DEVELOPING A SUPERIOR CORPORATE CULTURE FOUNDED ON BUDDHIST WISDOM

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ABSTRACT

While organisations continue to struggle with accelerating change, Buddhists consider change as the only permanent feature of the universe and that every person has the potential to transcend change by reaching higher levels of human consciousness. Buddhist concepts can thus be used to transform the collective consciousness of the entire workforce for developing a superior corporate culture that can sustain organisational success even under unfavourable operating conditions. Buddha’s empowering proclamation that we are the result of all what we have thought can be used to change negative mindsets and create positive employee beliefs that unleash their vast dormant human potential. This enhances their mindfulness and motivation for sensing and responding to both opportunities and risks, while maintaining their daily focus on operational matters. Such an employee-driven corporate culture produces innovative learning organisations that can reinvent themselves to suit rapidly changing operating environments by nurturing an every-day, organisation-wide, business innovation ideology.

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BACKGROUND

As risks and opportunities continue to grow almost exponentially in most business sectors, organisations have to deal with situations they had previously considered improbable or even impossible. Despite abundant literature theorising on what organisations should do to sustain success under such turbulent conditions that are increasingly hard to predict, there is scant reference to how this could be achieved through their workforce (Wentz, 2012).

What is required is new thinking for driving organisational performance, such as developing a superior corporate culture that helps energise, empower and engage employees to sustain success under fast-changing conditions. In the history of human thinking, breakthrough developments took place when two different lines of thought met from different cultural or religious traditions, as observed by Werner Heisenberg, a pioneering quantum physicist (Capra 1983).

Relevance of Buddhist Concepts

While organisational theory is attempting to guide organisations that are struggling to cope with accelerating change, Buddhist philosophy considers change as the only permanent feature of the universe and urges people to pass beyond this state of impermanence by evolving to higher levels of consciousness. Both Buddhism and organisational theory thus relate to change. Sustaining corporate success under ever-changing conditions is parallel to becoming an enlightened person in the ever-changing universe. Buddhist techniques can help the workforce to evolve to higher mental levels, and thereby elevate their collective consciousness that constitute corporate culture to a higher level for sustaining organisational success in an increasingly turbulent world.

But, how relevant is 2,500 year old Buddhist thought to modern day corporate culture? Buddhism provides a consistent and beautiful philosophical framework that accommodates our most advanced theories in the physical and mental realms. None of the recent developments in areas as diverse as quantum physics and organisational theory has invalidated anything the Buddha has said over 2,500 years ago (ibid). Furthermore, Buddha has said that his words should not be accepted as truth unless and until they have been proved by application to daily experiences (Humphreys, 1987). He has also stated that the Buddhas are only teachers that show the way for people striving by themselves to reach higher levels of consciousness (Carter and Palihawadana, 1987).
UNLEASHING EMPLOYEE POTENTIAL

Buddha proclaimed that mind precedes everything else, and that everything we experience throughout life is nothing but the product of our own mind (Goenka, 2000). Underlying his affirmation is the fundamental Buddhist concept that all people possess the ability to unleash the limitless human potential lying mostly dormant within them, and evolve to higher levels of consciousness by developing their minds, attitudes and behaviours.

These concepts provide valuable insights into ‘future-proofing’ organisational success by energising, empowering and engaging employees at all levels (the four E’s of organisational success) to achieve their personal and corporate goals under changing conditions. Such empowered employees adapt to changing conditions by unleashing and channelling the vast mental power lying mostly dormant within them into an organisation-wide, everyday business innovation ideology guided by their mindfulness.

Developing Mindfulness

Buddhism stresses the importance of mindfulness as the key to achieving higher levels of consciousness. In a modern day corporate context, as Schumpeter (2013) states, this means taking time out from stressful daily pressures to relax and meditate, to ‘disconnect to connect’ as mindfulness advocates put it. Many organisations have accepted the value of mindfulness. For example, Google has built a labyrinth for walking meditation, EBay has meditation rooms, Steve Jobs often talked about how Zen Buddhism influenced his product designs, and many business schools are embracing mindfulness. Research shows that in America, an hour of yoga a week reduces employees’ stress levels by a third and cuts health-care costs by an average of $2,000 per year (ibid).

