work situations for proficient decision making, even utilizing past experiences and knowledge base. However, the study proposed to a broader conceptual model having tri-dimensional approach (i.e, Leadership, team development and organizational environment) to suggest that only single approaches (i.e., single focus on leadership development, team´s skill development or creating supportive work environment) cannot provide solution for an overall framework for strategic thinking cultivation process in work teams. The study results appear to be generalized to a wide spectrum of the targeted organization since the tool was administered on the sample picked from the company´s three different work locations situated at different countries. The above facts proved high reliability of our proposed model and devised tool since rather than measuring single factor or skill, they both are measuring three variant dimensions i.e., organizational leadership approach, team building capability and supportive organizational environment building capability. Henceforth there are no prominent weaknesses to internal or external validity.

5. Conclusion

The study was an effort to scrutinize the effectiveness of our constructed research tool to evaluate and judge strategic thinking cultivation aspect among the work team members. Henceforth, our research suggests and supports three main fundamental points:

1) To strengthen and run a healthy process of strategic thinking cultivation process in work teams, the management leaders should enforce a framework capturing all the three angles of the process encompassing a) leadership development, b) team development and c) creation of supportive work environment.
2) All the three main categories of the study (i.e, leadership, team development and supportive work environment creation) have their own orbits wherein they are functioning on their independent cycle of activities (Sub- categories). This fact creates a natural resemblance of our model with the science of nature where the plants revolving around the SUN in its orbit but at the same time each plant has its own circulated motion as well where their Moon(s) are revolving around them and thus creating a potent balance supported by combined motion as well as having independent subsystems.



(Figure 8. Imaginary resemblance of the proposed strategic thinking cultivation process with the planetary circulatory motion of nature)

3) In addition, the tool proposed in the research study reflected capability for being a valid option to judge strategic thinking process at a deeper level since it encompasses the phenomenon from three broader angles (i.e., Leadership, team development and organizational environment) but further dividing them into seven subcategories (i.e., leader´s ability to conceive holistic view, leader´s Ability for logical and

rational approach, leader´s ability to switch attention across multiple perspectives, previous work knowledge, external environmental forces, workforce diversity effect, internal environmental pressures.

And finally, the seven subcategories proposed in the study generated supportive statistical basis to indicate clear deviating aspects creating a deeper and much balanced approach by reflecting direct as well as reverse linkages to the main concepts. Henceforth, the overall results depicted that the formulated research is a good fit with the prospects to evaluate strategic thinking process in the work teams.

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