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The importance of structure and process to strategy implementation☆

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Abstract A study involving over 200 senior managers demonstrates that overall firm performance is strongly influenced by how well a firm's business strategy is matched to its organizational structure and the behavioral norms of its employees. The authors identify a taxonomy comprised of four different combinations of structure/behavior types, which they label as: Management Dominant, Customer-Centric Innovators, Customer-Centric Cost Controllers, and Middle Ground. These alternative structure/behavior types are then matched with specific business strategies (i.e., Prospectors, Analyzers, Low Cost Defenders, Differentiated Defenders) in order to identify which combination(s) of structures and behaviors best serve to facilitate the process of implementing a specific strategy.

1. Doing versus dreaming

Many executives argue that brilliant execution is more important than brilliant strategy. The reason is simple: doing is harder than dreaming, and a poorly executed strategy is merely a vision of what could be. Effective implementation can prove difficult, as it requires the coordinated and appropriate efforts of individuals throughout an organization. Thus, a critical task for senior managers is to define the key success activities for their organization's strategy and develop an organizational system that promotes those same activities. Based on a recent study of over 200 businesses and business units, we find that in order for strategy to create superior performance, it must be complemented by appropriate organizational characteristics and employee behaviors.

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2. Reaching for the stars

Each year, the Mobile Travel Guide bestows its coveted five star rating upon only a select few hotels and resorts. The Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs, CO holds the title of longest reigning five-star facility. For over 40 continuous years, the Broadmoor has been honored with the industry's highest award by adhering to a strategy of providing the highest level of customer service. While many hotels share in this strategy, few consistently succeeded in executing it in the manner of the Broadmoor. Such success is the product of decisions by senior management that have created and maintained a system and culture that promote exemplary service.

While the physical setting, buildings, and surrounding grounds of the Broadmoor are visually impressive, the constant attention paid by the staff to guest services is the element that elevates the resort to five star status. Before ever encountering a customer, each new employee is required to attend a two-and-a-half day orientation session, during which they receive an employee handbook. In this initial training session, newly hired employees are presented with a great deal of information regarding job responsibilities, schedules, facilities and the like. The most critical topic addressed, however, is that of customer satisfaction, with the importance of making and keeping promises to customers being a central theme of orientation. At the end of this initial information session, the new hire's direct supervisor personally welcomes them to the organization and escorts them to their work location, officially marking the start of a 90-day on-the-job training session. During their probationary period, new-hires shadow an experienced employee in their respective areas and engage in extensive role-playing with managers. Only after successfully completing the 90-day training period are trainees considered full-time employees, who then enter into a strict program called "Keeping the Stars". "Keeping the Stars" is divided into five modules consisting of: (1) Culture of Guest Satisfaction, (2) Communication for Guest Satisfaction, (3) Everyday Guest Satisfaction, (4) Above and Beyond Guest Satisfaction, and (5) The Art of Recovery. It is through these sessions that employees come to understand the culture of the Broadmoor and its behavioral norms and, ultimately, it is through the resulting actions of the Broadmoor staff that the resort builds and maintains its reputation as a truly remarkable hotel and business.

3. Advantage, Broadmoor

After considering this example, one might superficially conclude that outstanding service is the only key to the Broadmoor's competitive advantage. Rather, the Broadmoor's true edge lies in the match of its structure and systems to its market strategy, which produces the appropriate behaviors that create superior customer value. The matching of structure and systems to marketing strategy is rare in the hospitality industry, and is difficult for competitors to imitate. Therefore, the Broadmoor's competitive advantage lies in the execution of its strategy, rather than in the strategy itself. In the remainder of this article, we present a model of successful strategy implementation.

4. Defining market strategy

In order to determine the proper relationship between strategy, structure, and behavior, a manager must first determine just what the firm's (or business unit's) market strategy is. Of course, every market strategy is unique to some degree. However, an infinite number of options overlook some basic choices that managers must make. Our research suggests that there are four different market strategies that firms or individual business units may adopt. These strategy types are: Prospectors, Analyzers, Low Cost Defenders, and Differentiated Defenders.

