

## THE PURSUIT OF IMMORTALITY: BEYOND THE COMPETITIVENESS PARADIGM

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*As the rules of the business game are getting re-written in the post- industrial era, the competitiveness paradigm is approaching its end. In this article, we discuss the death of inter-firm and intra-firm competition as we know it and propose an approach beyond competition, which we call the pursuit of immortality. Our digital age offers immense and unprecedented opportunities to bring forth the latent potential of organisations, by allowing individual employees scope for the expression of their capacity for learning and creativity. It is our thesis that every individual deep down is in search of something everlasting, and wants to leave something behind that endures. To help in this process, we recommend that companies imbibe pre-industrial society value systems that allowed the free expression of what we call the "divinery" instincts in individuals in the form of arts and crafts while maintaining focus and coordination through the use of information technology.*

*Basically, competition that benchmarks against the best already known is for lesser mortals. For the truly creative to emerge, we must rid ourselves of the limiting confines of the " known ". Companies should get out of this rat race and concentrate on setting their own standards rather than frittering away their energies in out- smarting competition. In the ultimate analysis, it is more important to make this world a better place to live in, than to build a better battleground for rivalry and competition.*

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Our obsession with competition is reaching vulgar proportions with even countries getting assessed using a competitiveness index. It has got so deeply ingrained in our system that gaining competitive advantage is seen as the 'be all and end all' mission of individuals, businesses and nations. We are told that competition is the prime mover of progress and that is what is responsible for keeping the prices low and ensuring that customers get better value for money.

All competition is, in the end, predatory, if not cannibalistic. The strong eat up the weak. The nearer to "perfect" the competition is, in a textbook sense, the more this is so. This is the fallacy inherent in the world-wide trend towards adopting free-market economics as the solution to all economic ills. For, while competition is a perennial favorite of starry-eyed economists, the marketers who live through it, hate it and would do anything within their power not to have to compete at all! In this article we examine the changing face of competition and propose an alternate paradigm.

## **The Changing Face of Competition**

Since the industrial revolution era when the theory of perfect competition was formally enunciated, the world has come a long way. Perfect competition assumed innumerable buyers and sellers who could not independently affect the price in a market and therefore resulted in optimizing of benefits for all concerned. In other words, what came to be known as the classical school of economics saw competition as the final arbiter and "enlightened self interest" as an insurance against the exploitation of any member of the economic system by another. Unfortunately the element of enlightenment has since rapidly fallen by the way. Self-interest has predominated to such an extent that during the 19th and early 20th centuries, it resulted in the emergence of "robber baron" style entrepreneurship.

Somewhere along the road to corporate wealth creation, competition has become an end in itself. Yet, to be competitive has two distinct meanings -one is to have a combative, fighting frame of mind as in "she is a very competitive person"; the other is where one has what it takes to stand an external evaluation e.g. by the customer or end user. One says "our prices, delivery schedules and quality have always remained competitive". The interesting difference is one of an attitude of mind, the stance, as it were. The latter sense is one that acknowledges the superiority of the consumer as the final arbiter. This trend started towards the early 60's when consumer movement activists such as Vance Packard (*Hidden Persuaders*, 1957) and Rachel Carson (*The Silent Spring*, 1962) started criticizing the manipulative tricks employed by businesses.

Then came the phase of severe competition from Japan and the Newly Industrialized countries. Hence in the 1980's the emphasis shifted to Competitive Advantage and offering better value to the customer than what the competitors could offer. Mergers, acquisitions and takeovers to gain size advantage also became fashionable. This is evident from the following definitions. According to Kenichi Ohmae(1982), the job of a strategist is to achieve superior performance relative to competition, in the key factors for success of business. Porter (1985) defines strategy as a central vehicle for achieving competitive advantage. He defines competitive strategy as the search for a favorable competitive position in an industry, the fundamental arena in which competition occurs. Competitive strategy aims to establish a profitable and sustainable position against the forces that determine competitive advantage.

