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## Underwriting corporate resilience via creativity: the pliability model

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This paper explores the concept of creativity within the context of a pliable ‘soft or hard’ organisational environment and analyses its efficacy in fostering corporate resilience. A review of the relevant literature on creativity is undertaken to investigate the concept of creativity and its impact on corporate resilience, and a pliability (fluidity) model, which assesses the efficacy of the corporate creative environment, is then suggested for application in both infant/mature organisations to unleash the creative potential within organisations and thereby underwrite corporate resilience.

**Keywords:** creativity; pliability; continuum; soft; hard; excellence; resilience

### Introduction

Call it the resilience gap; the world is becoming turbulent faster than organisations are becoming resilient and the evidence is all around us; big companies are falling more frequently than they did some decades back (Hamel & Valikangas, 2003). Arnold (2010) reported, in a study of 1500 chief executives conducted by IBM’s Institute for Business Value, that creativity is the number one leadership competency for the future, a view reinforced by Bartram (2005) who considers it as a key managerial capability. In the prevailing economic environment, organisations face broad and deep challenges, finding themselves further ‘squeezed’ and under greater pressure if they are not making the smart decisions. Therefore in order to succeed, new ideas that spur corporate creativity should be conceived and applied to shape and refocus quality management initiatives, smarter decision-making and rapid responses to challenges that improve overall efficiency (Marwa, 2012).

If businesses are to become high-performing organisations; they must have employees who possess the right skills, abilities and mindset. When sufficient numbers of appropriately skilled workers cannot be found or trained, organisational performance is bound to suffer (American Management Association [AMA], 2007). AMA (2007) avers that ‘if organisations are going to get the discretionary behaviours from individuals which are so important to business performance, they must work to create supportive cultures which encourage innovation and performance.’ Thus, creativity that spurs excellence should be at the core of any effective resilience strategy, and robust creative initiatives should be pursued as an integral part of securing corporate resilience and sustainability. This points to a broad role of creativity in underwriting corporate resilience and sustainability. If the gains made by specific improvements in companies are not sustained, then the improvement effort would have been in vain, and effectively, scarce corporate resources would have been put to waste (Marwa, Rand, Keoy, & Koh, 2009).

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The article explores the linkage between the creative climate and its impact on corporate resilience. Appropriate literature on creativity and resilience is investigated to develop a pliability model that is recommended for application to foster corporate resilience.

### **Organisational creativity**

Creativity has been variously defined as the raw material of innovation, whereas innovation is creativity implemented (Lombardo & Roddy, 2010). Similarly, Mumford and Licuanan (2003) asserts that 'creativity involves the production of novel ideas on products/services or processes,' and Ferlic (2008), views organisational creativity as capturing the concepts, principles and understanding relating to the organisational transformation and dynamics resulting from exploration of ideas at the workplace. These views largely suggest three things: 'leadership' is required to spur corporate creativity, there cannot be any element of organisational creativity without 'exploration of ideas' and there has to be a conducive 'space' to explore these ideas. It has been long argued by De Bono (1970) and reiterated by many others that creative thinking is not a talent but a skill that can be learnt, and contend that 'it empowers people by adding strength to their natural abilities which improves teamwork, productivity and where appropriate profits.' Thus, leaders who understand best practice and invest in their employees, through development and training will maintain competitive advantage and grow market share by taking it from the competition (Johnson, 2008). Similarly, Buchanan et al. (2005) and Fryer (2012) concur that 'best practice innovation' is concerned with creative measurement and process improvements fuelled by new technology, flatter team-based structures, people management, external linkages, change leadership, empowerment and the integration of innovative strategy that moves the company forward. They conclude that conditions favouring the adoption of best practice included: the 'cultural and political climate of the enterprise'. They also identify three essential aspects of 'organisational readiness'; fit with competitive strategy, managerial values and internal power distribution, and the values and power of key stakeholders.