The primary challenge of the *Prospector* is to identify and exploit new product and market opportunities. Their primary capability is innovation in product and market development. *Analyzers* are fast followers. They closely monitor customer reactions and competitors' activities, successes, and failures to identify unattended segments or product improvement opportunities. Analyzers seek to either improve upon successful product offerings initiated by Prospectors or offer comparable products at reduced costs.

Apple has successfully employed both Prospector and Analyzer strategies. Apple was first in successfully persuading the five major record labels to offer music downloads that could be copied to CDs and portable devices. Apple's iTunes Music Store, launched in April of 2003, sold 1 million downloads in its first week. Apple was a follower or Analyzer with its iPod MP3 player in late 2001. The Korean conglomerate, Saehan Information Systems, introduced the world to portable MP3 players when it released its MPMan in 1998. However, as David Card, an analyst at Internet researcher Jupiter

Research said, "Nothing combines the form factor (design) with the quality of sound or coolness of the iPod". Substantially improving customer value is the objective of the Analyzer. The result in Apple's case is that the iPod, with a 50% market share, is the top selling MP3 player.

Low Cost Defenders typically direct their products or services to stable segments of the total market. Their emphasis is on efficiency through standardized practices rather than on effectiveness that stems from flexibility. *Differentiated Defenders* also direct their products or services to stable segments of the total market. However, in contrast to Low Cost Defenders, the emphasis of Differentiated Defenders is on providing outstanding service and high quality, rather than on offering the lowest price. Differentiated Defenders attempt to maintain control of a market through superior product quality, service, or image.

The Broadmoor is a prime example of a Differentiated Defender. In the airline industry, overcapacity and high cost structures have created both peril and opportunity. Recently, upstart airlines have joined Southwest Airlines in the low cost segment. One very successful example of a young Low Cost Defender is JetBlue. JetBlue controls cost by utilizing airports that have lower gate fees, having competitive but not exorbitant pay scales for employees, rapid turn around of aircraft at the gates, and keeping overhead costs down by utilizing information technology to the highest degree possible. JetBlue uses only two types of aircraft, which results in a reduction in training expenses for all types of employees, including pilots, mechanics, and cabin crew. The pricing structure for JetBlue is very transparent in that prices differ based on destination and on the number of days between purchase and travel.

5. Strategy implementation decisions

Once a firm's or individual business unit's market strategy is determined, management's focus shifts to implementing that strategy. As previously mentioned, in this study we considered two critical implementation dimensions: organizational structure and strategic behavior.

5.1. Organizational structure

There are three structural dimensions that influence communication, coordination, and decision-making which are key to strategy implementation. These dimensions are: formalization, centralization, and specialization.

5.1.1. Formalization

Formalization is the degree to which decisions and working relationships are governed by formal rules and procedures. Rules and procedures provide a means for defining appropriate behaviors. Routine aspects of a problem can be dealt with easily through the application of rules, and rules enable individuals to organize their activities to benefit themselves and the organization. They are a form of organizational memory and enable businesses to fully exploit previous discoveries and innovations. Formal rules and procedures can also lead to increased efficiency and lower administrative costs.

Firms with fewer formal procedures are often referred to as "organic". Organic firms encourage horizontal and vertical communication and flexible roles. High-tech businesses frequently utilize a relatively stable substrate of formal structure and then overlay this base with temporary project teams and multi-functional groups. The net effect is to achieve the efficiency of a functional organization and the market effectiveness of a divisional form. Temporary teams are used for a wide range of activities including new product development, strategic assessments, and process development. The benefits of the organic form include rapid awareness of and response to competitive and market changes, more effective information sharing, and a reduction in the lag between decision and action.

Nordstrom's Employee Handbook may be the ultimate example of low formality. Fig. 1 is the Nordstrom Employee Handbook. Nordstrom explicitly uses strategically ambiguous language to empower employees at all levels in the organization (the topic we turn to next). The Handbook is also a reflection of Nordstrom's belief that excessive rules are a hindrance to creativity.