In the 90's the trend turned more complex with companies facing unprecedented uncertainties. Global competition, stunning technological breakthroughs, deregulation, shifting consumer tastes and volatile foreign exchange markets have made the life of the planners miserable. Before the ink dries on a long term plan document, the rules of the game change. Hence the shift from matching the capability to opportunities or coping ability (copability -Xavier 1995) in a turbulent environment. Dav (1990) calls this adaptive planning. In the era of globalization.

competition to cooperation and collaboration.

In the 1990s, both corporate strategy and marketing strategy thinkers as well as consultants are rediscovering the need to "reshape the industry". Authors such as Hamel and Prahalad (1995) have since extolled the virtues of having the necessary industry foresight to alter the shape and definition of the industry itself. In other words, changing the rules of the game and therefore playing a different game has become one of the significant ways of carrying on business successfully. Bookshops that considered other booksellers as their competitors must be at a loss to understand the new phenomenon of Amazon.com. Benetton, Levi's and National Bicycle are often quoted as case studies of flexible manufacturing and logistics, changing the very meaning of competing, via "mass customization".

While inter-firm competition as we know it is not prevalent any more, the intra-firm competition has also been severely restricted. Business Process Reengineering (Michael Hammer, 1993) and the TQM techniques have enabled companies to shift the attention from functions to processes thereby eliminating inter-functional conflicts. As the need for coping with environmental turbulence is very high, companies have to become learning organizations (Peter Senge, 1990; Chris Argyris, 1978). In times of drastic change, it is the learners who will inherit the future. Every business, in some sense, must become a knowledge-based business. This is possible only when the hierarchies are broken down and every employee is seen as a thinker in addition to being a doer. Consequently, the command-control model is getting replaced by horizontal and non-hierarchical models.

Ghoshal and Bartlett (1998), suggest a new model of an individualized corporation based on a more liberating set of assumptions about human capability and individual motivation. They suggest that we go beyond the inverted pyramid structure to an integrated network of entrepreneurial activities. The primary task of management lies in releasing the entrepreneurial hostages on the frontline organization and transforming middle and senior level managers into developmental coaches. Ultimately the organization should stretch the individual entrepreneurs to become the best they can be and to create an open, trusting and collaborative environment that facilitates boundary less behavior. When the boundaries between levels and ranks of people are made more permeable, position becomes less relevant than competence.

Though we have moved out of the traditional industry paradigms, the word 'competition' still continues to haunt business management literature. Even while suggesting a new way of visualizing business strategies, Hamel and Prahalad (1995) call it 'Competing for the Future'. It is just the hangover of the second wave models that continues to cloud our thinking. Just as we discarded the paradigms of the agrarian society as we entered the industrial age, we need to discard the competitiveness paradigm as we are becoming an inter-connected society with all-pervasive information networks. In this article we suggest a new approach by looking at the models of pre-industrial days.

## **Back to Basics**

In every walk of life, we see a marked preference for things of the past; be it medicine, agriculture, astrology, architecture (Feng Shui), or arts and crafts (Abrahamson et al -1998). There is also a backlash against the mindless exploitation of nature in the guise of scientific developments, which has landed us in severe ecological problems. Witness the most recent emergence of resistance to genetically modified foods. While our forefathers believed in living in sync with Nature, the industrial revolution taught us how to conquer Nature. We are now paying the increasingly heavy price for considering humanity as overlords of Nature rather than an intrinsic part of it. The industrial age had to discard the knowledge and wisdom of our forefathers, developed over several thousands of years as they did not fit with the new norms. With the advent of the information age, we see the revival of interest in the ancient wisdom for solving modern problems.

Even marketing is marching ahead in the reverse to revive the ancient practices with the use of modern technology. Peppers and Rogers (1993) have the following comments to offer about

customers 150 years ago."