Developing mindfulness as advocated by Buddha is essential for developing the creative insights needed for improving organisational performance. The basic aim of Buddhist meditation is to develop mindfulness by silencing the thinking mind and shifting awareness from the rational to an intuitive mode of consciousness. This is typically achieved by focusing attention on a single item such as the incoming and outgoing breath, engaging in demanding sports such as skiing, or performing movements without the interference of thought as in the meditative Chinese martial art, T’ai Chi Chuan, which combines slow flowing movements with the total alertness of a warrior during combat (Capra, 1983).

Such techniques produce mindfulness with higher levels of mental awareness and alertness. They enable employees and their managers to sense and respond to opportunities and risks quickly, while maintaining their normal daily focus on achieving targets and solving problems. However, their ability to contribute to organisational success depends heavily on the corporate culture within which they work.

CORPORATE CULTURE

To succeed in fast-changing operating environments, every organisation has to become increasingly innovative. This means enhancing the organisation’s ability to improve processes and methods, create new products and services, and even review their business models. Such organisational ability to innovate stems from its corporate culture. This can either cause an organisation to prosper through continuous adaptation and renewal, or to perish by sticking to obsolete concepts and methods that no longer work.

The close link between organizational performance and corporate culture became established over the past decades, as operating conditions became increasingly competitive and turbulent. Corporate culture refers to deep-seated beliefs, values, processes and methods shared by people in an organization. These were formed through past successes and therefore accepted as the preferred ways of doing things and solving problems. It is sustained by continuous human interaction within an organization, based on ‘the way things are done’. The attributes of organisational culture are thus closely related to human mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. Therefore, corporate culture can best be defined as the collective consciousness of the entire workforce, which can be nourished and enhanced through Buddhist concepts.

Redefining Corporate Culture

Instead of considering the workforce as individual and separate entities that operate independently, Buddhist thinking suggests integrating their differences into a collective consciousness that constitutes the corporate culture. This concept recognises the contribution that the collective mindsets of the workforce make towards organisational performance, as operating environments undergo change. This collective consciousness can be moulded to sustain organisational success even during difficult times by applying Buddha’s saying that a disturbed mind produces multiplicity of things, but when the mind is quietened such multiplicity disappears (Ashvaghosh, 1900). This means accepting every challenge favourably as a growth opportunity, which will
eliminate all the anxieties and fears associated with it and clear the mind for planning and implementing the best possible response.

**Elements of a Superior Corporate Culture**

Buddha’s advice to lay people (given in the discourse *Sigalaka Sutta*) provides a comprehensive list of things to avoid for developing oneself. Most of these are equally applicable for building a superior corporate culture, and include: taking life, taking what belongs to others, excessive sensory indulgence; lying, addiction to strong drinks and gambling; keeping bad company such as foes in friendly disguise, habitual idleness, haunting the streets at unfitness times, and not caring for parents, teachers, family, friends, servants and workers. Buddha has also explained how to treat workpeople by arranging work according to their strength, supplying them with food and beverages, looking after them when they are ill; sharing delicacies with them, and letting them off work at the right time (Walshe, 1987).

Despite being treated well, typical employee behaviour during difficult times shows an inner conflict between their conscious efforts demanded by corporate expectations, and their subconscious instincts based on their emotions, beliefs, mindsets, attitudes, etc. This conflict can become aggravated when a workforce comprising of different ethnic, religious and political groups has to work closely together towards a common corporate goal. Such diversities form integral parts of the corporate culture. In contrast to the conventional analytical view that sees such diversities as a problem, the organic Buddhist view sees all such things as interrelated but different aspects or manifestations of the same ultimate reality (Capra, 1983).

**Buddhist Framework for a Superior Corporate Culture**

A superior corporate culture can be described as one that can drive organisational success under favourable as well as unfavourable conditions. A practical framework for building such a superior corporate culture can be found in the four noble states of conduct (*Brahmavihara*) advocated in Buddhism (Narada, 1987):

* Metta: Loving-kindness – is the wish for the good and happiness of all, resulting from identifying oneself with all beings and empathising with their sorrows;  
* Karuna: Compassion – is the desire and commitment to help sorrow-stricken beings eliminate their suffering;  
* Mudita: Appreciative joy – is appreciation of the prosperity and happiness of others through a congratulatory attitude towards them; and  
* Upekkha: Equanimity – is a balanced state of mind, which is acquired through a deep understanding of the eight unceasing cyclic fluctuations in the wheel of life: praise and blame, joy and sorrow, gain and loss, and repute and disrepute.

