



Forget About the Rest, **CAN YOU COMPETE AGAINST THE BEST?**

John O. Burdett

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Darwin taught us that it's not the strongest that survive; it's about how quickly you adapt. That you are still around after a new entrant has reinvented the game¹ – depends on how agile you are. Agility? Mindset and core competency are the start of it. Managing the business from the outside-in, a flat structure, simple processes, pushing decision-making as close to the customer as possible, a readiness to challenge the status quo and technology savvy are clearly part of it. But at the heart of it? How quickly you and your team learn. Indeed, the only truly sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly you, your team and your organization learn.

There are three plateaus of learning – see **Figure one**. At each level of learning the provider offers not only a higher level of value but greater agility.

- i. *Simple learning*. Instruction. Doing what we have always done, better. Small steps. Continuous improvement: e.g., six sigma. Mindset: transaction. Typically, a commodity business where little separates one provider from another. Value platform? Operational excellence – meeting and, where possible, exceeding the customer's needs. Competitive edge: building a reputation for performance excellence. Vulnerability: difficult to compete against providers who offer greater value. Core behavioural capability: relationship building.
- ii. *Learning how to learn*. Exploration. Recognising opportunity. A step change. Innovation, pushing beyond what we have done before. Moving to the next level. Adding to the firm's (differentiated) offering. Mindset: transition. Typically, a business sector where innovative competitors regularly push the value proposition into new territory. Value platform? Operational excellence + customer intimacy. Competitive edge: building collaborative partnerships. Vulnerability: lack of organization agility, e.g., moving too slow when what customers want to buy and/or how they want to buy it changes. Core behavioural capability: masterful coaching and being open to be coached by the customer.

1 "Only the paranoid survive." The late Andy Grove. Former (and first) COO, Chairman and CEO, Senior Advisor, Intel Corporation.



- iii. *Learning how to learn limited only by the imagination of those involved.* Play. Exploiting the power of curiosity. Moving beyond what others assume is possible. Typically, a business sector where market leaders regularly introduce new products and services. Mindset: transformation. Value platform? Operational excellence + customer intimacy + unique capability. Competitive edge: building “a first to market” capability. Vulnerability: loss of even a small number of those who drive the business’s “creative engine,” can put the brakes on the competitive edge. Core behavioural capability: curiosity.

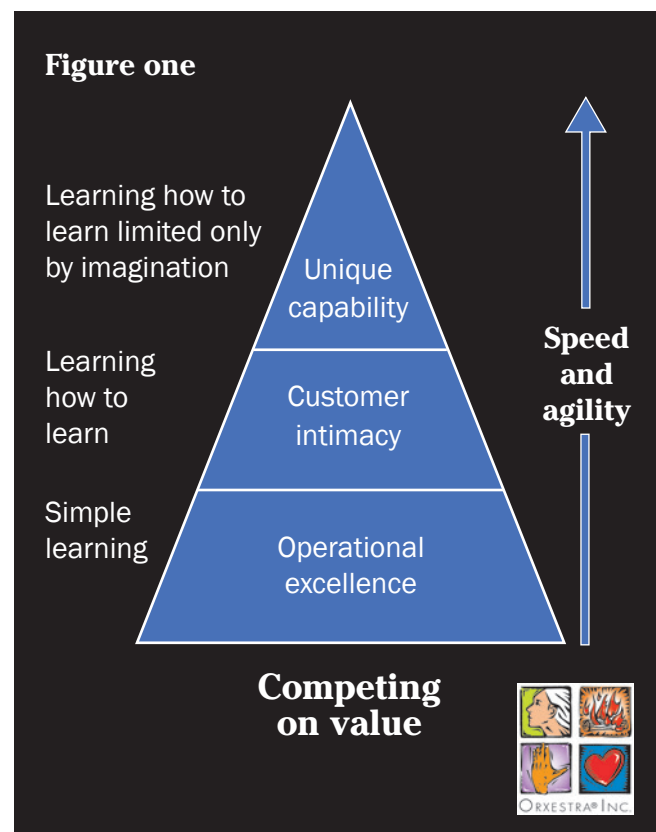
There is one mindset that the seller absolutely can’t afford: “I’ll change when I have to.” By then it is too late. Even in a commodity business where you deliver operational excellence, if your major competitor has a culture of learning how to learn, their operational agility and fleet-of-foot response to the customer’s emerging needs, give them an ongoing competitive advantage.

Then consider a business like Nokia. I can endorse, from personal experience, that they had a talented and dedicated workforce set within a culture of learning how to learn. At its pinnacle in 2007, Nokia had 51% of global market share in mobile phones. Until that is, in 2007, when Apple introduced the iPhone. Nokia were no longer fighting for market share with just another phone manufacturer ... they were suddenly competing with the imagination of Steve Jobs and Jony Ive. Nokia’s phone business was sold to Microsoft for \$7.2 billion six years later.

This introduces unique capability. It’s a value platform inhabited by the curious. And the difference that makes a difference? It can be summed up in one word. “Imagine.” Possibly the most powerful word in the leadership lexicon. Know that, only those who can see what others cannot see can do what others cannot do.

How do I know if there is a need to revisit how we create and communicate value?

1. Our learning mindset and value proposition are pretty much the same as they were before COVID. Note: success is to have access





to a range of products, processes, services and approaches that, as needed, are wrapped (collaboratively) around the customer's/client's emerging needs.

2. If we compare our offering with the “best-in-class” organizations in our sector: (1) we have little by way of a distinct point of competitive advantage; and/or (2) challenging the status quo is the exception rather than the rule.
3. On an annual basis we retain less than 80% of our customers/clients.
4. There is a mindset of “we are successful and thus we don’t really need to change.” In a turbulent and rapidly changing environment, the mindset you need is one of “continuously challenging the status quo.” Remember, only the paranoid survive! Without both: (1) a willingness to let go of the established way; and (2) psychological safety – being more of what you have always been is inevitable. Beginnings start with endings!
5. Our website has few (if any) referrals from customers/clients outlining *specifically* how we created value for them.

AGILITY



*Agility isn't an activity or even a way of working.
It's what results when the organization structure,
key processes, the technology employed and the
leadership mindset all recognise that the only truly
sustainable competitive advantage is how quickly the
organization learns. – John O. Burdett*





John O. Burdett

*“If you can’t
clearly
differentiate
yourself from the
competition, fail
now – it will save
time later.”*

– J. O. Burdett

JOHN O. BURDETT has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year. His ongoing partnership with TRANSEARCH International means that his proprietary work on talent acquisition, in any one year, successfully supports many hundreds of top leadership appointments on six continents.

He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around

the world in how to coach. He currently coaches a select group of CEOs. Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award.

John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. In addition to numerous business articles and twice being awarded article of the year by MCB publications, he has published 15 books on leadership, talent management, coaching and organization culture. A number of them bestsellers. His Talent Trilogy was completed in 2016. *The A-Z of Organization Culture* came out in 2017. *Tomorrow Will Be Different – Will You?* was published in 2020. In addition to the publications outlined, his five-part *Leadership Beyond Crisis Series* came out in 2021. He has recently completed his *Executive Playbook – It’s Time to Rethink Succession*.

