

Achieving Competitive Advantage in a High Turnover, Dynamic Market

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This paper uses a dynamic systems perspective to establish a causal model of how organizations can achieve and maintain competitive advantage in highly competitive situations where unique resources do not exist. The study is grounded in the resource based theory of the firm, and the model is developed from research surrounding this theory and from an extensive fifteen month in-depth examination of an organization in this type of market. Results suggest that keys to achieving a competitive advantage in this situation arise from the ability to establish a strong competitive culture, detailed execution of organizational processes, rapid assimilation of high caliber talent into the organization, and establishment of a constant sense of urgency in preparation and execution of plans. This is expressed as an integrated theory of competitive behavior in a causal model that illustrates the complex feedback nature of organizations in highly competitive, high turnover situations.

Key Words: Competitive Strategy, Achieving Competitive Advantage, Causal Analysis, Causal Modeling

Introduction

There has been a great deal of focus in organizational research on achieving and maintaining competitive advantage. One of the more prevalent theoretical lens through which competitive advantage is examined is the resource based view (RBV) of the firm (Barney, 1991; Barney, 2001). The key assumptions underlying RBV are that resources and capabilities are not equally distributed across organizations, that the differences in resources among organizations may be long lasting, and that this homogeneity and sustainability of resources explain why some organizations consistently outperform others (Barney, 1991; Barney, 2001; Barney, et al., 2001). Others have extended this argument to examine specific unique processes or capabilities that organizations use to either alter or integrate their resource base to achieve competitive advantage in dynamic markets (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003; Peteraf and Bergen, 2003; Barney, et al., 2001). Highly dynamic markets are those in which change is frequent and unpredictable, and stakeholders such as customers and competitors are continually shifting and are not readily identifiable (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). Moderately dynamic markets are those in which change occurs frequently, but usually within predictable patterns (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). In these markets, competitors and customers are well known or are readily identifiable.

While all this research provides valuable insight into achieving competitive advantage in dynamic conditions, its focus has largely been on organizations with shifting dynamics in the external environment such as shifting bases of customers, competitors, and suppliers. There is limited research that examines how organizations gain competitive advantage in contexts of dynamic internal environments such as those faced by high turnover organizations in highly competitive markets, although dynamic capabilities have been defined to include how firms manage both internal and external resources (Helfat and Peteraf, 2003). Furthermore, much of the work to date about competitive advantage has been grounded in a linear view. Yet, both the traditional RBV and the complementary dynamic capabilities view suggest that organizational competition can be highly complex and is a function of many interacting components. The purpose of our research is to develop a causal model that provides insight into achieving competitive advantage from a systems thinking viewpoint. While it is guided by RBV and dynamic capabilities as a theoretical lens, it extends existing understanding of achieving competitive advantage by illustrating the complex and interactive nature of competitive advantage in highly shifting, highly competitive markets. Specifically, it provides insight in the context of high turnover dynamic markets, yet is more broadly applicable to organizations in other types of dynamic marketplaces.

Methodology

It is critical to examine competitive advantage in light of an organization's social or behavioral phenomena, and to do so while framing the examination within the competitive context of the organization (Barney and Zajac, 1994; Oliver, 1997). In this study, we determined that the best approach to this was to conduct an in-depth, intensive study of a given organization that met several crucial criteria. One of these was that the organization exhibit high turnover. An underlying facet of sustaining a competitive advantage in the RBV is the possibility of competitive duplication of a firm's strategy (Barney, 1991). Examining a firm in a low turnover industry while the firm itself exhibits

high turnover would not ensure that this possibility of duplication existed. Thus, it was also critical that the organization's competitors also experienced high turnover. The RBV suggests also that resources must be valuable, rare, and imperfectly imitable (Barney, 1991). While most organizations have resources that fit this description, another criterion was that we could readily identify these and that the organization would allow us to examine these critical resources in sufficient depth. Another criterion was that resources available to the organization be largely available and widely distributed across organizations in the industry. This meets the heterogeneity assumption of the RBV (Barney, 2001). Finally, because we wished to examine achievement of competitive advantage in highly competitive marketplaces, another criterion was that the organization must exist in a continually and highly competitive industry.

The organization chosen that meets all these criteria was a highly competitive NCAA Division 1 college football program that had recently won a national championship in an undefeated season with a head coach who had never coached a team with a losing season. NCAA Division 1 college football is highly competitive, and only a few programs are able to sustain a competitive advantage, as evidence by the small number that have been consistently ranked in the top twenty over the last four decades (Table 1).