It is Ekvall (1996) who coined the word, the 'creative climate' and argued that an organisation's culture can manifest itself in the creative output of its employees, offering a model that brought forth 10 factors: idea time, risk-taking, challenge, freedom, idea support, conflicts, playfulness/humour, trust/openness, and dynamism/liveliness. Moultrie and Young (2009) have since adopted the model, splitting it into two sets of five attributes each, deconstructing it so that one half focuses upon 'attitude to work', the other the 'working atmosphere'. The duo contend that without encouragement, an organisation's workforce is unlikely to be motivated to drive forward, think of new ideas and implement new innovations. In a sense therefore, sound leadership is at the heart of every sensible innovative strategy in any organisation. Backstrom, Ingelsson, and Wiklund (2011) have rightly argued that leadership drives innovation and quality management in organisations, without which would-be innovators lose a sense of direction and get disoriented and confounded by lack of management support and soon drop ambitions of excelling. This view is reinforced by Hung, Lien, Fang, and McLean (2010), who assert that sound corporate leadership recognises its people's knowledge and seeks to grow it, which by extension fuels corporate innovation and TQM performance. Such leaders match people with the right challenges, support teams, ensure members share their excitements, are willing to help and recognise each other's talents, give people autonomy and support in choosing means to achieve goals, provide resources required, and recognise, praise and reward meritocracy as deserving. In doing this, the 'heart and mind' of the

organisation is harnessed, corporate resilience increased and the company acts as one entity.

Fast becoming a guru of creativity, Amabile, Conti, Coon, Lazenby, and Heron (1996) KEYS framework for assessing the climate for creativity serves many as an ideal starting point. With quantitative research conducted between 1987 and 1995, the model is designed to assess perceived stimulants and obstacles to creativity in an organisational work environment. Likewise, Andriopoulos (2001) has suggested five major organisational factors that enhance creativity in the work environment:

- *Atmosphere and mood* – the holistic impact of organisational factors. The more comfortable the atmosphere, the greater the freedom and brighter the mindset of the employees. Nystrom (1979) suggested that a democratic and participative ‘Leadership style’ is conducive to creativity, whereas more autocratic styles are likely to diminish it. Thus, leaders must effectively communicate a vision conducive to creativity to constantly encourage employees to challenge the present and act beyond current wisdom.
- *An organisational culture* – a set of collective norms, which influence the behaviour of members within the organisation, those that nourish innovative ways of addressing problems and finding solutions, those that are supportive and risk-taking with an open flow of communication and autonomy have the potential to be invigorating.
- *Resources and skills* – creative organisations explicitly strive towards the attraction, development and retention of creative talent, those who are eager to learn and take risks.
- *Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations* – both have a role to play and there needs to be a balance between these while using them to grow people’s creativity. From the authors’ perspectives, much of these stems from an enjoyment of the work in question, Albert Einstein spoke of ‘the enjoyment of seeing and searching’, Michael Jordan of the ‘love of the game’, John Irving ‘the unspoken value of love’ and very recently golfer Matt Kuchar who stated ‘the more fun you have playing the better you are going to do’.
- *Structure and systems* – flat structures facilitate creativity by allowing important decisions to be made at all levels, whereas tall structures do not. Similarly, reward systems, where used properly, can grow creativity and vice versa.

As argued by Haner (2005), the work space that provides the opportunity to think, communicate and collaborate creatively is an important area that is not well considered within many organisations. Similarly, Kristensen (2004) asserts that since creativity takes place in a physical space, such space can restrict or enable the free flow of sensory experiences and a sense of well-being. And so does Haner and Bakke (2004), who agree that the physical environments that are engineered to be cognitively and perceptually stimulating can be inspirational, motivational, and therefore enhance creativity.