When all managers and employees in an organisation embrace the above four noble states of conduct, they will collectively focus on corporate success, without disruptive internal conflicts that afflict many organisations. This will provide the fertile breeding ground needed for innovation.

**ORGANISATIONAL INNOVATION**

Innovative organisations survive and prosper by changing faster than their operating environments. In today’s fiercely competitive business world, employees’ creativity and innovation hold the key to corporate success (Gupta 2011). Workforce skills, mindsets, attitudes and behaviours are deployed to recognise and respond to change by reviewing products, services and operating procedures. There is a close link between such organisational behaviour for responding to change, and efforts by Buddhists to let go of their preconceived egos in a changing world. Innovative organisations reinvent themselves by continuously and pre-emptively adapting to significant changes in their operating environments.

**Globalising Innovation**

Organisations with a visionary focus on high performance provide a fertile breeding ground for innovation. As Doz and Wilson (2012) have stated, globalising innovation is becoming one of the best ways for global companies to gain a competitive advantage against increasingly fierce competition in the turbulent commercial and financial markets. Many successful companies are putting the globalisation of innovation at the centre of their strategic agendas.

However, the twentieth-century corporate model for innovation is no longer optimal here, since the range of knowledge needed for global innovation is becoming much wider and more varied. This requires combining knowledge and capabilities from many different places and sources, from within and outside the organisation. Very few companies have succeeded in internationalizing their innovation strategies enough to
draw on the complex, globally dispersed knowledge needed for developing leading-edge products and services (ibid).

Building a global innovation network poses a difficult strategic challenge requiring radical and systemic changes. This needs new structures, processes, tools, capabilities, and most importantly, new mindsets and corporate cultures. It requires the adoption of the four noble states of conduct (Brahmavihara) advocated in Buddhism explained earlier for creating a caring environment for nurturing innovation, without conflicts between people with widely differing mindsets.

**Buddhist Model for Nurturing Innovation**

Instead of clinging to what produced past successes, organisational innovation demands constant review and renewal of all related attributes. Similarly, Buddhists see the futility of clinging to things in an ever-changing world. This attitude cultivates mental qualities that nurture innovation such as non-judgemental awareness, relaxed concentration, and equanimity. The resulting mindfulness, flexibility and focus facilitate the on-going renewal of products, services and business processes to suit changing conditions.

Similarly, to reach the first milestone (Sovan) on the path to enlightenment in a changing world, a Buddhist must eliminate the following three shackles (Walshe, 1987), which are also relevant to the corporate world as shown within brackets:

**Sakkhaya-ditthi**: The illusion of individualism (a preconceived corporate identity); **Vichikiccha**: Doubts relating to enlightenment (doubts about achieving and sustaining success); **Silabbataparamasa**: Adherence to rites and ceremonies (rituals that typically subjugate lower levels of staff).

There is a close parallel between the Buddhist attempt to eradicate the above fetters on the path to perfection, and organisational efforts to sustain success by overcoming rigid thinking, negative beliefs, outmoded practices and reluctance to adapt to change.

**Reluctance to Change**

Considering the exponential growth and complexity of risk/opportunity variables in recent times, managers as well as employees must be willing to develop competencies to deal with situations they had considered improbable or even impossible (Crumpton 2012). By not doing this, Japan’s renowned electronic manufacturers, once the undisputed Titans of consumer electronics, are now struggling to survive against nimble foreign rivals, due to their stagnant business models, outmoded management practices and poor leadership (Fitzpatrick 2012).

Reluctance to change can be associated with Sloth and Torpor (i.e. laziness and lethargy), which is one of the ten fetters that Buddhists have to overcome on their way to enlightenment (Daing, 1966). In the modern world, this can arise from the cognitive dissonance associated with responding to change, which is the mental conflict that people experience when they are presented with evidence that their beliefs or assumptions are wrong. It basically means that you are in two ‘minds’ at the same time, where one ‘mind’ is contradicting the other (Schram, 2013).

Due to the reluctance to change typically found in the bureaucratic corporate world, employees are discouraged from detecting significant trends and integrating new thinking and methods into their day-to-day work. Consequently, they function within their existing mental and operational frameworks, with no innovation, opportunity-seeking or risk-evaluation underlying their daily focus on problem-solving.