5.1.2. Centralization

Centralization refers to whether decision authority is closely held by top managers or is delegated to middle and lower level managers. Lines of communication and responsibility are relatively clear in centralized organizations, and the route to top management for approval can be traveled quickly. While fewer innovative ideas might be put forth in centralized organizations, implementation tends to be straightforward once a decision is made. This benefit, however, is primarily realized in stable, noncomplex environments.

**Welcome To
Nordstrom**

We're glad to have you with
our company

Our number one goal is to provide
outstanding customer service

Set both your personal and
professional goals high
We have great confidence in your
ability to achieve them

Nordstrom Rules

Rule No. 1: **Use your good
judgment in all situations**

There will be no additional rules

Please feel free to ask
your department manager,
store manager, or division general
manager any question at any time

nordstrom

Figure 1 Nordstrom's Employee Handbook.

In a decentralized organization, a variety of views and ideas may emerge from different groups (e.g., product management and sales). Since decision-making is dispersed in a decentralized organization, decision making and implementation may be more time consuming. In the long run, though, it is likely that the decentralized organization will produce more new ideas and more actual program changes than will a centralized organization. And, when a non-routine task takes place in a complex environment, decentralization is more likely to be effective, as it empowers managers close to the issue to make decisions and implement them rapidly.

Fortune magazine has suggested that Nokia, the Finnish company that is the leading manufacturer of cellular telephone handsets, may be the least hierarchical big company in the world. Jorma Ollila, Nokia's CEO, in explaining the company's organizational philosophy, said, "It's the way the organization creates a meeting of minds among people. How do you send a very strong signal that this is a meritocracy, and this is a place where you are allowed to have a bit of fun, to think unlike the norm, where you are allowed to make a mistake?" "The objective is to always have decisions made by the people who have the best knowledge", noted Matti Alahuhta, the head of Nokia's mobile phone division. The benefits of this kind of hands-off management include encouraged creativity, entrepreneurship, and personal responsibility.

5.1.3. Specialization

Specialization refers to the degree to which tasks and activities are divided in the organization. Highly specialized organizations have a higher proportion of "specialists" who direct their efforts to a well-defined set of activities. These specialists might focus their attention on cooperative advertising, pricing, distributor relations, or on specific market segments. Specialists are experts in their respective areas and typically are given substantial autonomy, which enables the organization to respond rapidly to changes in its environment.

Organizations that have a high proportion of generalists are typically low in knowledge about specific market segments or in specific expertise such as e-marketing. Generalists, by necessity, must do additional "homework" before responding to change. Generalist organizations may be able to hold costs down by reducing the expense of hiring specialists.

5.2. Strategic behavior

Activities oriented to the creation of competitive advantage fall within the domain of strategic behavior. There are at least four sets of behaviors that could lead to a position of competitive advantage. These are: customer-oriented behaviors, competitor-oriented behaviors, innovation-oriented behaviors, and internal/cost-oriented behaviors. While it is common for firms to engage in multiple sets of behaviors simultaneously, most firms have a dominant behavioral orientation.

5.2.1. Customer-oriented

Customer-oriented businesses pursue competitive advantage by placing the highest priority on the creation and maintenance of customer value. As such, customer-oriented businesses engage in the organization-wide development of and responsiveness to information about the expressed and unexpressed needs of both current and potential customers. Due to its constantly refined market-sensing and customer-relating capabilities, the customer-oriented business should be well positioned to anticipate customer need evolution and to respond through the development of new customer value-focused capabilities and the addition of valuable products and services. Customer-oriented businesses also should have a competitive advantage in both the speed and effectiveness of their adaptability to opportunities and threats.

Michael Dell, CEO of Dell Computer, explains his company's customer-oriented philosophy: "We have a relentless focus on our customers. There are no superfluous activities here. Once we learn directly from our customers what they need, we work closely with partners and vendors to build and ship relevant technologies at a low cost". Dell goes on to say, "Our employees feel a sense of ownership when they work directly with customers". Such a sense of ownership and commitment is a powerful motivator and leads to high morale.