Rank	Team	Times in the Top Twenty	Total Points
1	Nebraska	28	368
2	Florida State	23	330
3	Michigan	28	314
4	Miami (FL.)	18	277
5	Oklahoma	19	277
6	Penn State	21	259
7	Alabama	19	252
8	Ohio State	20	252
9	Florida	14	188
10	Notre Dame	14	184
11	Tennessee	15	181
12	Southern Cal	15	178
13	Georgia	17	177
14	Texas	15	159
15	UCLA	15	156
16	Washington	15	154
17	Texas A&M	13	119

Table 1. Program Success Since 1975 in the Coaches Poll and the AP Poll (Recreation Sport Football College, 2005)

Furthermore, the average tenure for head coaches is about five years, and that the turnover rate for the last 35 years is 16.34% per year (NCAA Statistical Information, 2006). Estimates indicate that turnover among assistant coaching staff ranges between 30% and 35% per year. Players turn over on average about 25% each year. Any business

organization would find it difficult to achieve the type of advantage as the top three or four have managed. How to do it in a hypercompetitive environment with high turnover rates is the question that frames this research. While there are some features of competition in this arena that are unique to sports, there are features of most organizational competitive arenas that are unique to the given industry. Sports teams have been used by many organizational researchers to generalize to a broader range of organizations (Berman, et al., 2002; Staw and Hoang, 1995). We demonstrate as we build the causal model that there are many parallels between the football organization and more traditional business organizations. Therefore, this organization meets our crucial criteria, and findings from it are generalizable to a broader class of organizational settings.

Research Approach

The development of this model was based on an extensive review of the literature dealing with achieving competitive advantage from the RBV and the dynamic capabilities perspectives. Constructs were also drawn from extensive interviews, observation, and analysis of secondary data sources conducted using an ethnographic research methodology. The ethnographic approach produced a growing acceptance and trust of the investigator, which resulted in open, in-depth, and rich data collection as well as full access to all aspects of and data in the organization. This approach has been widely validated as appropriate when an intrusive methodology yielding rich data is required (Genzuk, 2003, Patton, 2002, Seale 1999). It allows the researcher to develop an insider's view of events, not only seeing, but also feeling what it is like to be part of an organization (Criswell, 1998). The ethnographic data collection lasted fifteen months in what constituted a full cycle of a competitive season in college football. Observation, data collection and review, participatory interviews and analysis were combined to produce the view gained of the elements that are critical to gaining competitive advantage in the high turnover, dynamic context of the organization. These elements were first interrelated by using causal analysis, or influence mapping. The resulting model is the focus of this paper. The causal model can be translated into a system dynamics structural model using an appropriate methodology for experimentation and further understanding of attaining competitive advantage in this dynamic context. This is the next step in the research.

Causal Model

The causal model is shown in Figure 1. The central element shown in the diagram is *success over time*, which is the key element of the competitive system. The arrows that flow into this element show the direct relationships that affect a program's success. All of the elements shown in the diagram interact together to create a complex feedback structure that determines, over time, the behavior of the competitive system. All of the elements are discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

The validity of the diagram was assessed in three ways. First, the elements included in it were chosen based on observations of behavior and discussions with participants in the study. Second, a number of participants were shown the diagram as it was developed, and all of these agreed that it draws a reasonable representation of the overall competitive structure. Third, the diagram was discussed with a number of coaches who did not participate in the ethnographic phase of the study. This occurred over a period of two or three months with a similar result of agreement with the structure.