The changing role of employees in the turbulent corporate world is summarised by McCann (n.d.) when he said that we no longer live in a world where one may look solely to the Boss for answers or motivation, and that each individual must take responsibility for pursuing knowledge, insight and possibility, and muster motivation and courage to take huge risks in devising and implementing strategy. As Petty (2011) has claimed, the best business leaders fear the complacent after-effects of success, more than the struggles necessitated by failure.

Such insights into sustaining corporate success in a turbulent world must be embedded in developing a superior culture closely geared to evolving organisational needs under changing conditions. We are leaving the old way of thinking with its over-dependence on the logical mind; a new kind of thought is awakening, characterized by a balance between logical thinking and intuitive wisdom needed for achieving success (Österberg 2003).

**WISDOM-SKILLS MATRIX OF SUCCESS**

Both individual and organisational success appear to depend on two decisive factors: knowing what to do next – Wisdom – and knowing how to do it – Skills – (definitions by the American ichthyologist, David Starr Jordan).
The Wisdom-Skills matrix depicted in Figure 1 broadly identifies the two key requirements for achieving individual and organisational success (Jinadasa, 2012), and forms the foundation of a superior corporate culture. Wisdom and Skills are presented here as the key ingredients for creating ‘learning organisations’ with the emphasis on continuous knowledge acquisition and skill development, closely geared to changing conditions in operating environments (Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydel, 1991).

Having the right players determines 60-80% of the success of any organisation (Biehl, 1989). The ‘right players’ have Hard Skills comprising of work-related knowledge, skills, tools and processes, plus Soft Skills comprising of intuitive, emotional, attitudinal, behavioural and interpersonal competencies. Soft Skills involve mindfulness, which is the key requirement for developing wisdom and reaching the higher levels of consciousness described in Buddhism.

**FIGURE 1. THE WISDOM-SKILLS MATRIX OF SUCCESS**

In the Wisdom-Skills matrix depicted in Figure 1, ‘Wisdom’ stems mainly from Soft Skills that guide the deployment of relevant Hard Skills, while ‘Skills’ relate to Hard Skills tempered with insights gained through Soft Skills. The Wisdom-Skills matrix provides a conceptual model for developing a superior corporate culture.

Without Wisdom, a person or organisation could strive to address wrong issues and solve irrelevant problems, or fail to harness superior attributes. For example, Sony did not have the wisdom to link up all of its digital devices to the Internet around 2003, when it had a product line-up that even surpassed that of Apple (Seiichiro, 2014).

Without Skills, a person or organisation will not be able to do what needs to be done. For example, Japan’s electronics firms that are struggling to survive show a huge mismatch between the corporate strategies needed and the abilities of executives to implement them (ibid).

Individuals who are high on Wisdom but low on Skills are typically older employees who need training in relevant Hard Skills (e.g. computer skills). Those who are low on Wisdom but high on Skills are typically technically qualified younger employees, who need training in Soft Skills and more work experience. People who are low on both Wisdom and Skills could either be novices who need extensive training in both Hard and Soft Skills, or employees whose interests lie outside their areas of work.

Champions with well-developed Wisdom and Skills are the drivers of corporate success. Focusing on Champions first is essential, because they are an invaluable organisational asset and also powerful change agents who can lift their colleagues to Champion level through their high levels of wisdom, skills, motivation and engagement (Whitaker, 2012).

**Wisdom in Buddhism**

Buddhist interpretation of wisdom is the intuitive ‘knowing’ that occurs through a right understanding of the laws of life, when the last barriers of analytical thought and the last traces of duality associated with such analytical thinking have been transcended. It is the result of raising one’s consciousness to the level that surpasses all thought, concepts and the duality associated with existence. It makes the mind utterly and limitlessly free to comprehend the true nature of life and things (Humphreys, 1987).
In Buddhism, wisdom is achieved by following the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the highest level of consciousness called enlightenment or Nirvana. This is the noblest course of spiritual training yet presented in such a simple and elegant form. It involves not only the right understanding of basic principles and right motive for treading the path, but also the right morality and right mental training that leads to Nirvana. Every person has the ability to reach Nirvana by following the Noble Eightfold Path (ibid).

