

Holistic Approach to Business: A New Paradigm for Prosperity

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The current literature is full of models, theories and ideas about holistic approaches. In a general sense holism refers to any approach that considers the whole more important than its elemental parts. Holism is well established as a concept in science, sociology, medicine, religion, psychology, and philosophy. However, the concept of holism in economics or business has only recently emerged.

Royer (1997) suggests that holism is an approach to conducting business that requires the organization to know its purpose, understand its purpose, and act on its purpose. In a study of holism in the work environment, Molinaro (1997) suggests that the western world view which focuses on materialism, technology, and power is causing many of the global problems the world is experiencing, and he states, "If we are to resolve our global problems we must redefine the role of work, so that it is more humane, spiritual, and ecological."

Willis Harman, one of the most prolific holistic business philosophers of the twentieth century, envisioned holism as it relates to the business community and wrote many books about holism and economics. Harman was cited by the World Business Academy in his commentary to clarify the role of business:

Business has become, in this last half century, the most powerful institution on the planet. The dominant institution in any society needs to take responsibility for the whole. Business has not had such a tradition and this new role is not yet well understood or accepted....Therefore, business has to adopt a tradition it has never had throughout the entire history of capitalism: to share responsibility for the whole. Every decision that is made, every action that is taken, must be viewed in the light of that kind of responsibility (Harman, 2002).

Other prominent business advisors echo this call to action toward a new world view of business. The mechanistic bureaucratic model of organization is being replaced by a new form of organization that reflects the characteristics of a living being. Essential properties of all living systems are "determined by the 'new science' emerging from contemporary research across the natural sciences.... The animation of an organization entails making systemic changes so as to no longer deny the heart and soul of its members, but instead to release their spirits and let them soar" (Harder, Robertson, & Woodward, 2004).

Advocates of the holistic approach suggest that organizations provide benefits, educational programs and rewards that help care for the total well-being of the employees, to include their mind, body and spirit. The words mind, body and spirit simply symbolize the different aspects of employees' lives that companies are encouraged to take part in caring for--everything from work/life balance and "emotional competence" to the search for meaning in their personal and professional lives (Comeau-Kirschner & Wah, 1999).



Recognizing and caring for the whole person, as well as the organizational system, results in providing the edge businesses are constantly seeking. However this edge is no longer the competitive edge that so much has been written about. Under a new leadership philosophy based on holistic business management, this edge is called the synergistic edge.

Synergy is the 'more' in the phrase "the whole is more than the sum of the parts." Synergy is the powerful force that is produced within the space of interaction and integration when individuals work together, as well as when resources and environmental factors are considered as part of the whole system. Therefore, creating the environment, stimulating the growth, and harvesting the power of this synergy must become a competency of the new business leadership era.

The search for the competitive edge is over, it is time to get down to business and approach the needs of each organization head on by harvesting the power of the synergistic edge. Holistic business management is the framework to create the environments where synergy can thrive. Synergy is desirable because it allows us to get off the treadmill of 'do more with less' because synergy simply creates more for all.

Systems thinking, human performance technology, high performance work teams, collaboration between functional areas, elimination of silos, managing the white space, system-wide quality programs, sustainability through a focus on people, processes, and profits, and nurturing the corporate soul are examples of a variety of initiatives being used in the 21st century. They are making a difference in the organizations where they are being applied but they are currently operating as disjointed efforts lacking synergy. From a global perspective these integrated approaches can be thought of as cups of fresh water in a salty ocean of conventional capitalism.

Bringing the various integrated approaches to effective business management under the umbrella of holistic business management is one way businesses can harvest the synergy of all efforts related to business development. Molinaro (1997) states that we should encourage research efforts to define a general holistic business management model that can be taught through business education in colleges, economic development centers, and to small businesses across the country. Business educators have a special responsibility of facilitating this holistic business approach among students, business owners, and all those interested in economic development. A clear definition can serve as the beginning of clarifying the new role of business in the global marketplace.

Defining a new paradigm for business that honors sustaining the planet through people, processes, and profits is a worthy cause and a formidable challenge for the 21st century economic community. It must be a collaborative effort of all interested parties for ensuring that the role of business and its responsibilities are well understood, measuring and communicating the benefits to gain commitment, and empowering new generations to create a new paradigm for economics. This paradigm shift can be made



by the current generation preparing and laying the foundation for the next generations to take the initiative in creating a new history for the world, where economics not only promotes prosperity, but it also accepts its share of responsibility for planetary life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

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