Appraisal of Innovation Leaders

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Many innovative companies pass through a number of transformation stages. The transformation is considered a chain of activities that begins with information that leads to knowledge, then into learning before it can finally be used for innovation.

The paper show that transformational leadership is shown to be a key factor for moving the organisation from being information based into knowledge based then into learning organisation and into innovative company. The six important characteristics of the transformational leaders for the transformation are shown to be: courage to switch off or terminate projects, rewarding performing staff, ability to appropriately time release of products to the market, ability to release products to the market within budget and ability to inspire and be a role model for other staff.

The paper also shows that there are other fourteen transformational leadership attributes that may be considered less critical than the above mentioned six characteristics. Those non-critical characteristics include: degree of passion for the job, attracting talent, ability to build teams, coaching subordinates, communicating at all levels, driving projects successfully, enabling project supporting environments, advising others managers, advocating for improvement, encouraging self-goal setting, ability of self-rehearsal, ability of self-reinforcement, ability of self-observation and ability of self-expectation.

Keywords: Transformational leadership, Innovation, Knowledge management, Learning organization

Introduction:

Undoubtedly, the rise of globalisation in 1980s has led to many changes in business environments, and in particular, to the concept of competitive advantages. The significance of competitive advantages to business success has been highlighted by the use of the well-recognised Porter five forces model of 1980 (Porter, 1980). The Porter model has been shown by number of authors in recent times, to be inadequate for business competitiveness in the 21st century (Soliman, 2011a and 2011b). For example the Porter model does not propose innovation and creativity as pre-requisites for winning modern competition. The Porter model also does not recognise the concept of *learning organisation* as a source of competitive advantage.

It should be noted that the 1990's Senge's model (Senge, 1990) specified five disciplines of learning organisation as a central theme of any learning organisation model. The Senge's model was in fact a response to the many concerns aired by a

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number of authors such as Stata (1989) who suggested that “the rate at which individuals and organisations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage”.

Further response to the rapid changes to business environments was made by Nonaka (1991) who introduced models of knowledge management which added further dimensions to the competitive advantage debate and prompted further studies on organisational competitive advantages. In this regards, a number of authors have pointed out to the significance of the role of knowledge management and learning techniques as important key competitive advantage tools that have not been fully researched (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Zack, 1999; Nonaka et al, 2000; Soliman and Spooner, 2000; Soliman and Youssef, 2003; Soliman, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

Further work by López et. al. (2006) and Senge (1990) suggest that some organisational failures may be due to lack of appropriate management of organisational learning which in turn leads to unsatisfactory management of organisational knowledge. These concerns have led to the formulation of the view that traditional competitive advantages may be overridden by a new set of key competitive advantages such knowledge management, learning and creativity (Christensen, 2007 and Maqsood, et. al., 2007). Furthermore, Maqsood, et. al. (2007) pointed out that satisfactory management of knowledge and learning activities not only a prerequisite for innovations but also the link between knowledge, learning and innovation and that knowledge management should be considered a key organisational activities. This view was supported by Garvin et. al. (2008) who noted that one of the main aspects of dynamic and continuously evolving organisations is that the organisation must be truly a learning organisation (Rebelo and Gomes 2008; Kalkan 2008, Mehrez 2010, Soliman 2010, 2011a, 2011b and 2011c).

This means that transforming organisations from the traditional *information* based form, into *knowledge* oriented organisations requires strategies designed to utilize knowledge that foster learning at later stages. Such strategies need to engage managerial staff in order to facilitate the implementation of the appropriate knowledge management programs. In other words such significant transformation into knowledge based organisation should be carefully executed so that the transformation does not hinder the organisation’s efforts in delivering goods or services in accordance with the organisations strategic plans.

Transformation from information-based organisation to knowledge-based organisation:

The significance of knowledge management and its impact on modern enterprises have been enhanced by Nonaka’s (1991) work on knowledge management. The Nonaka’s work sparked a number of research activities about the modern corporation’s power and its intellectual or intangible capabilities. A significant finding of some of these research activities is highlighted by the introduction of the definition of “*knowledge-based intangibles*” by Quinn (1992) who proposed that the value of most products and services may be dependent on such as technical know-how, product design, marketing presentation, understanding customers, personal creativity and innovation. Quinn findings have led many enterprises to consider collective

knowledge as a key competitive tool from which innovation can emerge. Further work by Quinn et al (1996) resulted in identifying knowledge management as key value adding activities. Their statement "*Three quarters of an organisation's added value is attributed to the possession of specific knowledge*" points to the significant role of knowledge in the management of modern enterprises.