Buddha advocated the Middle Path that avoids extremes of indulgence and mortification. This applies to individuals as well as organisations that tend to become complacent and indulgent under prosperous conditions. The Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment also provides a practical Buddhist framework for developing the Wisdom needed for achieving and sustaining organisational success.

**Insights into Wisdom**

Rational knowledge and activities are essential components of corporate success. These consolidate the present, but do not create the future. Intuitive insights are what really sharpen the competitive edge of organisations. Such insights cannot be obtained through analysis or willful concentration. They tend to appear suddenly, not when one is working but when relaxing with an empty mind. During periods of relaxation after concentrated intellectual activity, the intuitive mind seems to take over and produce sudden flashes of clarifying insights into what needs to be done to achieve the desired goal. Such direct intuitive insights are sometimes experienced by all of us during brief moments in our everyday lives (Capra, 1983).

When the rational mind is silenced, the intuitive mode produces an extraordinary awareness where fragmented perceptions of reality fade into an undifferentiated unity. In this heightened state of awareness, one is neither tense nor hurried, but filled with mental energy that can be channelled to reach any desired goal, no matter how daunting (ibid).

Gladwell (2005) explores those moments when we ‘know’ something without knowing why. This phenomenon called ‘blink’ produces snap judgements that can be far more effective than a cautious rational decision. He calls it the power of thinking without thinking – powered by the adaptive unconscious, which is like a giant computer that quickly and quietly processes a lot of data for sizing up complex situations, warning us of danger, and initiating action in a sophisticated and efficient manner.

This ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behaviour based on very narrow slices of experience is called ‘Thin-slicing’. Our unconscious appears to have the ability to sift through any situation, throw out all that is irrelevant, and zero-in on what really matters, to the point that thin-slicing can often deliver a better answer than more deliberate and exhaustive ways of thinking. However, we are inherently suspicious of this kind of rapid cognition, since we are trained to believe that the quality of a decision is directly related to the time and effort that has gone into making. Indeed, despite all its power, our unconsciousness is fallible. Our instinctive reactions can be thrown off, distracted or disabled as a result of having to compete with many other interests, emotions and sentiments (ibid).

Kahneman (2011) explains the two systems that drive the way we think and make choices. One system is fast, intuitive and emotional; the other is slower, more deliberate and more logical. He explores the extraordinary capabilities and also the faults and biases associated with fast thinking, and reveals the pervasive influence of intuitive impressions on our thoughts and behaviour.

Most impressions and thoughts arise in our conscious mind without us knowing how they got there. The mental work that produces intuitions, impressions and decisions happens in silence in our mind. There is nothing magical about intuition since we all perform feats of intuitive expertise many times each day. The confidence we have in our intuitive beliefs and preferences is usually justified, but not always, since we are often confident even when we are wrong. The accurate intuitions of experts are better explained by their prolonged practice than by heuristics (i.e. solving problems by finding practical ways of dealing with them and learning from past experience). We now see that skill and heuristics are alternative sources of intuitive judgements and choices (ibid).

Del Pe (2006) refers to our intuition as our cosmic connection to the universe, through which we receive flashes of inspiration and intuitive insights. We can learn to strengthen our cosmic connection and increase its ‘bandwidth’ to ‘download’ creative ideas and innovative solutions to any complex problem. This is the concept underlying SQ (Spiritual intelligence Quotient), which is the central and most fundamental of our intelligences (Covey 2004), because it guides both IQ (rational Intelligence Quotient) and EQ (Emotional intelligence Quotient) popularised by Goleman (1995).

**Relevance of Wisdom**

Recent media reports suggest that many businesses and industries are finding it difficult to stay competitive. According to Dean and Mihalasky (1974), one of the underlying reasons could be that too much reliance is being
placed on short-term rational thinking. With more data generated through more computers, there has been a tendency to slip into managing by numbers. The emphasis has been on the application of rationality and logic to problem-solving and decision-making, using tools such as operational research and modelling by computers that ‘think’.

According to Prof. Mihalasky, what all this has given us is more incorrect, invalid or unreliable data for making decisions, whose outcomes have been correct about as many times as when they were based on blind guessing. He attributes this to people focusing all their attention on logical and analytical thinking, without investigating the benefits of non-logical, intuitive thinking under rapidly changing conditions whose outcomes are hard to predict (ibid).

