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Dynamics in Business and its Consequences for Learning Business

Learning by Sharing as a model for revitalization

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Dynamics in Business and its Consequences for Learning Business

Learning by Sharing as a model for revitalization

Thomas J.P. Thijssen¹ Wim Gijsselaers²

ABSTRACT

Currently there is much debate about the gap between business schools and the business world (Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). One of the arguments is that business schools focus too much on 'scientific' research and lack relevant business context and real world experience. Our proposition is that the dynamics in the business environment force businesses and business schools to revitalize together through learning by sharing.

This article advocates that researchers, teachers, students (business schools) and practitioners (business) should engage in a mutual learning process. Close cooperation, shared understanding, and shared learning can foster adaptation to the dynamics of the business environment, and encourage both business schools and business corporations to build new academic theory and new business logic. The learning by sharing model (Thijssen, Maes and Vernooij, 2002) can be applied to both the academic world and the business world in concert. The present paper conceptualizes how business corporations and business schools can learn from each other and develop closer links.

Key words: Change management, learning practices, revitalization, collaborative learning, theory development, double loop learning, innovation, business, business schools

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1. INTRODUCTION

Criticisms on the nature of business education seem to be fuelled by the alleged gap between business schools and the business world. Authors such as Mintzberg (2004), and Bennis and O'Toole (2005) claim that business schools are overly scientific and out of touch with business realities, concentrating on research which has little to do with the needs of business world. It has also been argued that graduates lack essential business skills, are not well-prepared to respond to changes in business world, or do not have a realistic understanding of business world (Boyatzis, Cowen & Kolb, 1995).

The question may be raised how business schools and business can bridge this gap through new cooperation models. The present article proposes a model for bridging this gap bringing together researchers, teachers, students (business schools) and practitioners (business) through mutual engagement in a learning process called "learning by sharing". It enables business schools to adapt to the dynamics of the business environment, build new academic theory about business performance and business logic together in a process of continuous revitalization. It goes beyond question that when current criticisms about business education will continue, business schools will face problems such as lack of competitive advantage and in the long-run the loss of students. Business corporations that can not profit from new insights from business research may face the risk of decline in business performance. The present paper explores how business and business schools can respond to the quest for closer cooperation.

Turbulence and the dynamics of change

Volberda (2004 pp 233) uses the concept of "turbulence" in the external environment -ranging from low to high - when analyzing market dynamics, complexity and unpredictability. He defines turbulence as combination of market dynamics (frequency and intensity of change), market complexity (number of elements and relationship between elements that change) and market predictability (information transparency and causal relationships). Four levels of turbulence are identified: (1) stable, (2) complex/dynamic (3) hypercompetitive and (4) extreme competition. Each level requires a different response. In Volberda's view business managers are forced to respond to the pressures of competition by reshaping the design of the organization (structure, technology and culture), reshaping organizational forms (rigid, planned, flexible, chaotic) and choosing the appropriate level of flexibility and variety (steady state, operational, structural and strategic).

Two ways of responding to market opportunities

Shane (2003) identifies three major sources for opportunities for change: political and regulatory changes, social and demographic changes and technological changes. There are two ways to respond to these

changes. The first one is simply to ignore the opportunities presented; the organization does not restructure which leads to 'more of the same' actions leading to 'more of the same' business/marketplace outcomes. Although this option doesn't sound like a serious one, business practice shows that many firms find themselves locked in such a strategic doom loop (Nadler et al, 1995). Typically these firms are not capable to make sense of new information or don't give it sufficient management attention. For example, Xerox, focusing on Kodak as competitor, missed the Japanese threat. A singular focus on one enemy detracts from a creative focus on how to serve the customer better. Failure of market leaders such as IBM, Sears, GM and Citibank has demonstrated that domination does not guarantee success; indeed success may carry with it the seeds of failure (Nadler et al. 1995). Clearly these companies ignored competitive information and failed to give it proper management attention.

In terms of business operations one may say that the standard paradigms (more of the same actions lead to more of the same business outcomes) continue to dominate the enacted reality (Nadler et al, 1995 page 123). Trapped in such a cycle, companies can't change their strategy unless they change the organization. It goes without saying that in those cases they can't change the organization unless they change the people.