Furthermore, Clark and Soliman (1997) identified that the commercial emergence of knowledge-based information technology represents a tremendous opportunity to enhance an organisation's effectiveness. However, the findings of Clark and Soliman (1997) elaborate that the introduction of knowledge-based systems is a difficult task, which requires team effort and support throughout the enterprise including the transformational leader.

The full benefits from knowledge management programs have been identified by Although Eginton (1998) and Sbarcea (1998) as "*benefits that are obtainable only when the knowledge management strategies are appropriately aligned with the organisation strategies*". The work by Eginton and Sbarcea did not recognise that alignment of knowledge management programs with organisational strategy is a necessary pre-requisite before the full benefits from knowledge management programs can be realised. Furthermore, the work by Soliman et al (1999) described the knowledge management chain "*as a number of decisions that need to be made at each stage in the chain requiring creation, capturing, accessing and using knowledge. In other words, each time a complex decision is made by the transformational leader, input from various teams and groups across the enterprise would be required warranting the use of knowledge-based systems*". Further work by Hansen et al. (1999) pointed to the need for the enterprise to identify the most suitable knowledge management program that would best assist the organisation in achieving its strategic objectives.

Further attention to the link between knowledge and strategy was due to the work of Soliman and Spooner (2000) who argued that ensuring the alignment between knowledge and strategy is a complex and difficult task that the knowledge leader must address. Soliman and Spooner also concluded that one of the necessary success factors for a knowledge management program is the interaction between a knowledge management effort and the organisational culture. Soliman and Spooner (2000) also provided a list of seven attributes/characteristics of a leader in charge of transforming an organisation from information based into a knowledge driven one. These attributes include: knowledge focused, knowledge visible, knowledge defined, knowledge seeker, knowledge culture, knowledge assessor and knowledge exemplified.

However, in reality the organisation needs to consider whether to create a separate leadership role to develop and drive the process planning implementation of a knowledge management program. This is usually a difficult task for organisations given that the challenge is to find a leader with characteristics such as interpersonal skills, visionary leadership, business acumen, strategic thinking skills, ability to withstand ambiguity and uncertainty and teamwork, Soliman and Spooner (2000). Furthermore, Soliman and Spooner (2000) have added "*in addition to the above roles, the leader should also drive the knowledge management process by avoiding recruitment of staff with poor managerial skills, inappropriate management*

philosophy, lack of control and low motivation". Further work by Soliman and Youssef (2003) pointed to knowledge as "*a facilitator of creative practices that helps a company compete*".

From the above discussion, it is clear that knowledge has become the new strategic imperative of organisations, and leaders in charge of knowledge management programs must ensure that the opportunities which are likely to result from transforming an organisation from information based into a knowledge driven organisation, actually take place.

Therefore, since the transfer into knowledge based is regarded as critical to the competitive position of the organisation, then the organisation must act to facilitate the transfer to knowledge based with the engagement of an appropriate transformational leader. This is the view proposed by Soliman (2010, 2011a) who argued that one of the aims of leadership is to facilitate the transfer into knowledge based and then into learning organisation.

Transformation from knowledge based into learning organisation:

Often, the concepts of organisational learning and learning organisation have been used interchangeably to refer to learning in organisations (Ortenblad 2001; Rebelo and Gomes 2008; Sun and Scott 2003). However, in terms of their similarities, such as the similarity between the double loop learning of organisational learning and the discipline of mental model in a learning organisation, it should be noted that the two concepts are quite different (Al-Qawabah, 2012). However, a clear distinction between the two concepts was provided by Sun and Scott (2003). According to Al-Qawabah (2012) it is possible to view the distinction as similar to the distinction between concepts such as: descriptive versus prescriptive; process versus new form of organisation; naturally occurring versus not naturally occurring; obtainable and necessary versus ideal State and domain of academics versus domain of practitioners:

Cavaleri et. al. (2005) suggested that knowledge management initiatives must facilitate the transformation into learning organisation. Cavaleri et. al. (2005) further added that such transformation should improve capabilities and would ultimately improve the organisation's competitive advantages.