In sum, Shirazi (2008) asserts that since high-impact talents tend to be poached by competitors in a downturn, companies ought to provide development experiences that spur the exploration of diverse ideas and rotational assignments that nurture individual creativity and talents. Retraining and developing top talents ensure that everyone is informed and encourages questions, new ideas, creativity and innovations (Coombe, 2008). Leaders must therefore encourage constructive conflicts that challenge the status quo and fuel good decision-making, by encouraging questions and new ideas, while making it safe for employees to raise them. Management must be open and acknowledge

that they do not have all the answers to the myriad of issues and should therefore solicit employee inputs, thereby empowering their people to contribute their best ideas. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2008) has established that companies that have invested in their social capital (improving their manpower skills) and have a transparent rewarding system, have been able to improve their bottom line without compromising on their social performance and compliance to quality standards during a recession. HRfocus (2010) further contends that talent management must mesh with business goals for post-recession success. Companies need to accommodate different lifestyles and work choices and find ways to balance these with business needs to ensure a high level of product and performance. The best and most talented people will not want to stay with a company that is not signalling that it has faith in its own future growth potential (Leavy, 2009).

### Corporate resilience

In a turbulent age, the only dependable advantage is a superior capacity for reinventing a business model before circumstances force this to happen (Hamel & Valikangas, 2003). Dervitsiotis (2003) asserts that in periods of a dramatic change brought about by advances in technology, and social and economic instability, the objective of survival in the presence of threatening challenges takes precedence over the improvement in performance. Thus, strategic resilience is about continuously anticipating and adjusting to deep secular trends that can permanently impair the earning power of a core business. It is having the capability to change before the case for change becomes painfully clear. Organisations therefore require the capacity to operate in a dual management mode, which accommodates both the familiar success criteria in stable conditions and the criteria for resilience and competitive fitness in times of economic turbulence. To be resilient, companies therefore ought to balance between perceived opportunities and risk, while fostering attributes that prop them up, namely: foresight, agility, staying power, entrepreneurialism and diversity.

Agility and resilience are likely to be the characteristics of organisations that sustain (high) performance over long periods of time (AMA, 2007). Resilience as the ongoing ability to anticipate and adapt to critical strategic shifts (Reeves & Deimler, 2009) will become an increasingly important driver of future competitive advantage. Nonetheless, there are four challenges that stand in the way of resilient organisations that should be dealt with: ensuring zero trauma (*staff stress associated with corporate response to challenges*), conquering denial (*be forthright to accept mistakes/internal failures*), value variety (*self-insurance through a variety of products/services*) and liberate resources (*free idle or underutilised resources to support production where most needed*) (Hamel & Velikangas, 2003). Sergeant and Laws-Chapman (2012) have contributed to this debate by cautioning that teams that operate in stressful environments are less collaborative and more likely to make mistakes. Building emotional resilience therefore can create a healthier workplace culture, reduce absenteeism, improve teamwork, raise morale, unleash creativity and fire up productivity. Importantly, strategic resilience is not about responding to a one-off crisis, rather it is about rebounding from setbacks and fostering these attributes. As argued by Leavy (2009), better-run companies like Nokia, Microsoft, General Electric and others are taking the time to invest in the future very seriously, even as they clearly consider improving efficiencies and reigning in costs. Therefore, the keys to enduring biting economic meltdown must be an insistence on sustenance of the corporate quality initiatives whatever the cost (Marwa, 2012).

### Fortifying resilience via creativity – pliability model

Following from the discussion on resilience, it is apparent that creative solutions are needed for organisations to thrive, but how can business leaders deliberately increase creativity, while at the same time dealing with a turbulent economic environment? Rodriguez (2002) has partly answered this question by maintaining that organisational creativity should be driving organisational performance. Thus, while learning and organisational performance can be at odds (Singer & Edmondson, 2006), leadership must foster a mindset, group behaviour and organisational investment needed to promote today's learning and invest in tomorrow's performance.