The second way of dealing with change finds its roots in what nowadays is phrased as organizational learning, interactional learning, or business process reengineering (Boonstra, 2004). Another way to respond is to innovate and restructure. New action creates new business/market place outcomes and new strategic insights. Nadler, Shaw and Walton call this a generative strategy. In fact the focus is on creative recombination of resources and building innovative abilities in the organization. Research shows that organizations that follow a generative strategy have some common characteristics. It has been found that they are structurally fluid and ever changing.

Building generative organizations with generative strategic capabilities

These organizations are highly self-aware of their identity. They see competition as a valuable element of the landscape and value diversity and individuality and focus on network- the ability of people to communicate, dialogue and learn together. A clear common identity- values and norms that guide practice, behavior and choice-enables organization members to make decisions that achieve synergy and alignment fluidly.

To build a generative organization and generative strategic capability Nadler, Shaw and Walton (1995) identify certain critical steps:

Build a strategic language system and agree on terms to discuss market dynamics

Build listening devices to provide an external view and comparison with other firms

Build fluid processes through bringing people together and share ideas in a productive way

Build a strong culture for the solidity of direction and day to day behavior

Build communities of practices with a common interest, sharing a common language system and interacting to produce something

Build time for self-reflection into processes to ascertain whether they are progressing in the right direction.

Generative organizations apparently share particular characteristics and practices that enable learning by sharing in all aspects of conducting business and responding to market dynamics.

Practitioners such as David Nadler, Roberts Shaw and Elise Walton of Delta Consulting Group consider organizations as economic and social entities constantly dealing with the demands, threats, and opportunities posed by the larger environment, to make longer-term choices to respond to that environment. Nadler et al. start at the strategy and policy level. At the same time they think of organizations as complex yet active systems of human behavior.

Speed of change force academics to catch up with innovative practices

Academics often view attempts from practitioners as inadequate because scientific rigor and methodology of research is fully absent. Yet, in a dynamic environment the speed of change in the connected economy is so high that academics have a hard time catching up with innovative practices and generate appropriate theory on these new practices (Thijssen et al., 2002). Also Stan Davis and Christopher Meyer (1998) of the Ernst & Young Center for Business Innovation in Cambridge, Massachusetts argue that when the forces of speed, intangibles and connectivity converge, every dimension of business behavior is being challenged to its core. The rate of change is so fast it is only a blur, where the clear lines distinguishing buyer from seller, product from service, employee from entrepreneur are disappearing. Advantage is temporary and nothing is fixed in time or space. Change is constant: knowledge and imagination are more valuable than physical capital: products and services are blended as offers. Transactions give way to 'exchanges'; and physical markets take on the characteristics of financial markets.

As businesses struggle to respond to market dynamics and capture new opportunities to be competitive, similar challenges face business schools. Business schools find it also difficult to find adequate answers to respond to the changing needs of business. Some universities still believe that learning needs to precede work (Thijssen, Maes, Vernooij, 2002), and view the role of teachers as the unquestioned dispenser of objective knowledge and students as the uncritical receivers. Students can complete their study by sheer absorption and accumulation of knowledge. The actual learning process follows a predetermined route, that is, a fixed curriculum, even though universities tend to emphasize self-guidance on the part of the students in carrying out learning tasks. The teacher's role is restricted to designing the curriculum,

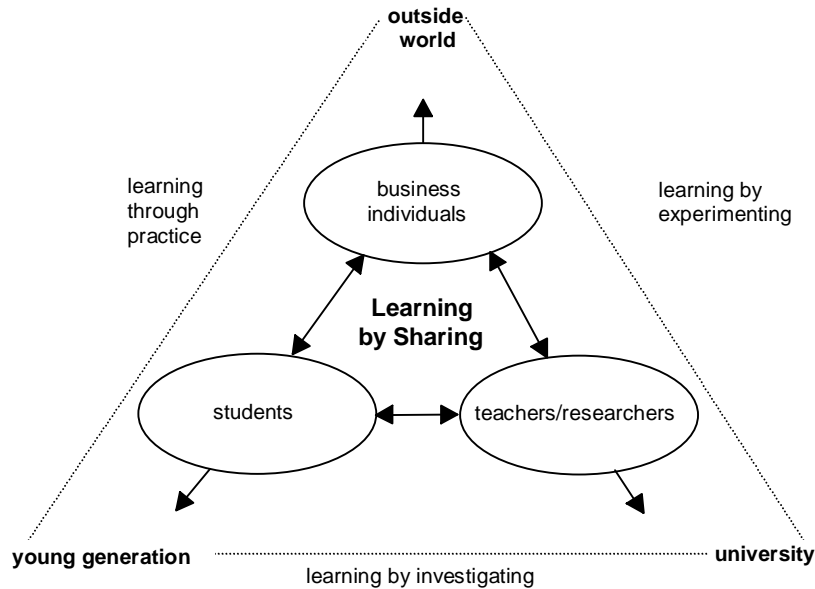
prescribing the learning-path to be followed, and giving students feedback on the extent they have acquired the learning content.