5.2.2. Competitor-oriented

A different perspective on competitive advantage is to simply "beat the competition". This orientation places priority on in-depth assessment of a set of targeted competitors, focusing on their goals, strategies, offerings, resources, capabilities, and the organization-wide dissemination of assessment-generated information. The result is that managers develop competitor-oriented objectives instead of economic or customer-oriented objectives. The behavioral goal for the business is to match, if not exceed, competitors' strengths. However, a competitor orientation carries with it a certain amount of risk, including hampering creativity because of the energy required for monitoring competitors, distracting managers' attention from customer need satisfaction, or failure to seize opportunities. It also may lead to imitative strategy and product development.

Avis Rent A Car System has successfully employed the competitor-oriented philosophy, embodied in the slogan "We Try Harder", to become the world's second largest general-use car rental business. By portraying itself as the underdog to industry leader Hertz, Avis has focused the attention of its employees on providing superior service and, in the process, has created one of the world's top brands for customer loyalty.

5.2.3. Innovation-oriented

A third perspective holds that businesses build and renew competitive advantage through radical or discontinuous innovations. An innovation orientation means that the business is not only open to, but seeks out new ideas in both its technical and administrative domains. It encourages risk taking and enhances the likelihood of developing radically new products. However, businesses must be aware of the possibility that an innovation orientation may not allow for the follow-through that is necessary to fully reap the benefits of earlier innovations.

Innovation is a style of corporate behavior that's comfortable with and even aggressive about new ideas, change, risk, and failure. It must permeate a very wide swath of an organization in order to make a difference. Bright ideas are an important part of innovation, of course. But as Steve Wynn, CEO of Mirage Resorts, observed, bright ideas aren't terribly rare. "Three executives sitting in a room can get 40 good ideas ricocheting off the wall in minutes". The challenge is getting a steady stream of good ideas out of the labs and creativity campfires, through marketing and manufacturing, and all the way to customers. This often requires a "Eureka" moment.

"The PalmPilot was born out of frustration", explains Donna Dubinsky, former CEO of Palm Computing and now the CEO of Handspring. "At first almost all we did at Palm Computing was sell handwriting recognition software. But we got tired of seeing our great software run on others' so-so handheld computers. We'd tell them what we thought they could do to improve, but they wouldn't accept our little company's influence. Bruce Dunlevie (a Palm board member) got sick of Jeff Hawkins and me complaining about our partners' lack of innovation and vision and said, 'You know, if you guys know what to do, why don't you go do it?' The next day Jeff shows up with a little cardboard and wooden model he'd glued together in his garage. That model became the PalmPilot. But, the Eureka moment came when we showed the docking cradle and explained that our little device could connect to a PC with the touch of a button. Nobody had done that before. It seems basic now, but no one had made the logical leap that this organizer was a PC accessory, not a stand-alone PC".

5.2.4. Internal/cost-oriented

Michael Porter (1980, 1985) argues that there are two basic sources of competitive advantage. The first is differentiation advantage that derives from the customer, competitor, or innovation-oriented behaviors that we have discussed. The second is cost advantage that derives from the internal orientation that we now consider. Internally oriented businesses pursue efficiency in all parts of their value chain and seek to reduce costs in primary activities such as logistics, operations, and sales and marketing. They also strive to reduce costs in support activities such as procurement, R&D, and administrative functions. These businesses are obsessed with operational excellence that is translatable into lower prices for buyers. Where experimentation is a hallmark of businesses with an innovation orientation, exploitation is the hallmark of internally oriented businesses. Exploitation enables the business to realize improvements as it drives down the learning curve. However, over-reliance on exploitation may make it difficult for businesses to adapt as market conditions change.

6. Organizational archetypes

In the course of this study, we identified four distinctly different combinations of structures and behaviors adopted by the 216 participating businesses (see sidebar for additional details on how this study was conducted). Table 1 illustrates the characteristics of each archetype.

We refer to members of Archetype I as *Management Dominant* firms. The data clearly reveals that in comparison to firms in the other three clusters, Management Dominant firms rely on senior managers to make most decisions and to determine the specific actions workers undertake. Consistently demonstrating the lowest scores across all behavior orientations, these firms, in essence, have taken most decision-making processes out of the hands of the individual. Instead, senior managers exert an unusually high level of authority and influence here.