Lombardo and Roddy (2010) have queried why some organisations are consistently good at innovating and adapting (*Soft*), while others seem to be blinded by change (*Hard*). Their findings point to the fact that leaders who embrace the dynamic tension between creative disruption and operational efficiency can create new models of extraordinary value. Creative leaders invite disruptive innovations, encourage others to drop outdated approaches and take balanced risk. They are open-minded and inventive in expanding their management and communication styles, particularly to engage with a new generation of employees and customers. This should be the overriding desire of all organisations and the move should thus be towards creating a 'soft environment'. Leaders of such 'Soft' organisations find different ways of solving problems and generating options and ideas of which 'Hard' organisations are not aware. Leaders of 'Soft' organisations are often at the heart of managing performance in their organisations (Waples & Friedrich, 2011). The duo cite Dessler (2008, p. 6) who has defined performance management as

a process that unites goal setting, performance appraisal and development into a single, common system whose aim is to ensure that employee's performance is supporting the company's strategic aims to one that prioritizes to long-term survival and health of the enterprise, rather than a focus on short-termism.

'Soft' organisations are willing to invest more resources in creativity and total quality analysis, just to look for leverage points and errors to improve upon (Vargo & McDonough, 1993). They demonstrate genuine concerted efforts to continually build up corporate resilience, not on a short-term basis, but rather, enduring longer objectives. They focus on maintaining portfolio quality and creating effective risk-management strategies (O'Hare, 2002). Such organisations map all their processes and embrace workflow efficiencies that are fuelled by employee creativity and appropriate quality improvement interventions (Yang & Choi, 2009). Similarly, Johnson (2008) contend that 'soft' organisations constantly build advantages into the organisation at a much greater rate, while eliminating disadvantages and vigorously pursuing creativity and innovation, in order to offer their clientele, innovative solutions to current challenges (Singh, Grag, & Sharma, 2009). They bring forth greater efficiencies and reductions in waste associated with internal processes and simplify value propositions (*highly customisable product ranges*). Such organisations focus on providing both superior frills/options (*for the high-end market*) and incremental frills/options (*for the most basic customer needs*). Employees in all cadres of a 'soft' organisation are involved in quality management and training which nurtures group dynamics, problem-solving and task skills that are institutionalised with a built-in mechanism which motivates and recognises individual employees and all teams (Marwa et al., 2009).

On the contrary, in 'Hard' organisations, employees have no freedom to be creative and develop new ideas, products, services and ways of doing work (Weinlick, 2012). These organisations have policies that severely inhibit creativity, and are known as

bland with un-invigorating environments which lack freedom and have a distinct silence of voice. In such organisations, policies and red tape have destroyed the creative soul; they bind staff into certain ways of working, offering little room to be fresh and innovative. The mere act of questioning policy can bring criticism and labelling as a trouble maker. Here, policies are never questioned, if they still achieve what they were originally designed for. Such policies tend to live on long after their ‘use-by’ date and are followed religiously even when they are no longer relevant or have become sterile and unhelpful. Without periodically reviewing and changing their policies, these quickly become antiquated, inflexible and dead. To such organisations, the Pliability model (Figure 1) is recommended to help grow corporate creativity and resilience in these turbulent times. The ‘Pliability’ model derives its name from the capacity of an organisation to cultivate a creative climate/environment (Kristensen, 2004) and culture that permits creativity to blossom within. The model is premised on two continuums; one based on the pliability (capacity to embed creativity), with ‘Soft’ (*ease to inculcate creativity*) and ‘Hard’ (*stifling creativity*) being extreme ends of one continuum and organisational longevity being the other; with ‘Infancy’ (*relatively new*) and ‘Maturity’ (*relatively old*) being the extreme ends. The argument being advanced here is that regardless of longevity (infancy or maturity), if organisations find themselves operating in ‘hard’ environments (that stifles creativity),