It should be noted that organisational learning is a process that involves interactions among individuals and decision makers. Learning has been a very well-known and heavily studied subject. However, some authors have begun to study learning at the individual level of analysis in the organisational context. Garvin (1993) defined a learning organisation as "*an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights*". Garvin's work shows that a learning organisation can be measured and manifested through series of activities. In more recent times, Ortenbald (2004) proposes an integrated model for a learning organisation that includes organisational learning, learning on-the job, a climate of learning and an organisational structure that is flexible and organic. Chang and Lee (2007) further explained that a learning organisation covers individual, grouping and organisational learning with the simultaneous proceeding effort for organisational and individual learning.

According to Senge (1990) and Rebelo and Gomes (2008), senior management must realise that the way in which an organisation learns is a key parameter to its effectiveness and potential to develop and grow. Rebelo and Gomes (2008) further added that "*the popularity of learning organisations and organisational learning are due to the fact that learning is an important source of competitive advantages*". It should be noted that Kumar and Idris (2006) found that team learning, embedded system and provision of leadership possess strong relationship with knowledge performance.

The origin of the concept of learning can be traced back to March and Olsen (1975) who were the first to link the efforts of the individual to organisational learning. On the other hand, Argyris and Schön (1978) were the first to propose models that facilitate organisational learning. Indeed the work of Argyris and Schön (1978) in identifying single-loop and double-loop learning has presented basis for further work that has led to the evolution of the concept of *Learning Organisation* proposed by Senge (1990). In this regards Kim (1993), proposed a single comprehensive model based on the integration of the Argyris and Schön and March and Olsen models which further enhances the application of the Senge (1990) model.

The concept of organisational learning was further enhanced by the work of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) who proposed a link between knowledge and learning. Further attention to the concept was made by Flood (1999) who discussed a link between the Senge model and the origins of the theory traced back to Argyris and Schön (1978). It should be noted that Amabile (1988) pointed out that "*in order to build environments that support innovation the organisation must clearly demonstrate that creativity and innovation are valued by focusing communication within the organisation on the excitement and potential of the ideas being generated and the work being accomplished*". In more recent time Bontis et. al. (2002) empirically tested a model of organisational learning that is based on knowledge flow across the organisation. In other words, organisational qualities such as leadership, organisational motivation, resources, and innovation management practices may greatly influence individuals an organisation's overall innovation.

Although most managers now recognize the relationship between efficiency and profitability and that customers' demand is indeed dynamic and require continuous learning and complex analysis based on assumptions, uncertainty and trial and error. This thinking implies that standard learning tools may fall short of achieving desired organisational outcomes. For example, staff learning and competencies may ultimately lead to organisational innovation needed for sustainable performance. It is therefore, the role of the transformational leader is to ensure that learning and creativity would constitute essential foundation for innovation.

Transformation from learning organisation into innovative organisation:

Innovation may be defined as the act of propagating an idea and transforming it into a new product, service, or business model that can be useful to customers. There are two important segments of innovation; namely, product innovation and process innovation. It should be noted that innovation can also be pursued radically (i.e. sudden change of modus operandi) and incrementally (i.e. incremental with step-by-

step improvement). It should be noted that Woodman et. al. (1993) proposed that "*organisational characteristics have an impact on the creative process and situation, resulting in the creative products or processes*". This implies that, managing innovation could involve developing strategies, and processes that facilitate the transformation of ideas to final product or service.

Amabile (1996) proposed that "*innovation requires an ongoing investment in leadership skills needed to support innovation*" Amabile (1996) also suggested that to enhance and maintain creativity "*the organisation need to establish stimulating, supportive, and positively challenging environments*". This view was further enhanced by Egbu et. al. (2001) who have considered innovation as the new pre-requisite for competitive advantage.

In more recent times, Bel (2010) has identified innovation leadership as the most important driver of innovation. Bel stated "*without great innovation leaders, there is no innovation*" and has further added "*A good innovation leader is characterized by the ability to excel on the apparently conflicting skills of creativity and discipline*". Innovation leaders could be characterized by strong ability to recognize opportunities and to develop them, and by a set of attributes, skills and abilities, which makes them more suitable than others. Some of the leader attributes are: Inspiring, Driving, Enabling, and Advising. Other innovation leaders may exert the following attributes: Advocating, Rewarding, Managing linkages and Supporting.