Though there is a widespread belief that increased competition has greatly enhanced the quality of products and services, the industrial age is yet to surpass the ancient arts and crafts. The fact remains that the industrial revolution is yet to deliver muslin type of cloth that was hand-woven by the Bengal weavers right from the ninth century to the nineteenth century. The Ikeas cannot match the decor and finish of the furniture made during the pre-industrial days nor can Cartier surpass the artistic jewelry designs of the past. (A visit to any good art museum like the Boston Museum of Fine Arts or the Metropolitan Museum of Art or the silk weavers of Benares, India will prove these points).

It is evident that the so-called competitive spirit could not have produced the architectural marvels like the Taj Mahal in India or the Egyptian Pyramids. Leonardo da Vinci surely would not have created the Mona Lisa in order to enter into a contest. Neither Galileo nor Euclid worked in a competitive environment to produce their epoch-making discoveries. We can extend the same logic to the great contributors to the arts and literature as well.

The ancient Chola and Pallava Dynasties of India (ninth and tenth centuries, AD) have left behind bronzes acclaimed as the finest achievement amongst the metal sculptures in the world. They embody grace and precision that bring together in one composite whole the artist's imagination, the poet's sensibility and the craftsman's skill. A famous anecdote about a sculptor who worked for a Chola King goes as follows. During one of his routine visits to a new temple site atop a hill, the King found that the work was almost complete and wanted the consecration of the temple to be fixed for the coming month, to coincide with the Queen's birthday. The sculptor politely declined the King's request stating that he still had a lot of work to be done at the back of the temple, facing the hill. The King retorted that no one was going to climb the hill to see the back of the temple, whereupon the sculptor replied that the Gods and angels would. He was building "a temple fit for the Gods", not just for a mortal king.

We are not suggesting a mindless romanticizing of the past. Not everything made in the past was of excellent quality. Nor do we say that there were no comparisons or conflicts. The tragedy of our times is that in embracing the competitive spirit, we seem to have lost the pride in craftsmanship and the pursuit of quality workmanship as an end in itself -the value of a job well done for its own sake. How can we get that back into our corporations?

### **From Excellence to Immortality**

Basically, all those people who have left an indelible mark on the human race, did not do so to prove a point to their competitors. Excellence in a competitive environment points to doing better than the competition and doing more of the same thing. If it has to make a difference to the human race, then it has to be something more than the excellence as defined for a competitive environment, something more fundamental than excelling a rival. The ancients, nonetheless, were people who primarily did not have a mass mentality. They made full use of their individuality and their originality, unpolluted by the world's views. They were driven to create their masterpieces more by a desire to leave behind something beyond Time, i.e. immortal.

Ours has been referred to as "Me/mine" generation. Most people get so very entangled in the bondage of the family and work that they get a feeling of helplessness in terms of understanding the true meaning of their coming to this world. A few people manage to free themselves from the bondage and progress further to making a contribution to the society. It is this fundamental desire to overcome the fear of death and a spiritual journey towards immortality that really brings out the best in the people. In this case you have no competitive benchmarks, but an inner drive to leave an indelible mark on everything that you do.

We call a person a visionary if he is able to think and plan far ahead of his fellowmen and achieve something significant to a wider community over a period of time. This time frame is limited to four or five years for a politician. It extends to 10 or 15 years in the case of business leaders. These are people seeking their rewards in their current birth itself. The people who are working for attaining immortality do not have a limited time frame. They are aiming at the generations to come to appreciate their work. For such people, we propose the term divineries. They have divine qualities and they build eternal beauty into whatever they create.

Who can be a divinery? Anyone can become a divinery provided he is able to free himself from the bondages of this world and enjoy doing anything that he does. It is an accepted fact that the quality of workmanship that we had in gold ornaments or household utensils in the past cannot be found today. The reason is that the artisans of the earlier era considered themselves as creators and not appendages to a manufacturing process. The goldsmith, ironsmith and the carpenter in India are known as viswakarmas, meaning creators of the universe. Extending the same notion, the potters, weavers and the cobblers are also creators. So too are artists and architects. The craftsman seeks rhythm in his life, colour in his composition and harmony in his form in order to protect an object which has a function and at the same time provides visual pleasure.