His observations are substantiated by the fact that many top companies hit by the 2008 global financial crisis were managed by people with the highest academic and professional qualifications (Hard Skills), backed by sophisticated management information systems. This happened because in the relatively stable years leading up to the 2008 crisis, academic and HRD (human resource development) programs were typically geared to the old paradigm of corporate wealth based on financial assets derived from productivity and profit, which focused on the short-term utilization of employees’ skills without developing their intuitive, attitudinal and behavioural competencies (Maynard and Mehrten, 1996).

In over 20 years of research on wealthy people, Napoleon Hill concluded that intuition was one attribute common to all these successful people (Hill 1960). A later study also found that top CEOs who performed best in intuition tests tended to be most successful in running their businesses (Dean and Mihalasky, 1974), despite the commonly held belief that ‘business is the business of business’ that is unrelated to abstract concepts such as intuition.

For example, former General Motors president Alfred Sloan, commenting on the company’s founder William C. Durant, characterized him as a man who was guided solely by some intuitive flashes of brilliance to make astonishingly correct judgments, and proceed on a course of action without making an engineering hunt for the facts. (ibid). Sir Richard Branson, as keynote speaker at the 2009 Engage Today Conference, also explained how he followed his intuition to launch the subsequently successful Virgin Atlantic airline in 1984, despite media criticism and ridicule, the patent office refusing to register the brand name for three years as they felt it was “too rude”, and a survey of Britain’s leading marketing magazine claiming that only 10 percent of the British public would ever fly an airline called Virgin.

The lack of such intuitive Wisdom led to the collapse of many renowned companies during the 2008 global financial crisis, which was caused by the poor judgements by highly-educated and experienced individuals in decision-making positions. They had well-developed Skills (rational Hard skills), but lacked Wisdom (intuitive Soft Skills) to sense impending dangers and initiate timely responses, despite prior warnings by astute rating agencies such as Weiss Ratings. The Wisdom-Skills Matrix also explains why companies such as Nokia and Motorola achieved global leadership, but slipped thereafter due to weaknesses in deploying combined Wisdom and Skills, likely caused by unbalanced Hard and Soft Skills in their key decision makers.

HARD AND SOFT SKILLS

As Klaus (2007) affirms, it is rarely a shortfall in technical expertise (Hard Skills) that limits people’s careers, but rather a shortcoming in their social, communication and self-management behaviours (Soft Skills). Hard Skills comprise of work-related knowledge, skills, tools and processes. These are well developed in most organisations because they are the focus of our education and certification system, and employees are hired mostly on their Hard Skills. However, there is little focus on evaluating and developing employees’ Soft Skills, comprising of their intuitive, emotional, attitudinal, behavioural and interpersonal competencies. Developing such Soft Skills increases their self-confidence, widens mindfulness, sharpens intuition, strengthens motivation, and integrates new thinking into their daily work – essential elements for developing the Wisdom needed to navigate their organisations safely through unpredictably turbulent times.

The 2012 HR Competency Model presented by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2012) has identified nine competencies out of which eight are behavioural, as summarised by: Knowledge (Hard skills) + Behaviour (Soft skills) = Success.

Despite the importance of Soft Skills for achieving organisational success under volatile conditions, they remain undeveloped in the workforce of most organisations. Consequently, their daily focus is on conventional problem-solving. They pay almost no attention to process/product/service improvement, opportunity-seeking and risk-evaluation, which are essential for developing organisational Wisdom needed for adapting to changes that often demand rapid responses.

Developing Wisdom and Skills
Soft skills provide the foundation for developing organisational Wisdom (knowing what to do next) through a combination of self-confidence and intuitive insights (inner Soft Skills), and interpersonal competencies for communicating with and influencing others (outer Soft Skills). Wisdom is acquired not only through heightened awareness of organisational capability, changes in the operating environment, competitive offerings, new technologies etc., but also from sensing the attitudes and behaviours of people (colleagues, customers, suppliers etc.). Insights gained through such Soft Skills of employees at all levels should guide the acquisition, adaptation and deployment of Hard Skills, especially under fast-changing conditions.