Further attributes of leaders were identified by Soliman (2011a) as: communicates with vision, energizing, accelerating innovation processes to innovate, committing employees to innovation and enabling employees to be innovative. These characteristics correspond to what is known as charismatic and strategic leadership.

Given that innovation involves risks (sometimes high risks) and uncertainty, then it follows that the innovation leader should also be one who handles risks successfully. Leaders in innovation do not necessarily avoid risks but carefully approach risks to navigate through and concurrently further learning. In addition to those attributes, innovation leaders share common leadership skills and abilities such as coaching, motivating, and rewarding.

According to Soliman (2011a), the subject of leadership has been widely researched but yet little has been published about the role of leaders in transforming organisations from knowledge based into learning and then into innovative organisations. The primary role of leadership should be to create a climate for innovation.

Attributes of the innovation leader:

In current business environments, three leadership's types are frequently mentioned; namely transformational and transactional leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1990 cited in Chang and Lee 2007; Howell and Avolio, 1993), charismatic-visionary leadership (Yuki and Howell, 1999) and team leadership (Steckle and Fondas, 1995). The purpose of this study is to deal with transformational leadership with respect to transformation from knowledge based into learning and then into innovative organisations. Leaders who assist their organisations to learn can then build a

workforce that possesses integrative competencies necessary for innovation process (Bennet, 2006).

Transformational leadership was originally proposed by Bass (1985). However later authors developed further transformational leadership theories (Burns, 1978; Conger and Kanungo, 1987; House, 1977; Sashkin, 1988; Bass 1990). As such leadership theories have led to research on transformational leadership, which has expanded the range of leadership characteristics being examined, but still ignore transformational leadership with respect to transformation from knowledge based into learning and then into innovative organisation. For instance, Senge (1990) has identified several roles for leaders in a learning organisation and proposed that leadership must have the capability to affect others in a learning organisation. However, the leadership characteristics that create, capture, transfer, and mobilize knowledge before it can be used for innovation have still not been thoroughly researched.

Furthermore, Bass and Avolio (1994) proposed that transformational leadership usually emphasizes long-term and vision-based motivational activities. However little research has been conducted on the potential for a transformational leader to positively impact organisational creativity and its transformation from knowledge based into learning and then into innovation (Soliman, 2011a). A number of authors such Howell and Avolio (1993), Yammarino et. al. (1993), Gardner and Avolio (1998), Jung et. al. (2003) and Soliman (2011a) pointed out that the increase in the popularity of transformational leadership is due to its ability to motivate people, as compared with other leadership styles. This view was confirmed by the work of Bass and Avolio (1994) who characterized transformational leadership as being composed of four unique but interrelated behavioural components: inspirational motivation (articulating an appealing and/or evocative vision), intellectual stimulation (promoting creativity and innovation), idealized influence (charismatic role modelling), and individualized consideration (coaching and mentoring).

In more recent times Soliman (2011a) presented a quantitative approach and developed a questionnaire based on Politis (2001) work to evaluate leadership attributes. The results show that there are at least 22 factors or dimensions of leadership. Soliman (2011a) summarized the innovation dimension as: (1) acceptance of risks; (2) degree of passion for the job; (3) willingness to act proactively; (4) courage to switch off or terminate projects; (5) attracting talent; (6) ability to building teams; (7) coaching subordinates; (8) rewarding performing staff; (9) communicating at all levels; (10) inspiring and role model for other staff; (11) driving projects successfully; (12) enabling project supporting environments; (13) advising others managers; (14) advocating for improvement; (15) encouraging self-goal setting; (16) ability of appropriate timing to release products to the market; (17) ability to release products to the market within budget; (18) ability of self-rehearsal; (19) ability of self-reinforcement; (20) ability of self-observation; (21) ability of self-expectation; and (22) ability of self-criticism.