As the demand and the supply of education is globalizing, the coming generation of students differs significantly from preceding ones, the need for life-long learning is replacing classical learning. New technologies call for new learning models, and universities are confronted with challenges from the environment. They are forced to change their strategy, their policy and their educational models. It does not suffice to pass on yesterday's knowledge to students in isolation from the dynamics of change and from the real world experience. Of course this stereotypical description of Universities does not fit reality in all cases, as indeed some business schools do seek new solutions to respond to the needs of business in a dynamic environment. But it does indicate however, that there is an increasing need for new learning models at business schools to close the gap between education and business.

Learning by Sharing as a model for adapting to change, innovate and create value

Learning by Sharing (Thijssen, Maes, Vernooij, 2002) as developed at the University of Amsterdam is a new model for collaborative learning. In this model the development of theory (rigor) through experiments and investigation is combined with the development of innovative practices (relevance) through learning in practice. Teachers, researchers, students and practitioners join forces to establish learning communities. Its main improvements on existing learning models are the systematic introduction of the external world into the learning process and the reciprocal nature of the interactions involved. All learn from the shared learning experience. In practice the Learning by Sharing model overcomes much of the problems as identified by practitioners (see figure 1). It allows for building a common language, dialogue and learning. It builds communities of practice and through the involvement of researchers and teachers, it offers opportunities to reflect on current direction and practices. Mahoney and Sanchez (2004) support this view and propose combining products and processes of thought and linking rigor and relevance.

FIGURE 1: Learning by Sharing Model



In the Learning by Sharing model, the notions of *learning by experimenting*, *learning by investigating* and *learning through practice* are important: teachers/researchers and business individuals work together in projects. Researchers behave as practitioners and practitioners behave as researchers. This results in a sustainable information exchange between the parties involved. To this end, teachers/researchers in business economics should engage in dialogue not only with others in the academic community but also with business individuals actually working in the field. Such dialogue can develop into practical collaboration, both in research and teaching and in strategy development, on specific topics of mutual interest.

As far as research (*learning by investigating*) is concerned, the direct link between the two communities enables researchers to identify areas in which to conduct truly relevant and innovative research. This ensures the production of useful knowledge, that is, knowledge useful for practitioners (Argyris and Schön, 1996: 43). The notion of *researchers as practitioners* refers to the empirical testing of a theory, after which it can be adjusted according to (business) practice. In this way, applied research becomes research that matters for business practice.

On the other hand, the notion of *practitioners as researchers* refers to practitioners putting theories to everyday use (Argyris and Schön, 1996: 50). They can adjust their strategy and practices by incorporating insights from new theories. Nothing is more practical than a good theory. For the research community, the combination of new theories and practical topics ensures that the contributions made by the collaboration

of researchers and business individuals (joint applied research) are not only grounded in theory but also relevant to business practice. At the same time, participation in research activities enables practitioners to significantly enhance their operating abilities (operational excellence), and to keep abreast of state-of-the-art developments in academic disciplines. Partnerships between academics and practitioners on key issues in business practice are therefore mutually beneficial. It is proposed that the Learning by Sharing model is a potential answer for businesses and business schools to deal with the dynamics of change in concert.