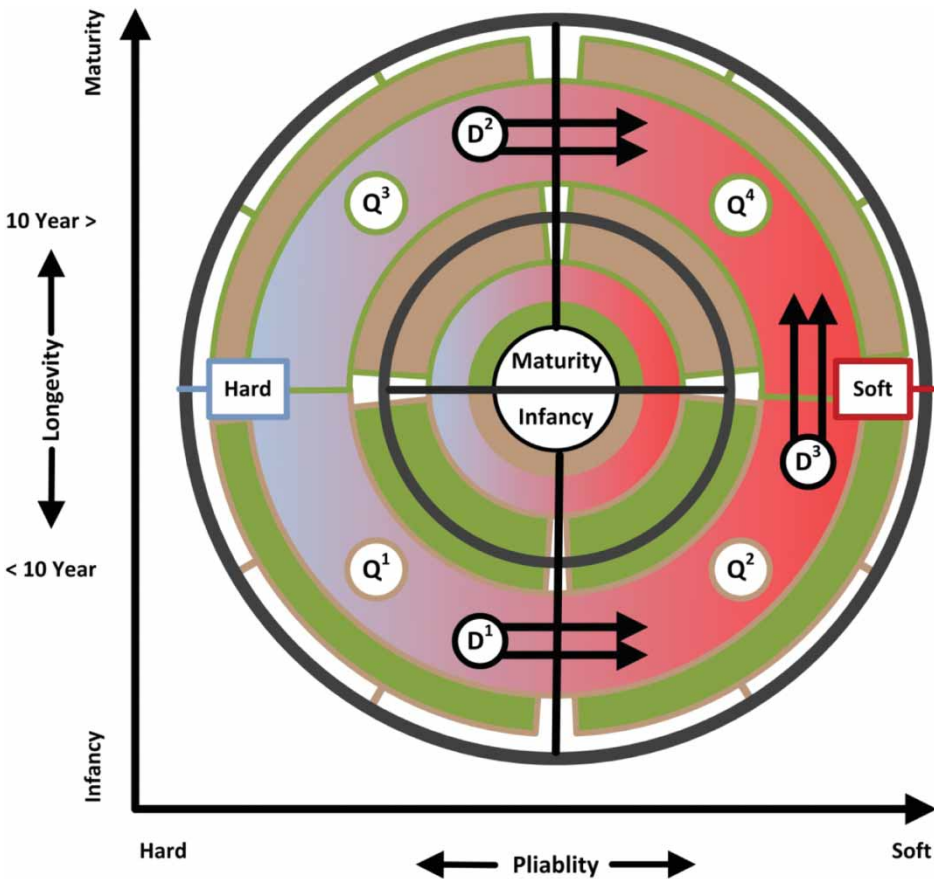


Figure 1. Pliability model.

then they ought to break through the ‘hardness’ barriers by crafting interventions that grow corporate creativity and resilience. The move is about leading organisation’s people to apply creative thoughts/insights in their day-to-day activities, which will in turn fuel corporate innovations, excellence and resilience.

The thrust of the Pliability model (Figure 2) is that irrespective of their longevity, organisations should purposefully craft strategies that move them from scalable efficiency to scalable learning (Q<sup>1</sup> to Q<sup>2</sup> and Q<sup>3</sup> to Q<sup>4</sup>) by cultivating appropriate characteristic/attributes. The key consideration should be the organisation’s standing/position on the pliability continuum; for ‘hard’ organisations, the shift should be towards the creation of a softer pliable internal environment that allows creativity to blossom, while for those that are already ‘soft’, the focus should be towards sustainability and continuous improvement of that conducive environment.

Thus, by implementing sustainable improvements and cultivating attributes that render it possible to turn round their work environments and culture using a creative workforce, such organisations will thereby enhance their corporate innovations, which should underwrite genuine corporate competitiveness and resilience. As rightly argued by Morris (2003), an environment that is conducive to nourishing creativity is critical and must inter-link culture and the physical aspects of the environment where work takes place.