Such an employee-based, on-going feedback mechanism will enable organisations to continuously outpace changes in internal and external conditions. This mechanism will sustain organisational success through the parallel development and deployment of both dimensions of the Wisdom-Skills Matrix. However, organisational Wisdom, which requires a corporate culture nourished by empowered employees, is directly affected by organisational structures and governance models.

OBsolete Organisational Structures

The origins of the present hierarchically structured governance model date back to Victorian times. A bureaucratic administrative system had to be set up to manage the worldwide British Empire at a time when there were no telephones, and information was handwritten and carried by ships (Mitra, 2013). Despite modern communication systems operating in real-time, this old governance model is still used in most public and private sector organisations. It manifests as a hierarchical organisational structure, comprising of top and middle management, and supervisors and workers, with clearly demarcated responsibility and authority levels.

Such a hierarchical organisational structure places barriers between different levels of staff. Its top-down governance model hinders the development of an employee-driven superior corporate culture, thus slowing down decision-making and obstructing organisational ability to sense and respond quickly to changing conditions.

Developing a New Governance Model

Innovative organizations have a governance model that gives their employees the freedom to achieve their goals in an autonomous and creative way, within specified operational guidelines. In similar vein, Buddhism advocates the complete equality of all people, since every individual is capable of reaching perfection (nirvana) solely through his or her own efforts. Buddhists are allowed to follow diverse approaches in pursuit of their common goal of enlightenment, within the broad guidelines provided by the precepts. Consequently, Buddhist organisations thus have flat structures and governance models that can respond quickly to challenges posed by ever-present change. They both encourage people to develop their almost limitless human potential to sense and respond to rapid change.

FUNCTIONING AT HIGHER MENTAL STATES

Table 1 shows the mental states associated with different brainwave frequencies. In our normally awake Beta state, the mind is bombarded with numerous stimuli such as thoughts, needs, desires, conflicts, pressures, stresses etc. Consequently, it is not free to direct more than about 10 percent of its attention to any one thing. At the slower Alpha state, the mind becomes more relaxed and focused, and becomes far more receptive to learning new things. This explains why children from about seven to fourteen years of age, functioning mainly at the Alpha state, learn things much faster than adults who are functioning mainly at the Beta level. In the relaxed Alpha state, creativity is increased, memory is improved, and the ability to solve problems is enhanced. (Silva and Miele, 1978).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Brainwave Frequency</th>
<th>Associated Mental State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gamma</td>
<td>higher than 40 cps</td>
<td>Intense mental activity; fear,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta</td>
<td>14 – 40 cps</td>
<td>Awake state; awareness of five senses; perception of time and space;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha</td>
<td>7 – 14 cps</td>
<td>Light sleep or deep relaxation; meditation; intuition; no time and space limitation;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theta</td>
<td>4 – 7 cps</td>
<td>Deep sleep; deep meditation.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Simple Buddhist meditations such as relaxed breathing with mindfulness can quickly calm the mind and bring it to the Alpha state. In this Alpha state of relaxed concentration and non-judgemental awareness, employees will be able to use their intuitive creativity while maintaining a rational perspective. The levels of employee engagement and productivity tend to be higher when they are operating in the relaxed Alpha state characterised by high stress thresholds.

### SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

A Global Workforce Study, covering over 32,000 full-time employees working in large and midsized organisations across a range of industries in 29 markets around the world (Towers Watson, 2012), makes the most powerful case yet for the connection between higher organisational operating margins and a new and more robust definition of employee engagement (i.e. sustainable engagement) designed for the 21st-century workplace.

In its analysis of 50 global companies, those with low traditional employee engagement scores had an average one-year operating margin just under 10 percent; those with high traditional employee engagement had a slightly higher margin of 14 percent; but, those with the highest sustainable engagement scores had an average one-year operating margin almost three times higher at 27 percent (Table 2).

**TABLE 2. LINK BETWEEN EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT AND AVERAGE OPERATING MARGINS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Companies with:</th>
<th>Average one-year operating margin:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>low traditional engagement scores</td>
<td>just under 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>high traditional engagement scores</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>highest sustainable engagement scores</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Towers Watson, 2012*

Regarding gaps in the traditional engagement model identified by this study, closing the first gap requires effectively enabling workers with internal support, resources and tools. This can range from helpful supervisors to online tools and processes that provide information and guidance to make good job-related decisions in real time. Closing the second gap requires creating an environment that is energizing by promoting physical, emotional and social well-being, embedded in a culture that focuses on workers’ health, safety and security, both physical and emotional. Schwartz (2012) suggests adding mental and spiritual wellbeing to the above list, for added energy derived from the capacity for absorbed focus and a strong sense of purpose, which is very much in line with Buddhist thinking.

