

## Management Course IV: The Population-Ecology Model

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The population-ecology approach (sometimes known as the natural selection model) poses that the direction of change in organizations is toward a better fit with the environment or the market setting. According to the researchers working within this management paradigm (Howard Aldrich, *Organizations and Environments*; Charles Bidwell and John D. Kasorda, *The Organization and Its Ecosystem*; Hanna, Michael T. and Glenn R. Carroll, *Dynamics of Organizational Population, and others*), the aim is not to deal with a single organizational units but with populations of organizations. The proposition is simple: If you want to understand the behaviors of a single organization, you have to study the population of all the organizations within its task environment or market niche.

Organizational designs that have the appropriate fit with the environment are selected (and will survive) over those that do not fit or fit less appropriately.

There are three stages of the natural selection or the capacity to survive model. In the first stage, variations occur in the organizational designs. These variations can be planned or unplanned. Once variations have occurred, the second stage, selection, is reached. Organizational designs that fit the task environment are selected over those that do not. The final stage is retention. The designs that are selected are preserved, duplicated or reproduced. Retention is accomplished through research, knowledge and education that allow leaders, managers and professionals to create designs that can be successful even in a changing environment or context.

The statement is that organizational designs fill niches in the environment or market. Niches are distinct combination of resources, clusters of customers, and other constraints that are sufficient to support an organizational design. A fair measure of an organizational design is its support within a market niche. The notion of niches points toward the possibility that there are unfilled niches out there just waiting for the right organizational design.

The model provides very interesting management action rules. Narrow niches tend to support organizations that are specialized, and wider niches support more generalist organizations. Some of the challenges for this model relate to specifying the sources of variation, the internal processes that will create the fit between the organization and the environment, and stressing the concept of effectiveness while producing results. The approach

is well suited for complex organizational systems and how they achieve flexibility to adapt to changing conditions.

Another critical dimension is that of strategic choice made on behalf of the organization. The variations in organizational design have some source, and it is the strategic choices made within the organizations.

Researchers have provided practical reflections alerting that organizations are not inert masses (they can learn) even though they seem so at times (they cannot learn).

Even organizations that are seemingly inert have an impact by the very inertia, but there we are not speaking about negative impact in as much as the capacity to effectively survive.

Organizations perform. They transform inputs into outputs. Those outputs have impacts and consequences on the society. Individual, groups, communities, markets and other organizations respond to organizational outputs. In a wider sense, everything that is not the organization is its environment. If people respond to the organization with support or opposition, we have direct or indirect power or influence to determine outcomes. The lesson is that when addressing the organization's ecosystem (the comprehensive environment or setting), the analyst has to consider more entities than strict organizational systems. It is imperative to acknowledge the presence of human beings with their passions, emotions, conflicts and irrationalities, as these constitute critical variables for the analysis of social and organizational processes.

The point is that when working with the population-ecology model it is necessary to include institutional, cultural, social psychology and political forces in order to obtain a better understanding of the environmental reality.

As very distinguished researchers have acknowledged, this approach has shown high utility, at least, in two main areas. As some sort of ultimate test of effectiveness, survival is a positive indication and organizational death (and even weakness) is a negative indication. The natural selection model can give a historical perspective of the antecedents, the processes and the consequences of organizational actions. (This is inquisitively argued in Herbert Kaufman, *The Limits of Organizational Change*). It is also useful as a sensitizing venture to establish the importance of environmental factors. If the organizational niche is expanding or striking, it is necessary for leaders to take this reality into account.

Finally, it is the population-ecology model that has nourished the concept of organizational life-cycles, emphasizing organizational births, transformations, and death.

Human beings have fairly predicted life span, whereas organizations do not. Organizations have the potential (if well designed!) to last much longer than individuals, and this is one of the predominant characteristics of them.

Again, if properly designed and redesigned to fit emerging and changing realities, organizations could last indefinitely. The formula is the following: preserve principles, values and culture by constant exercises of creativity and innovation.

There is only one method of human conception, but there are many different types of people that can create organizations. Organizations can be created by other organizations, as when subsidiaries are founded by the parent organization.

The community-population-ecology model has the room to include many factors for designing, understanding and managing organizations.

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