By releasing the organisation’s full creative potential (Figure 3) through purposeful interventions that allow employees to apply their creative minds in a directed and purposeful manner, best practices will be engrained and shared out, which should fuel

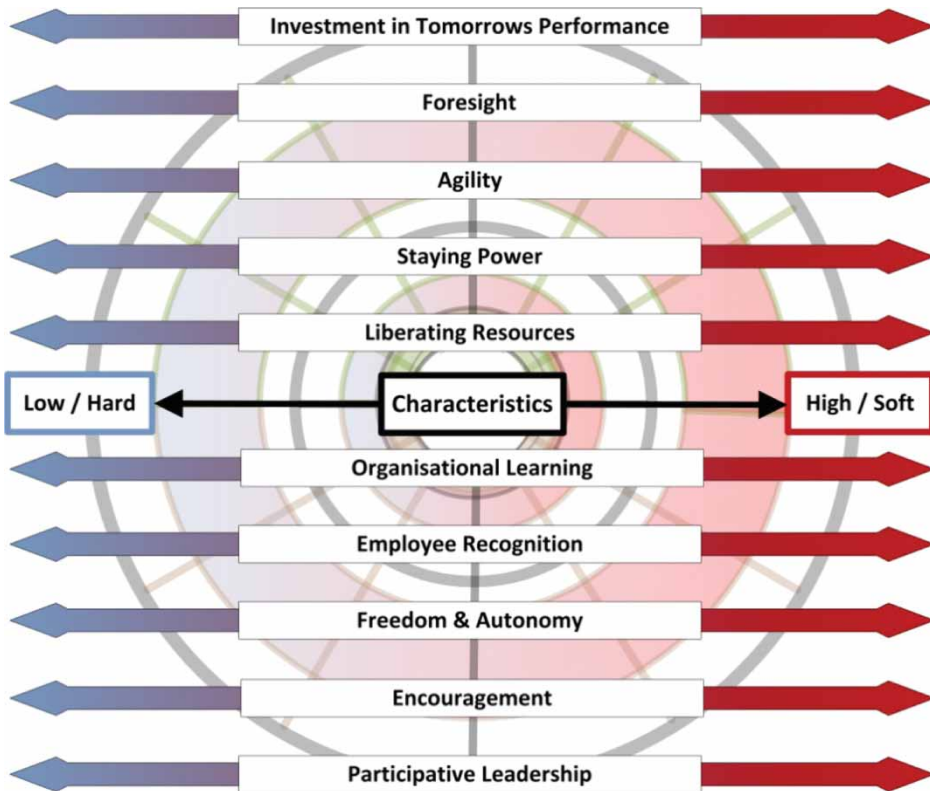


Figure 2. Characteristics of the pliability model.



