

Aligning the IT Human Resource with Business Vision: The Leadership Initiative at 3M – Robert Roepke, Ritu Agarwal, Thomas Ferratt, 2000

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Summary of Paper

Leveraging IT partnerships has become a new way to maintain a competitive advantage. Business leaders are now looking at Information Technology (IT) as a business partner. “Insightful IT leaders recognize that the greatest impediments to success are often related to people rather than to information technology, and systems [1].” This recent change still poses a challenge both in leveraging IT as a strategic partner and in transforming the role of IT itself.

Ropeke, Agarwal and Ferratt [2] address this transformation in reference to 3M corporation. The emphasis at 3M was on the implementation of the leadership initiative. This approach allowed 3M to develop the competencies and modify the roles of their IT professionals. An additional benefit was employee retention that prevented the need for recruitment. The conceptual models they employed support guiding the leadership initiative and the implementation details. The challenges and lessons learned are also discussed.

With the onset of the 21st century, IT organizations’ keys to success include the ability to be adaptive, responsive, and aligned with business needs. These changes have implications on the role of IT personnel. Process changes that are needed include: assuming an entrepreneurial role; supporting process innovation; seeking a more proactive role; and adapting to relationship changes such as outsourcing, vendors and consultants. Transforming IT to become a strategic partner entails developing business-aligned leadership skills. Three related objectives to this transformation include reengineering the relationship between IT managers and workers; empowering the IT workforce to contribute to the strategic partner role; and encouraging IT professionals to stay for an extended tenure.

3M’s corporate culture is founded on William L. McKnight’s basic rule of management laid out in 1948 that states ‘as our business grows, it becomes increasingly necessary to delegate responsibility and to encourage men and women to exercise their initiative. This requires considerable tolerance. Those men and women, to whom we delegate authority and responsibility, if they are good people, are going to want to do their jobs in their own way. [3].’ Today 3M focuses on competitive advantages and large growth potential by building on five strengths: marketing leadership; technical innovation; customer focus; global reach; and employee initiative.

To meet 3M’s objectives, the emphasis was placed on a transitional leadership. Three programs are associated with transformational leadership as follows: creating a vision; mobilizing and encouraging commitment to the vision; and institutionalizing the change. The shift toward a new leadership approach is facilitated by four managerial models: the conceptual model; the personal leadership model; the positional leadership model; and the shared leadership architecture.

The transition model is introduced as a conceptual model that focuses on changing the relationship of older style management-worker relations to new style management by encouraging partnerships and joint relationships [4]. Key transitions include: fostering a collaborative philosophy in lieu of command-and-control management philosophy; placing emphasis on the people in lieu of the job environment; and encouraging participation in lieu of compliance. Implementation of this model alters leadership behaviors. Bowen and Lawler (1992)

[5] suggest empowerment and address the four essential ingredients impacting performance while Walton (1985) [6] suggests a transitional strategy that moves from control to commitment.

The benefit of the transition model is to aid with the behavioral changes of IT professionals. The Personal Leadership model includes eight skills to successfully transform IT [7]. Some of the goals include: getting people to take responsibility; accepting change in the workplace; and learning to continually adapt. Having a Personal Leadership Curriculum helps manage the evolution of the goals set forth and allows for ongoing changes and adjustments.

Complementary to the Personal Leadership Model is the Positional Leadership Initiative. The Positional Leadership Initiative targets IT management. Essential elements include: delivering value added to the marketplace; developing a shared vision within your work group; and encouraging alignment within the work group itself.

Future leadership initiatives include a shared leadership architecture that includes: positional leadership based on organization; project and knowledge, coupled with group dynamics; and personal leadership based on personal effectiveness and clear management. These two forces should serve as a guide to building stronger business relationships. The importance of these initiatives is based on the human element and recognizing how critical people are to an organization.

Research Questions Addressed by Paper

The changing roles of IT professionals and shift of global markets have caused corporations to modify their business vision. Roepke, Agarwal, and Ferrat [8] address the key challenges of IT leaders through a leadership initiative implementation at 3M Corporation in efforts to transform IT into a strategic business partner. While unraveling the IT human resource vision, details to guiding the transformation are presented along with challenges encountered and lessons learned [9]. The article provides in valuable insights as the experiences encountered are described in relation to the models and initiatives used. These experiences provide foundations for future developments and enhancements.

