

ARTICLE REVIEW

Building a Culture of Experimentation

Author: Stefan Thomke

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In the competitive business environment in this digital era, organizations should be abreast of innovation and marketing strategies and must have a strong culture. In order to be successful, a culture of experimentation, among others, is an important factor for the success of business organizations big or small.

The article “Building a culture of Experimentation” written by Professor Stefan Thomke, and published in the Harvard Business Review’s March-April 2020 issue, brings food for thought stating that “building a culture of experimentation takes not only good tools but also a complete change of attitude”. As the author of “Experimentation works: The Surprising Power of Business Experiments”, Professor Stefan Thomke has done significant research on the online experimentation of several organizations. He states the importance of innovation and marketing for firms to be abreast of

their competition and advocates organizations to have a culture of experimentation.

At the beginning of the article, the author grabs the attention of his readers by providing the scenario of booking.com, describing this company’s experiments, and how the top management of this company empowered employees regarding experimentation. He states “All this experimentation has helped to transform the company from a small Dutch start-up to the world’s largest online accommodation platform in less than two decades”; the author effectively persuades the readers to continue reading.

The author highlighted Booking.com in the article although digital giants such as Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft have also been involved in different forms of digitalized experimentation as part of their business. In fact, their improvements, innovations and

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subsequent successes may be attributable to their continuous digital on-line experimentations to improve their services. The author not only captivated readers by using the success story of a particular company, he also gives examples of these digital giants.

The article also brings about other important elements, such as shared behavior, beliefs, and values, rather than tools and technology. The author, Stefan Thomke states that “To successfully innovate, companies must make experimentation an integral part of everyday life”, and goes on to discuss “the creation of an environment where employees’ curiosity is nurtured, data trumps opinion, and anyone (not just those in R&D) can conduct and commission a test, where all experiments are done ethically, and managers embrace a new model of leadership’.

It is interesting to note that the author identifies certain elements related to the culture of experimentation such as curiosity, trumping of opinion by data, democratization, ethics, and leadership. He expresses many ideas on how experimentation works in business, and illuminates the opportunities, and challenges, also reminding readers of the ethical issues regarding experimentation which many people forget.

The author encourages organizations to provide opportunities and to empower employees. He points out that the adaptation of a mindset of

cultivating curiosity enables people to regard failure not as costly mistakes but as opportunities for learning. His assertion that *Data trumps Opinions* invariably implies that the boss [HiPPO (highest-paid persons’s opinion)] is always right concept of human nature can be quelled by data obtained by experimentation. Experimentation results in data and the data may be evidence that refutes or challenges a preconceived time-honored idea that is etched in stone. From this perspective, he highlights the challenges organizations have faced and will continue to face.

As a remedy of these challenges, he brightens his concept of *Democratization of Experimentation*, which points to the matter of inclusiveness and involvement, as well as openness throughout the business. The article also mentions the importance of *Ethical Sensitivity* to avoid uncalled for issues that might arise from experimentation. The author even gives the example of Facebook, who learned a lesson from their experiment in receiving the emotional states of users in 2012 and also recommends ethic training.

The author also suggests embracing a *Different Leadership Model* which calls for challenging the status quo; putting in place experimentation-friendly systems, resources, and organizational designs; being a role model in experimentation initiatives; and recognition of actions conducive to ***Building a Culture of Experimentation***.

This article discusses the innate human nature in the transgression of cultures and our reluctance to go beyond certain norms of accepting established ideas and practices. Experimentations which challenge principles that are perceived to be successful are rare, essentially because of the fear of failure. Besides this, the author provides examples of digitalized experimentations by staff at all levels of organizations regardless of “permission” from senior management. He also suggests that maximizing the quantity of experimentation is important considering the potential failure rate. Running just small numbers of tests, might not, in the long run, yield results that might be conducive.

The article provides insightful information about how experimentation can be done. It is well written and useful not only for the operation of businesses but can also be applied in human resource management, as the author states potentials issues and possible ways to

handle or manage these issues. As the author is an expert on experimental culture, he elaborates very clearly and interestingly on it.

In conclusion, the ‘take-home-lesson’ of this article is to commit to “Tests” whenever possible, regardless of the outcome of experimentation (whether success or failure). Testing should be sustained on a large scale and made into a cultural norm. A culture of experimentation will ultimately help in decision making that leads to positive changes. This article would be best for those in businesses, big or small, that seek innovation, and problem solving via experimentation. As this article focuses more on a change of attitude rather than on the “how to” of experimental design and development, it is suggested that those who do not believe in experimenting are among the ones who would benefit most from reading this article.