Soliman (2011a) summarized the results of three groups of managers who were asked to assess degrees of importance of leadership attributes associated with each of the above 22 factors. The result of the Soliman (2011a) analysis is shown in the

following plot (Figure 1). Confirmatory factor analysis using SPSS factor analysis was employed and SPSS "Scree" plot was generated to explore the distinct break between the steep slope of the large factors and the gradual trailing of the rest. The factors that have eigenvalues greater than 1 are considered significant while all other factors (with eigenvalues less than 1) are considered insignificant and should be disregarded in assessing the leadership characteristics of the innovation leaders. Soliman (2011a) presented four critical innovation leadership characteristics that are critical (with eigenvalues greater than 1) to innovation projects. The four critical leadership characteristics are found to be: (1) acceptance of risks; (2) degree of passion for the job; (3) willingness to act proactively; (4) courage to switch off or terminate projects. It is found that acceptance of risks is the most critical followed by degree of passion for the innovation. However, it should be noted that the other 18 innovation leadership characteristics are important to the success of the innovation project.

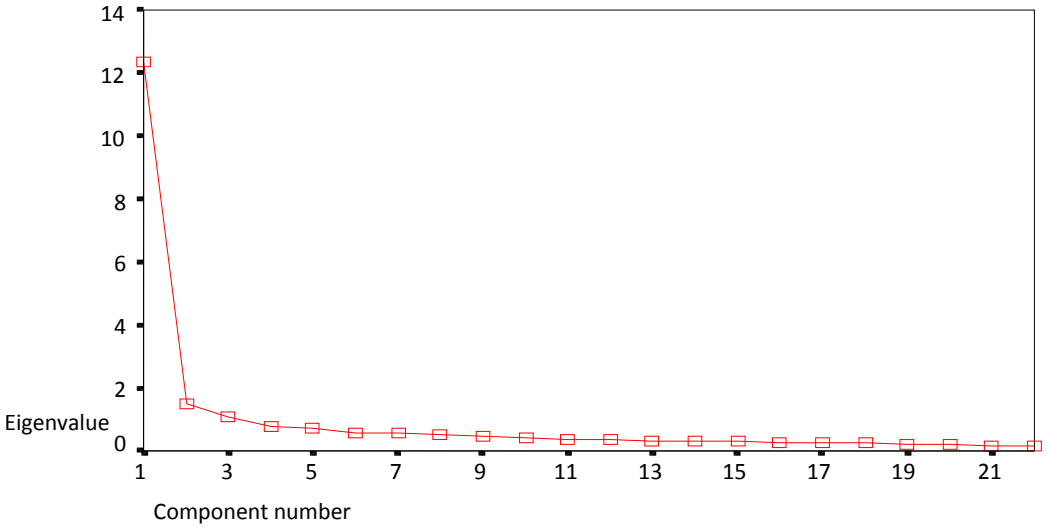

Figure 1: Scree plot of Innovation Leadership Characteristics (after Soliman, 2011a).

From the above Scree diagram, the three most critical factors for the three groups are acceptance of risks, willingness to act proactively and courage to switch off or terminate projects. All other 18 factors with eigenvalues less than 1 are considered less critical less but essential Characteristics.

Conclusions:

From the above discussion, it is possible to describe innovation activities as a chain of activities that begins with information that leads to knowledge, then into learning before it can finally be used for innovation.

The above discussion also proposes that transformational leadership could facilitate moving the organisation from being information based into knowledge based then into learning organisation and into innovative company. Soliman (2011a) has shown that the six important characteristics of the transformational leaders may be: courage to switch off or terminate projects, rewarding performing staff, ability to appropriately time release of products to the market, ability to release products to the market within

budget and ability to inspire and be a role model for other staff. Soliman (2011a) also found that there are other fourteen transformational leadership characteristics that may be considered less critical. Those non-critical characteristics include: degree of passion for the job, attracting talent, ability to build teams, coaching subordinates, communicating at all levels, driving projects successfully, enabling project supporting environments, advising others managers, advocating for improvement, encouraging self-goal setting, ability of self-rehearsal, ability of self-reinforcement, ability of self-observation and ability of self-expectation.

This discussion above demonstrates that shifting from information based into knowledge based then into learning organisation to become an innovative business could require a unique level of transformational leadership. In that regard, the above discussion also demonstrates that organisations need to create, capture, transfer, and mobilize knowledge before it can be used be used for innovation. However it is necessary that organisations acknowledge the challenges facing transformational leadership.

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