Contribution of the Paper

3M's IT leadership initiative identifies leadership capabilities for IT professionals. This challenge is extremely beneficial but requires a significant investment in time. The elements identified include: a transition model, a personal leadership model, a model for nominal leadership and a shared leadership architecture [10].

Furthermore, taking a leadership initiative helps IT align with a business vision and transforms IT into a strategic partnership role. This not only provides useful insight on IT professionals and human capital but also demonstrates the value added to the corporate structure. The emphasis on personal development over technical skills yields a higher regard for job satisfaction which lowers turnover and enhances quality of work output. By default, this approach met its objective of a strategic partnership.

Integration of Course Concepts

M. Lynne Markus [11] raises the awareness of organizational change in her article “Power, Politics and MIS Implementation”. Markus discusses the basic theories of resistance with respect to information systems. While this article was written in 1983, one of the theories discussed is the interaction theory, which focuses on organizational tasks and work-related communication and the coordination of tasks. New information systems often call for changes in roles and responsibilities, yet are often a vehicle for creating organizational change.

Sambamurthy, Bharadwaj, and Grover [12] recognize that agility is essential in today’s competitive business environment. The purpose of “Shaping agility through digital options: reconceptualizing the role of information technology in contemporary firms” is to broaden the understanding about the strategic role of IT and the influence it has on the overall firm. “Overall, these conceptual frameworks stimulate thinking about the role of IT as a platform for agility. Firms are integrating IT with key processes, knowledge, and relationships to nurture innovation in customer relationships, manufacturing, procurement, supply chains, and other key activities (Agarwal and Sambamurthy 2002; Barua and Mukhopadhyay 2000) [13].”

Kayworth and Leidner [14] address working relationships and business vision with respect to virtual teams and the global changes of corporations. While virtual teams lend themselves to modified business processes and call for alternate technologies, IT management still plays an active role in application development. The emphasis of effective leaders is from a mentoring perspective. “At the same time, effective leaders are also able to assert their authority without being perceived as overbearing or inflexible [15].” Effective leaders are also successful at communicating and providing direction to their peers and in expressing responsibilities among the virtual team members. They are better equipped to deal with behavioral complexities.

Zwass encompasses concepts from the above mentioned authors in Chapter Eight “Support of Individual Group Knowledge Work [16].” Beginning with knowledge work, Zwass discusses the increased need to depend on information systems as professional support systems (PSS). Changes in technology also call for more complex and sophisticated support systems with components such as modeling capability, multimedia representation, connectivity and cooperative capability, group memory and access to external information and knowledge bases [17]. Cooperative capability which entails task-oriented teams brings together working relations like those mentioned by Kayworth and Leidner. Zwass also builds on concepts similar to those presented by Markus with respect to communication. Technological changes have affected the structure of corporate communication with the increased use of electronic mail and videoconferencing replacing face-to-face meetings [18].

Critique/Analysis of the Paper

IT partnering is an essential part of maintaining a competitive advantage in today's global market. Roepke, Argawal and Ferratt demonstrate solutions to aligning the IT human resource with business vision throughout their study at 3M Corporation. The leadership initiative taken was insightful and on ITs role to become a strategic business partner. The challenges faced and successes realized made the study at 3M easy to visualize. The emphasis on human behavior to guide the organization into the 21st century was practical and supported the author's purpose.

While the article was designed to be more practical than theoretical, the dept of the theory was difficult to follow at times. The introduction of multiple theories and the approach used to delve into the theories was at times confusing. The structure and interrelationship between the theories themselves was often confusing. The practical application of the theories with respect to 3M was however easy to understand. The supporting theories and explanations did support the leadership initiative and the figures provided were beneficial.

Lessons Learned

Roepke, Agarwal and Ferratt bring our attention to a much needed change in IT. The role of IT and the potential as a strategic partner places emphasis on the importance of human capital. With the increase of downsizing, leveraging human capital is one way to maximize IT's role. This transformation serves as reinforcement that options are available to secure IT personnel and reduce ongoing turnover.

The focus on the Leadership Initiative serves as a guide and provides a starting point for this transformation. "The keys to success for the 21st century information technology organization might well lie in its ability to be adaptive, responsive, and aligned to business needs (Ross et al . 1996) [19]." The objective is the development of business-aligned, entrepreneurial leadership skills, competencies, and behaviors among the entire IT staff.

References

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