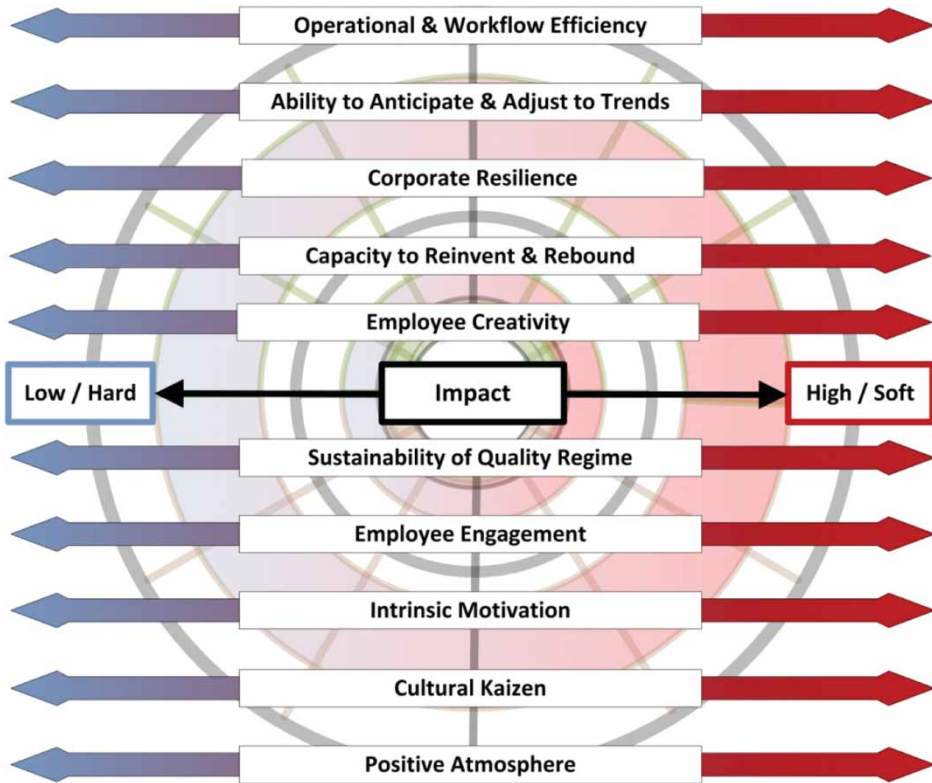


Figure 3. Impact of the pliability model to user organisations.

excitement, optimism and the desire to explore new threads of ideas, thereby invigorating corporate performance. Considering that creative outcomes are produced in a creative environment (Weinlick, 2012), where creativity as a culture is encouraged and rewarded, innovations blossom and fuel competitive performance, which underwrites resilience. So, organisational creativity should not be confined to a few selected individuals, but rather all employees should actively participate. Both individual and organisational creative developments should be supported by structures and processes that ensure permeable boundaries, increase value complexity and provide a safe psychological space where blame is not the currency traded on the floor (Fryer, 2012).

For decades, corporate maturity/longevity has been found to be a challenge in itself. Beatty and Ulrich (1991) assert that organisations evolve through a life cycle with each evolving stage raising change challenges. The duo contends that the presence of established norms that once helped accomplish past success may lead to complacency, and managers may become too dependent on these for future success. It is this tendency that particularly tends to 'harden' mature organisations, who then regard these classified norms as irrevocable patterns of behaviour that eventually lead to structural inertia. Similarly, Kuhn and Marsick (2005) assert that mature companies often grow into a narrow view of innovation, focusing on the development of new products or services and on incremental improvement of existing offerings rather than radical strategic innovation that provide a new platform for sustained growth. In these organisations, the ability to think in ways that achieve strategic innovation is hampered by the invincible hand of

organisational orthodoxy. As an organisation matures, an entrepreneurial spirit of discovery gives way to complacency, risk aversion, and inward focus, and incrementalism sets in. The gravitational pull of the past and forces of equilibrium make it difficult to contemplate alternative futures. Core competencies turn into core rigidities. As a result, companies devote much more energy to optimising *what is* than to *imagining what could be*, leaving the job of strategic innovation to nimble newcomers. It is this shared mindset that often becomes a liability and a core rigidity whose intensity may hinder the ability to change even in the face of calamitous challenges. Embracing ‘softness’ thus calls for a rethink of these norms and/or patterns of behaviour by engraining new thinking and best practices that move the organisation forward. Thus, organisational orthodoxies, gravitational pull of the past, forces of equilibrium and incrementalism should be nipped in the bud in order to pave way for strategic innovations. Mature organisations should avoid seeing all their ideas as everlasting and unquestionable beliefs (Sasongko, 2011) as this has the potential to make them big, fat and slow giants less adaptable to change. Otherwise, since mature organisations suffer from ‘cultural lock-in’ (*that is the inability to change even in the face of clear market threats*), they should not stiffen the invisible architecture of their corporations, or numb their sense-making capabilities and mental models, which have become self-reinforcing, self-sustaining and self-limiting. Rather, they should embrace reforms that genuinely address their structural and cultural inertia, internal politics, complacency, fear of cannibalising existing products, satisfaction with status quo and a reluctance to abandon a ‘certain present’ for an ‘uncertain future’.