Archetype II firms are *Customer-Centric Innovators*. These firms have informal environments and are populated with a proportionately high number of specialists whose primary behavioral foci is on understanding customers and developing innovative solutions to address their needs.

Archetype III firms are *Competitor-Centric Cost Controllers*. These firms place the highest emphasis on monitoring competitors' actions and making sure that costs are kept under control. Their consistent position with regard to structural issues of formalization, centralization, and specialization suggests a balanced approach between senior and middle management with regard to critical task decisions.

Archetype IV firms seem to have no distinctive characteristics. Thus, we refer to them as *Middle Ground* firms. While all behavioral norms receive some attention, in these firms no single behavioral norm holds more importance than any other. Likewise, structure elements of formalization, centralization, and specialization all occupy a moderate or middle ground. Unlike customer or competitor-centric firms, Middle Ground firms seem to take a balanced approach to behavioral issues.

7. Performance within competitive strategy types

While the cluster analysis revealed the existence of four distinctly different organizational archetypes, this analytical technique does not demonstrate whether a match between strategy type and organizational archetype leads to superior performance. Previous research (Olson & Slater, 2002) has shown that this goal can be achieved through different strategies, implying that strategists have flexibility when creating organizations to achieve high performance. Superior performance for the chosen strategy is contingent on how well policy decisions and practices (e.g., structure and behavior) are aligned with the requirements of a specific strategy. As Table 2 indicates, an appropriate match of structure and behavior to strategy leads to superior performance.

Prospector firms that achieved the highest overall performance were Customer-Centric Innovators. These firms are staffed with a high proportion of specialists who enjoy considerable discretionary authority and a workplace unencumbered by many rules and regulations. Prospector firms thrive on innovation, much of which is customer-driven. Employees in these firms place a heavy emphasis on understanding customer needs and on innovation. While a focus on competitors and internal operations and costs is of secondary concern, these firms do not completely ignore these issues.

Table 1 Organizational archetypes

	Formalization	Centralization	Specialization	Customer orientation	Competitor orientation	Innovation orientation	Internal/cost orientation
Management dominant	High	High	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Customer-centric innovators	Low	Low	High	High	Moderate	High	Moderate
Competitor-centric cost controllers	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Middle ground	Low	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

Table 2 The performance implications of matching organizational archetype to strategy type

	Management dominant	Customer-centric innovators	Competitor-centric cost controllers	Middle ground
Prospectors	Low	High	Low	Low
Analyzers	Low	High	High	Low
Low-cost defenders	Low	Low	High	Low
Differentiated defenders	Low	High	High	Low

The most successful Analyzersare Competitor-Centric Cost Controllers and Customer-Centric Innovators. As fast followers, Analyzers copy only those products or services that have already demonstrated success in the market place. Determining which of their competitors' products and/or services to either improve upon or offer at lower prices requires that these firms maintain a constant focus on leading-edge competitors and a firm understanding of what actual costs will be incurred in development, production, promotion, and distribution. In order to react quickly to emerging opportunities, Analyzers require flexible structures. A sizeable number of Analyzers also succeed by adopting the characteristics of Customer-Centric Innovators. This distinction suggests that Analyzers falling into this cluster are firms that seek to compete by improving upon the initial offerings of Prospectors rather than just cutting costs.

The most successful Low Cost Defender firms are Competitor-Centric Cost Controllers. Low Cost Defenders require efficient operations to keep overall costs low and retain customers whose primary buying criterion is price. Understanding market-pricing standards requires that managers in these firms continuously evaluate market conditions. These firms utilize a moderate number of specialists, create moderately formal environments, and empower mid-level managers and employees to make decisions.

