

Mintzberg's Five Configurations of Strategic Management

The famous management expert, Henry Mintzberg, proposed a five configurations approach to strategic management wherein any organization can be broken down into five core elements or parts. The interactions between these parts determine the strategy of the organization.

The five parts according to Mintzberg are:

- The **Operating Core** which consists of those doing the basic work and whose output can be directly linked to the goods and services that the organization makes and sells. According to Mintzberg, this part is common to all organizations since the core work must be done and hence, the operating element has to be put in place.
- The **Strategic Apex**, which is composed of senior management and the senior leadership, which provides the vision, mission, and sense of purpose to the organization. Indeed, it can be said that this part consists of those men and women who shape and control the destinies of the organization.
- The **Middle Level Managers** who are the “sandwich” layer between the apex and the operating core. This element is peopled by those who take orders from above and pass them as work to the operating core and supervise them. In other words, they perform the essential function of acting as a buffer between the senior management and the rank and file employees.
- The fourth element is the **Technostructure** that is composed of planners, analysts, and trainers who perform the intellectual work. This element provides the advice for the other parts and it is to be noted that they do not do any work but function in an advisory capacity.
- The final element is the **Support Staff** who perform supporting roles for the other units and exist as specialized functions that are responsible for the peripheral services in the organization.



The key aspect about these configurations is that it can be used to predict the organizational structure of any organization and used to model the strategy that the organization follows as a result of the interaction between these parts.

For instance, in many service sector companies, the organization structure is very fluid and interchangeable with the result that the middle managers perform crucial tasks and the apex gets directly involved in running the organization.

On the other hand, in many manufacturing companies, it is common to find the Technostructure prevailing as the organizational processes are bureaucratic and have mechanistic characteristics which makes the organization function like a machine. This is the configuration in many public sector and governmental organizations as well.

Finally, the startups have a structure that is composed of the strategic apex and the supporting staff in their initial years of operation as the organization structure is yet to be formalized.

The key implications of Mintzberg's configurations are that it gives us a useful model to describe how the organizational structure affects strategy. As many theoretical models depend on external strategy alone, this model is preferred by those who want to understand how internal dynamics produce strategy

Role of Planning, Plans and Planners in Mintzberg's Five Configurations

Role of Planning, Planners, and Plans

The previous article discussed the five configurations of organizational structure that Mintzberg proposed as part of his theory. This article examines the role of planning, plans, and planners in each of the configuration. **To start with planning is an important element of strategy whenever there is excessive standardization and where the organizational structure is mechanistic and where the technocrats are in positions of importance.**

For instance, the Department of Defense or the Pentagon in the United States relies extensively on standardized work processes and planning to carry out its activities. This is the case with large organizations like GM (General Motors) as well. These organizations rely on “experts” and “planners” who form an “army of techno structural bureaucrats” who plan and who assist the organization in carrying out its activities by formalizing plans for the future.

Some Real World Examples

On the other hand, startups in the software industry hardly plan for the longer term when their focus is on the next year’s results. However, the role of plans in strategy cannot be underestimated because all organizations need longer-term plans for their survival. Indeed, as the example of the planning commission in developing countries like India illustrates, longer-term plans are crucial to ensure that countries and organizations do not lose track of their sense of purpose and mission. The role of planning is crucial in the machine bureaucracies and the professional organizations that need a vision and mission to take them forward. As we have discussed, plans, planning, and planners all contribute to the development of strategy.

Difference between Strategy Formulation and Strategy Implementation

Talking about strategy, there is a crucial difference in the terms strategy formulation and strategy implementation. Mintzberg and his associates researched extensively and found that in most cases, strategy formulation and strategy implementation are entirely different aspects. The difference is that whereas planners plan strategy and formulate it, managers execute strategy and implement it. Hence, there is the aspect of two different elements of the organizational structure that is involved in planning and execution of strategy. Indeed, in many organizations, there exists a creative tension between the planners and the implementers and the way in which the organizations resolve this aspect makes the difference between organizational transformation and organizational failure that is at the heart of Mintzberg’s configuration model of strategy.

Closing Thoughts

Since the contemporary business environment is characterized by rapid pace of change and unpredictable trends that take everyone by surprise, planners and managers have to ensure that their strategies take into account these aspects. For instance, an Army commander follows the strategy to tackle an enemy unit but also must make changes on the fly to ensure that the situation on the field is amenable to their strategy. Different organizations strategize differently and it is the nature of longer term planning combined with the adaptation to shorter-term needs that determines how well an organization performs in the real world