Chapter I

Inquiring Organizations: An Organizational Form Perspective

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Abstract

This chapter describes each of Churchman’s inquirers as a process and how each can be perceived as an organizational form. By combining the forms suited to each inquirer, we show how an integrated organizational form founded on the inquirers can support an entire inquiring organization and how this form may be used to facilitate organizational learning and the creation and management of knowledge. We have laid the foundation of organizational form perspective for researchers and believe this foundation will enable researchers to investigate organizational learning, knowledge management, and communication processes within the complexity of inquiring organizations.

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Introduction

In order to manage knowledge and operate successfully in today’s information intensive business environments, various organizational forms have emerged. The form that an organization takes has consequences for communication and dissemination of information and thereby the ability to engage in organizational learning. Some of these forms compress knowledge at the root level of the organization, while others facilitate the search for useful knowledge within the organization. Still other forms are capable of supporting organizational members in their quest to synthesize knowledge from diverse sources. By recognizing the importance of knowledge, organizations shift from industry-based strategy to the resource-based theory of the firm (Burns & Stalker, 1961). This strategy depicts a firm as being solely responsible for its own deeds and, therefore, performance. When a firm reconfirms that knowledge management and core competencies are at the heart of organizational performance, they also recognize the need to further develop core competencies and to create and manage knowledge. Organizations striving to move toward a learning orientation but maintain flexibility in the face of complexity may do well to consider the practices of inquiring organizations.

Combining contingency theory, the work of Lawrence and Lorsch (1967), and the definition of an inquiring organization, we maintain that:

1. Both inquiry and organizational form are critical to a given context or environment.
2. These contexts or environments differ throughout an organization and its units.
3. They may change abruptly.
4. An organization is most effective when applying different inquiry processes and different organizational forms as appropriate for the task at hand.

We therefore assert an inquiring organization as a complex structure of multiple organizational forms working together for the benefit of the organization. This chapter describes how each inquirer is a process built as an organizational form and how the forms, when integrated, provide support for the entire inquiring organization.

The following sections discuss inquiring organizations, organizational learning, organizational form, and the effect form can have on the learning environment of an organization. The inquiring systems described by Churchman (1971) and later framed and modeled as inquiring organizations and knowledge systems (Courtney, Croasdell & Paradice, 1998; Hall & Paradice, 2003; Hall, Paradice & Courtney, 2003) are described in the context of knowledge creation and its management, which provides the foundation for organizational learning and decision-making. Practices of individual archetypical forms are then integrated to present a holistic view of inquiring organizations incorporating multiple perspectives.