As with Analyzers, the highest performing Differentiated Defender firms are Customer-Centric Innovators and Competitor-Centric Cost Controllers. Differentiated Defender firms prosper by offering higher quality products and/or services. These firms typically charge premium prices to cover the costs associated with providing these offerings. Consequently, it is imperative that these firms maintain a close relationship with key customers in order to quickly spot changing trends or customer demands. Thus, it is no surprise that high performing Differentiated Defenders focus on customers by retaining a high level of specialists to service them. However, it is somewhat surprising that Differentiated Defenders that adopted the Competitor-Centric Cost Control focus performed almost as well.

8. Conclusions

The results of this study reveal several important lessons. First, there is substantial evidence that how a firm is structured and which behaviors are emphasized strongly influences performance. For Prospectors, a Customer-Centric Innovator design is clearly preferable. For Low Cost Defenders, a Competitor Centric Cost Controller design is just as preferable. For Analyzers and Differentiated Defenders, the findings are not as evident. It appears that either a Competitor-Centric Cost Controller or a Customer-Centric Innovator design will help to generate high performance for these firms. Managers should closely examine the finer points of either of these strategies and tailor their organizations accordingly. And, we believe that it is critical to choose one path and carefully follow it, rather than attempting to merge the two and end up being lost in the Middle Ground.

Perhaps the most startling finding from this study is the observation that almost 40% of the participating firms were either Management Dominant or Middle Ground organizations. Management Dominant firms rely upon a few strong managers at the top of the company to direct the business. The data demonstrates that there are no strong behavioral norms in these firms other than perhaps obedience. However, given the low number of specialists these firms hire, we suspect employee turnover is high. In contrast, it appears that Middle Ground firms attempt to balance everything out. The end result is that these firms have no distinctive behavioral norms and, despite an informal environment, the generalist workers that constitute the majority of employees in these firms appear to have little direction or freedom to take initiative.

Well over fifty percent of the businesses that we studied have adopted structures and encouraged behaviors that reinforce their market strategies. Whether the process by which this alignment occurred was due to management's conscious analysis or is simply the result of an evolutionary process is unclear. But what is clear is that these firms are in a stronger position than many of their competitors. The good news for low performing businesses is that they have the opportunity to improve their performance by restructuring and by establishing appropriate behavioral norms for their employees. Our findings are clear: Firms that match structure and behavior to strategy fare better than those that do not.

9. Sidebar: how the study was conducted

To test our model, we developed a questionnaire that relied on existing, previously validated scales of formalization, centralization, specialization, customer orientation, competitor orientation, innovation orientation, and cost/internal orientation. We utilized overall firm performance (i.e., level to which a firm met expectations, exceeded major competitors, and satisfied top management) as our dependent variable because of its relevance regardless of the nature of the contextual influences. Overall perceived performance shouldn't encompass only the organization's performance on financial and nonfinancial goals that may be important to the organization. This measure demonstrated high reliability. Market strategy definitions were adopted from previously published studies (Slater & Olson, 2000, 2001). The resulting survey was pre-tested and a small number of modifications to scale items were made in order to clarify the intent of specific questions.

As a sampling frame, we used a commercial mailing list of 1200 senior marketing managers operating in 24 two-digit SIC codes primarily from the 20 and 30 series. Senior marketing managers were selected as key informants because they should be knowledgeable about marketing organization structure, strategic behavior, business strategy, and overall firm performance. Each executive was mailed a copy of the questionnaire, followed by a duplicate copy two weeks later. We received back 228 responses—one per firm—which, after accounting for undeliverables, constituted a 20% response rate. Two-thirds of the respondents who reported their positions indicated they held positions of director or vice president of marketing within their respective firms.

The psychometric properties of the responses were subsequently assessed in one confirmatory factor analysis using LISREL 8.52 and the initial 40-item measurement model was reduced to 35 questions. A cluster analysis using the three structural variables (i.e., formalization, centralization, specialization) and the four behavioral variables (i.e., customer, competitor, innovation, internal/cost orientations) produced four organizational archetypes. The results revealed distinct combinations within each cluster, each with a separate combination of weightings on the seven variables. We subsequently ran a series of ANOVAs (analyses of variance) to determine the extent to which overall firm performance varied between organizational archetypes among firms adopting a specific market strategy.

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