2. TURBULANCE AND THE DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

Albert Einstein was quoted by Igor Ansoff saying: “in the turbulent environment of the 21st century the complexity of the way organizations react to the environment match with the turbulence of the environment” (Volberda, 2004). In the same way Ashby’s (1956) law of requisite variety states: the complexity and speed of a firm’s response need to increase with the complexity and speed of change in the environment. Greater variety in the environment necessitates the processing of more information in shorter periods of time (Huizing, 2002). For that, firm members – employees and managers alike- have to be more sophisticated and skilled in their individual and collective meaning making capabilities. They have to learn, and they have to learn how to improve their learning in a flexible way.

Volberda (2004) identifies opposing tensions between control and flexibility. Morphostatic organizations treat disturbance as external noise to be blocked out or adjusted to. In this type of transition order is preserved. By contrast, morphogenetic systems treat disturbance as information about internal conditions and respond by altering their orders. Flexible firms are able to manage opposing tensions. They facilitate creativity, innovation, and speed while maintaining coordination, focus and control. The managerial task when the market turbulence is high is creating flexible capabilities to respond to the dynamics of change. Volberda identifies the following dynamic capabilities (see Table 1):

TABLE 1. Dynamic capabilities

Specialized routines	Dynamic capabilities
Static control	Dynamic control
Limited expertise	Broad and deep knowledge base
Low absorptive capacity	High absorptive capacity
Fixed managerial mindsets and no experimentation	Broad managerial mindsets and much experimentation
Lower-level learning (single loop)	Higher-level learning (double loop)

Depending on the market dynamics of the external environment, organizations need to embark on continuous learning and acquire dynamic capabilities as listed above. The question is how do businesses reinvent themselves to cope with the market dynamics?

3. A ROADMAP FOR CORPORATE RENEWAL

Most companies have tried to reinvent themselves -some more than once- over the past decade. General Electric's dramatic performance improvements stands in stark contrast to the string of disappointments and crises that have plagued Westinghouse. The ascendance of Asea Brown Boveri to global leadership in power equipment only emphasizes Hitachi's inability to reverse its declining fortunes. Philips's successful revitalization since 1990 only highlights its own agonizingly slow turnaround in the preceding ten years. It is this kind of developments that triggered Sumantra Ghoshal and Christopher Bartlett (2000) to analyze renewal processes in the corporate world. They found that companies seem to follow a certain path for corporate renewal. They developed a set of guidelines, as contained in a blueprint for corporate renewal, which aim for successful renewal of companies. In *Breaking the Code of Change* (Beer & Nohria, 2000 195-222) Ghoshal and Bartlett state the following questions: What accounts for the successful renewal efforts of some corporations and the failure of others? The roadmap Ghoshal and Bartlett suggest based on the main findings of their research includes steps of rationalization, revitalization and regeneration:

Roadmap to corporate renewal according to Ghoshal and Bartlett (2000).

□ **Rationalization**

- Through building frontline initiative through creating norms of self-discipline and embedding support

□ **Revitalization**

- Through cross-unit relationships
- Creating stretch: boldness to strive for ambitious goals
- Developing trust as a vital characteristic to nurture collaborative behavior that drives effective realization

□ **Regeneration**

- Through continuous learning
- Integrating the contextual frame of individual initiative, unit performance and cross-unit organization wide collaboration
- Maintaining a dynamic imbalance through altering the emphasis on rationalization and revitalization

Ghoshal and Bartlett (2000) suggest that to lead the renewal process companies should:

□ **Leading the renewal process**

- Follow the roadmap of rationalization, revitalization and regeneration
- Transforming a hierarchical bureaucracy into a self-regenerating company

If companies aim to reinvent themselves in order to respond to the dynamics of change the roadmap presented above may be a useful travel guide. Learning by Sharing as an integrative learning model aims to close the gap between business and business schools and to integrate processes and products of thought. This will be explained in the following section.

4. INTEGRATING PROCESSES AND PRODUCTS OF THOUGHT THROUGH LEARNING BY SHARING

In our view, academic research emphasizes development and assessment of integrative theories that are generally applicable. This aim finds its roots in the nature of Basic Sciences which pursue the development of universal applicable knowledge. The most outspoken examples can be found in Mathematics and Physics. But practitioners and applied researchers look for different purposes of the applicability of scientific theory. They try to find applications of theory for specific competitive (business) contexts that can help in further improvement of business performance (Mahoney, Sanchez, 2004). Practitioners formulate strategic logic by applying theory to specific competitive contexts and test the logic in the market. The market response leads to refining or redefining a firm's strategic logic. Finally the firm's experiences in formulating and testing strategic logic inform researchers to develop new theory. It can be seen as a continuous process of collaborative double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996). Now we can raise the question, how do business schools deal with the demands of business in a dynamic environment?