### Implications

- (1) *Leadership and creativity* – leaders must encourage constructive conflicts that challenge the status quo and fuel good decision-making, by encouraging questions and new ideas, while making it safe for employees to raise them and experiment on new ideas. As argued by Nystrom (1979), a democratic and participative ‘leadership style’ is more conducive to creativity than an autocratic leadership style. Thus, it must be the responsibility of leaders to grow internal democracy that allows new perspectives and insights to be safely tested and shared.
- (2) *Organisational longevity and creativity* – near-constant innovation is the only way to respond successfully to near-constant disruption (Hagel, Brown, & Davidson, 2009), which is the hallmark of a soft organisation. The rate of learning, innovation and performance improvement within the organisation must match (or exceed) that of the surrounding environment if the organisation is to survive (or thrive). Organisational orthodoxies – self-imposed beliefs and theories on success about the business, the boundaries of the industry, the business the firm is in, how customers’ value is created, the basis of competition and how the value chain is structured . . . etc., needs to be revisited, reviewed and sharpened in the face of prevailing challenges. Importantly, given that innovation is inherently a human activity, one performed by talented individuals (*of all sorts in the organisation*) then it follows that talent will pull institutions into the twenty-first century, hence organisations seeking to increase the probability of renewal and new mindset must be creative (Joiner, 2007).
- (3) *Organisational politics/powerplay and creativity* – an organisation can be an impediment or killer of creativity; conflict between departments, internal competition, internal politics and gossip all restrain the possibility of creative forward thinking. Criticism of new ideas and lack of autonomy to implement creative ideas are likely

to put individuals or groups off from sharing their thoughts in the future. An organisation has to be open to change; the market and the needs of customers are fluid and so an organisation needs to be. A static, risk-averse environment that is too comfortable within, happy to maintain the status quo and lacks incentives to abandon the present is not the creative climate in which one would flourish.

- (4) *Invest in operational excellence tools* – Watterson and Seeliger (2008) argue that entities can prosper even in a recession if only they can guarantee their survival, by aggressively investing in operational excellence tools. Companies must become lean, more efficient and reduce waste through process efficiencies.
- (5) *Resilience and recession* – as argued by Choudhury (2008), merely cutting costs and jobs as is evident in this recessionary period is not a cure to corporate resilience. Since high-impact talents tend to be poached by competitors in a downturn, companies ought to provide development experiences that spur exploration of diverse ideas and rotational assignments that nurture individual creativity and talents. Retraining and developing top talents ensure that everyone is informed and encourages questions, new ideas, creativity and innovations. Leaders must thus realise that rapid innovation cannot be programmed from above, and hence, seek to cultivate a ‘creation space’ that fosters innovation and learning.

### Limitations

Since organisations are distinct by reason of longevity and/or different levels (points) within the pliability continuum, cautious application of this model is suggested so as to fit with the context of its application. For some organisations, the adoption of this model may be easier (as they are nearly softer), yet for others, a struggle will ensue in adopting the model. Whichever the context of application, a supportive leadership will play a critical role.

### Conclusion

As rightly argued by Waples and Friedrich (2011), leaders in organisations, irrespective of longevity or pliability, must frame the evaluative process as one that is positive and developmental for both staff and the organisation. Leaders of these organisations need to be creative and explore new ways of winning the hearts and minds of their people by refocusing their energies towards organisational creativity that underwrites longevity. By releasing the organisation’s full creative potential, leaders should craft purposeful interventions that allow employees to apply their creative minds in a directed and purposeful manner, which engrains best practices and shares them out, to fuel excitement, optimism and the desire to explore new threads of ideas, which invigorates corporate performance. Regardless of longevity (infancy or maturity), organisations operating in ‘hard’ environments (that stifles creativity) should break through the ‘hardness’ barriers by crafting interventions that grow corporate creativity and resilience. The move is about leading organisation’s people to apply creative thoughts/insights in their day-to-day activities, which will in turn fuel corporate innovations, excellence and resilience. Importantly, organisational creativity should drive organisational performance, as this is the surest formula to underwrite corporate resilience.

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