The mind works very differently when you have to fight competition versus when you are in a creative mood. A visionary does something to get the appreciation of others while a divinery works for fulfillment of something beyond the narrowly defined self. In fact competition, while it may raise the blood pressure and the flow of adrenaline temporarily, can kill creativity. The mind gets so very obsessed with overcoming competition that it fails to bring the sacred dimension to the action. The religious philosopher J. Krishnamurti, (Jayakar, Pupul 1996), has the following comments to offer on competition and creativity. "One is everlastingly comparing oneself with another, with what one is, with what one should be, with someone who is more fortunate. This comparison really kills. Comparison is degrading, it perverts one's outlook. And on comparison one is brought up. All our education is based on it and so is our culture. So there is an everlasting struggle to be something other than what one is. The understanding of what one is uncovers creativity, but comparison breeds competitiveness, ruthlessness, ambition, which we think brings about progress. Progress has only led so far to more ruthless wars and misery than the world has ever known. To bring up children without comparison is true education."

According to Pfeffer (1998), it is a myth to believe that people work for money. The primary motive of work is self-essence and having fun. It is reported that companies like Xerox go out of their way to promote on-the-job relationships by holding social events for employees. In terms of getting the best out of people, behavioural scientists put forward several theories like Theory X, Y & Z. Then the emphasis shifted from motivation to empowerment. Currently the shift is towards the liberation of employees by making them intrapreneurs. Developments in IT have made it possible to work from any-where including their own homes. This is akin to the pre-industrial days when skilled artisans and craftsmen worked for themselves and the work came to their homes.

### **From Competitive Advantage to Complementary Advantage**

When you are engaged in a task that is divine to you, you do not want to destroy anybody. Your motive is not to outsmart competition; but to live in harmony with everything -both animate and inanimate -around you. The advantage that you seek is complementary in nature and not competitive as in the current business world. The ancient world operated on complementary advantage where people tried to complement each other's skills to achieve the societal objectives. Similarly competition in the work place amongst colleagues kills the very purpose for which the organization was founded. If people start working against each other, how can the overall objective of the organization be achieved?

roles. It basically refers to working together to create a better future for all the members of the system. Extending the same logic a little further, it makes immense sense for multi nationals and global corporations to develop the bottom of the pyramid to sustain their businesses in the long-run. After all, a good restaurant in a falling neighborhood is likely to die.

The book on Limits to Competition (1996) explores the question of whether free market competition can indeed deliver the full range of needs for sustainable development. Basically we are not against comparisons. However, the need for checking the unmindful exploitation of the weak by the strong in the guise of free market needs to be addressed. What is at stake is the future of our civilization, which is currently witnessing crass materialism and escalating violence. This can be checked only by organizational goodness through complementary advantage.

## Conclusion

We are not saying that competition should be totally eliminated. All that we are saying is that competition is for lesser mortals. It only helps one to benchmark against other people who have achieved a certain level of success and work towards attaining the same level of success or surpassing it marginally. Therefore, for break-through innovations, you need a different set of parameters. If you are already on top of the world in your chosen field, you have no benchmarks to surpass. Then the motivation has to be something more divine in nature leading to attainment of immortality. Sergi Babuka may have used a competitive model to get his first Olympic gold. His subsequent exploits were aimed at only bettering his own record.

We are living in the Information Age that offers immense opportunities for companies to exploit the latent potential of individual employees by allowing them scope for the expression of their individuality. After all, every individual wants to leave something behind and attain immortality. What we recommend is that companies imbibe pre-industrial society value systems that allowed the free expression of divinity instincts in individuals in the form of arts and crafts and at the same time maintain focus and coordination through the use of information technology. Additionally, companies should get out of the rat race and concentrate on setting their own standards rather than frittering away their energies in outsmarting competition. In the ultimate analysis, we need to make this world a better place to live in and not just a battleground for competition.

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