Pfeffer and Fong (2002) emphasize the inertia of business schools that have not responded to the demands of business. Huff (2000) expresses concern that sheltered university business school research is being eclipsed both because of changes in demand of globalizing competition and by knowledge produced collaboratively, in practice. Education is an increasingly competitive business, where corporations spend more on business education than do business schools. More than 1600 corporations in the US possess formal corporate universities. If business schools do not identify and apply an adequate answer they may be bypassed in the future.

Limited ability to understand the real world

When researchers and practitioners are confronted with the dynamic complexity of the real world (Mahoney & Sanchez, 2004) it becomes evident how limited the ability of researchers and managers is to fully comprehend, describe, explain, and (perhaps) predict the world as it is and as it is becoming. A mission of reconnecting theory building from the outside and theory building from the inside requires a process of interconnected research and practice in which interactions between managers and researchers have a purposeful focus on theory building.

Combining products and processes of thought

Mahoney and Sanchez (2004) propose a new model for a pragmatic approach to theory building based on an interactive process of double-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996) between managers and researchers. Mahoney and Sanchez argue for the following sequence of activities:

Researchers should propose integrative theories thought to be generally applicable; researchers and managers should consider applicability of strategy theory to specific competitive contexts;

This strategic logic is then formulated by managers and applied to specific contexts;

The market response leads to refining or redefining strategic logic; and

The firm's experiences in formulating and in testing strategic logic inform researchers' effort to develop new strategic theory.

Double-loop learning may occur at different conceptual levels within organizations. There are yet a few examples of businesses that apply double-loop learning. An example that often is mentioned today is Philips that strives to transform itself from a technology driven company in the area's of lightning, medical instruments and microelectronics to a market-driven company with the new slogan "sense and simplicity". Reflecting on market impact, Philips applies double-loop learning to improve its design and to stay ahead of competitors. Other examples are Google and Apple, both in the field of high technology solutions that require double-loop learning from market responses to innovative products and services, such as Google earth and I-Tunes and I-Pod. Through constant innovation and monitoring market responses Google and Apple generate value for all stakeholders and increase their competitive advantage. Yet another example is the transformation of Lego transforming itself from a product driven company (selling Lego Bricks) in the late 90's to a demand driven company (offering children a way to design and create by themselves) in web-based communities requiring continuous and fluid double loop learning processes, listening and learning from customer behavior.

Questioning the theory in use through double loop learning

Sanchez (1996) suggests that organizational knowledge may exist in at least three forms, categorized by whether knowledge is based on process, purpose, or state levels of understanding. These levels of understanding characterize three forms of knowledge: know-how (practical understanding of how to do things), know-why (theoretical understanding of why things work) and know-what (strategic understanding of what things can be done). A fundamental benefit of double-loop learning is to improve the ability of managers to develop strategic theory in specific business contexts. By involving researchers who can help bring to the surface the assumptions, norms, and practices of an organization's theory in use (Argyris & Schön, 1996) organizations can reflect on their theories in use. Through synthesizing the notions of the previous sections on market dynamics, opportunities, generative organizations, learning by sharing and building dynamic capabilities and combining products and processes of thought we can formulate the implications for business and business schools and develop an initial integrated model for revitalization.