### ELIMINATING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS AND BELIEFS

Negative feelings such as fear, anger, resentment, envy, guilt, anxiety etc. arise from a person’s pessimistic interpretation of past events or perceived outcomes of impending events. Negative emotions are founded primarily on fear – fear of change, failure, rejection, ridicule, etc. (Goleman 1995).

The collective thoughts and beliefs of the workforce directly influence organisational success every day, in every way. During good times, their enthusiasm can drive corporate performance to great heights. Conversely, during bad times when maximum effort is most needed for survival, their fears and anxieties can create a vicious downward cycle. Buddhist philosophy provides a simple and effective way to change people’s negative perceptions into positive commitments. The Noble Eightfold Path to enlightenment also provides a practical framework for changing people’s mindsets, attitudes and behaviours, especially during difficult times.

The first step in this path is Right Understanding (Samma Ditthi), which means acquiring a profound knowledge of the nature of the ever-changing world (thus seeing every problem as an opportunity for self-improvement). This leads to Right Thoughts (Samma Samkappa) of non-attachment and loving-kindness (as opposed to selfishness, ill will and cruelty), which progressively lead to Right Speech (Samma Vaca) meaning kind words, Right Action (Samma Kamma) meaning ethical deeds, and Right Livelihood (Samma Ajiva) meaning righteous business practices. The sixth step of Right Effort (Samma Vayama) deals with virtuous actions arising from the development of pure mental states through self-purification and introspection. The seventh step of Right Mindfulness (Samma Sati) is about heightened awareness of oneself and the changing world we live in. Right Concentration (Samma Samadhi) or mental focus is the eighth and final step on the path to enlightenment (Narada, 1987). The Noble Eightfold Path thus provides a holistic framework for overcoming
any negative thoughts and beliefs triggered by setbacks, enhancing mindfulness, nurturing an attitude of love and care for all living beings, and developing the Wisdom and Skills that govern success, both at individual and organisational levels.

**PILOT PROJECT AT COLOMBO TAJ SAMUDRA HOTEL**

With the 5-star hotel industry in Colombo becoming fiercely competitive with many new global entrants, the Taj Samudra Hotel needed novel strategies for its survival and growth after reopening on 1st November 2013. Its employee morale was quite low due to the stressful pressures of completing refurbishment work on time, while catering to the needs of hotel guests. The Indian-owned Colombo Taj Samudra was the first to embrace the new concept of building a superior corporate culture, by energising, empowering and engaging its entire workforce.

Unlike conventional training programs limited to a select few, all 650 Taj employees at unskilled, skilled, supervisory and managerial levels jointly underwent the identical training, aimed at collectively unleashing their physical and mental powers for building a superior corporate culture. These empowered Taj employees decided to deliver an unmatched world-class experience to every guest, based on their new service-oriented corporate culture symbolised by *Love and Care* – two concepts closely related to Buddhist thinking. As a result, their Guest Satisfaction Tracking Index shot up by over 50% within five months, bearing ample testimony to the benefits of nurturing a superior corporate culture founded on equality, fairness, respect, love and care for the entire workforce as well as guests – i.e. attributes influenced by Buddhist wisdom.

**CONCLUSION**

A superior corporate culture is the key to sustaining success in the increasingly competitive and turbulent commercial and financial worlds. Buddhist wisdom provides a holistic foundation for energising, empowering and engaging employees (the 4 E’s of corporate success) to boost organisational performance through higher levels of mindfulness and awareness. Instead of considering the workforce as individual and separate entities that operate independently, Buddhist thinking suggests integrating their differences into a collective consciousness for developing a superior corporate culture.

This concept recognises the contribution that the individual and collective mindsets of the workforce make to improving organisational performance under changing conditions. Their collective consciousness can be moulded to sustain organisational success by optimising employee decisions and activities every day, in every department, at every level. The resulting improvement in individual and organisational Wisdom and Skills creates learning organisations that can sustain success even in the challenging years looming ahead.

**REFERENCES**