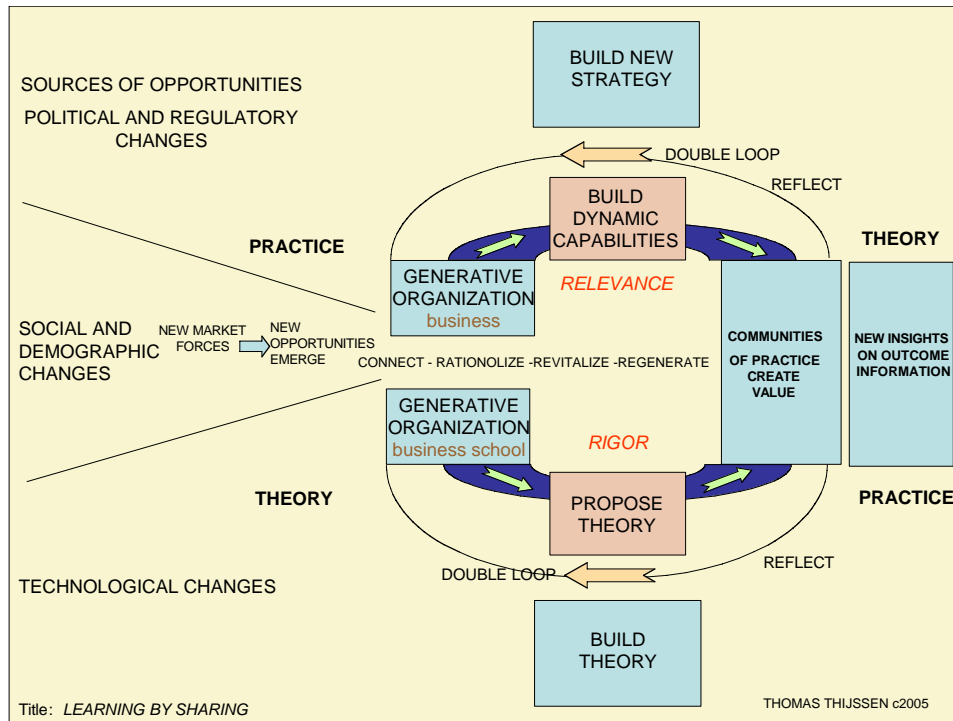
5. IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS AND BUSINESS SCHOOLS

The entrenched dissociations between the academic world and the business world seem to inhibit the development of better strategic management theory. Methods such as “the learning by sharing model”, and the “double-loop learning process” may help business and business schools to stay in concert and provide benefits to both.

The concept of Learning by Sharing between business and business schools lays the foundation for an *Integrated Revitalization Model (IRM)* as a promising alternative of dealing with the dynamics of change as pictured in figure 2. The IRM model is developed in several Learning by Sharing experiments over the past 10 years. It was developed in both educational settings at the University of Amsterdam, and in business and government settings. It engages practitioners, researchers and students in proposing theory and applying it in specific business and government contexts. Examples can be found in (Maes, 2004) the Executive Master of Information Management Programme, PrimaVera Research Group and the European Centre for the Experience Economy as well as the Sportlife Case on interactive media (Thijssen, Boswijk and Peelen, 2006), and a government project on combating poverty and social exclusion (Thijssen, 2006). Through a number of case studies in educational settings, business settings and longitudinal action research in the social services sector in the Netherlands (2002-2006) the learning by sharing model as a method for revitalization has been confirmed through improved organizational outcomes (relevance) and a contribution to theory development (rigor).

Figure 2 depicts the complex interaction between academics and practitioners. It visualizes the conceptual thinking of this paper.

FIGURE 2 Integrated Revitalization Model



Explanation of the Integrated Revitalization Model from left to right

According to Shane (2003) the three main sources of opportunities are (1) political and regulatory changes, (2) social and demographic changes and (3) technological changes. These changes represent market forces and present new opportunities. In the Integrated Revitalization Model, businesses and business schools do not ignore these opportunities but instead join forces in learning by sharing. In doing so, generative organizations are built according to Nadler et al. (1995). The learning by sharing effort follows the roadmap to revitalization according to Ghoshal and Bartlett (2000) through rationalization, revitalization and regeneration. Researchers propose theory and participate in communities of practice with practitioners to test the theory (Thijssen et al., 2002). Practitioners propose a strategy and build dynamic capabilities (Volberda, 2004) and participate in communities of practice with researchers and test the strategy.

The actual outcome of the revitalization process is reflected upon based on market responses (new insights on outcome information) and the double loop learning process is started. Based on this double loop learning process businesses build new and improved strategies and business schools build new theories.

In this way, combining products and processes of thought ensures sensitivity to market forces, to strategy development and theory building to enable revitalization of both businesses and business schools. Through learning by sharing, combining rigor and relevance, practitioners and academics are perhaps

better equipped to respond to change, innovate and to create value. The above Integrated Revitalization Model is considered a promising model for dealing with the dynamics in business and understanding the consequences for learning business.

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