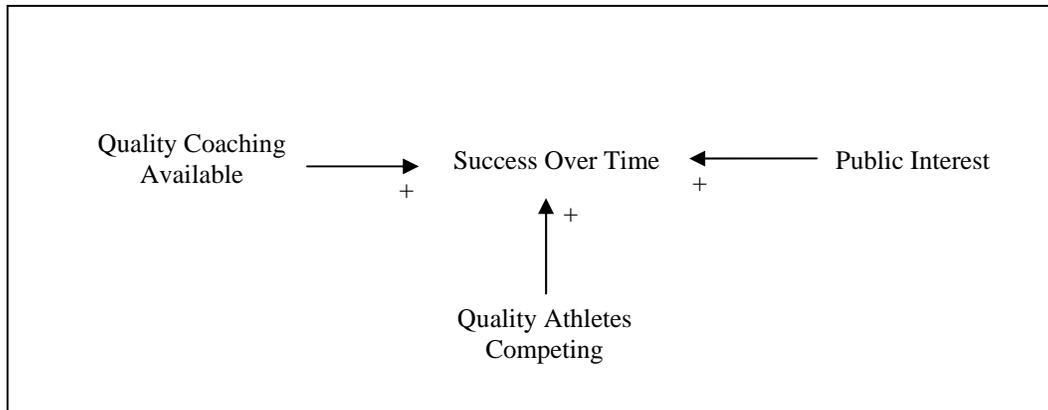


Figure 2. Success Over Time

While people are critical, few of these organizations are able to gain or sustain competitive advantage in the high personnel turnover context of this dynamic market. Recall from Table 1 that few teams have appeared in the top twenty consistently over time. Recall also that we noted earlier that player turnover is about 25% per year in any given team, and that the general coaching staff turnover rate is even higher. This means that not only do existing personnel and their collective knowledge and expertise leave, but also that new personnel with new knowledge and expertise arrive each year. The organization must continually recombine and reintegrate these elements in order to achieve success. The coaches and the systems they bring to an organization receive a great deal of attention in the press, particularly in the more successful programs. A review of this large body of press reports and commentary shows a widely varying array of motivational styles, views of competitive cultures, systems and facilities among the successful programs. These are also typical elements which are attributed to success in the competitive advantage literature (Berman, et al., 2002; Peteraf and Bergen, 2003). Yet successful programs are very different from each other in fundamental ways, so the question remains, how do organizations achieve competitive advantage in this environment? It's not just the people or the ability to attract top people, but something deeper in the way the organization manages these vital resources (Barney, 1991; Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000). To address this question in more detail each of the key elements mentioned in Figure 2 are reviewed in more depth.

The first elements are coaches and coaching. Figure 3 shows the elements that most directly impact the quality of the coaching staff. Head coaches receive a great deal of attention and are well paid by almost any comparative standard. But the ability of a head coach to produce success by himself is limited, as it is for most successful Chief Executive Officers. Senior executive talent, however, rarely turns over at the rate in other organizations as it does in college football, so the task becomes more formidable and the competition for the best talent more constant and intensive. Understanding what works in this environment can provide useful insight for other organizations with highly dynamic internal contexts.

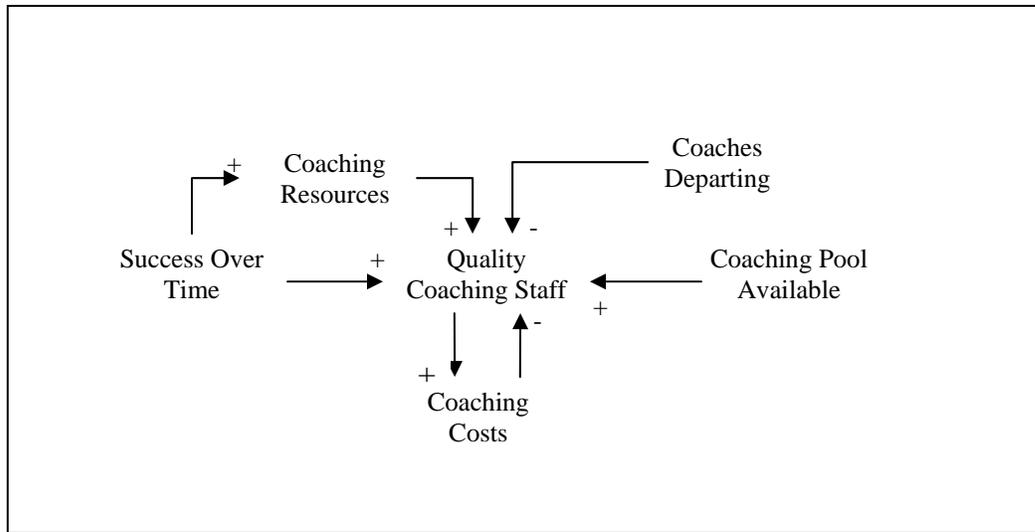


Figure 3. Coaching Staff Structure

Discussions with assistant and head coaches about why they chose one program over another yielded interesting insights. One that certainly is expected is the salary paid to a coach makes a difference in whether he joins or stays with a program, and is represented in Figure 3 as coaching costs. While it seems tautological on the surface, closer consideration reveals that it is embedded in a complex structure of competitive advantage. For example, the ability to pay higher salaries comes from a program’s success (gaining competitive advantage) which in turn generates larger coaching resource pools. Many people are drawn to join successful organizations, so there also is a direct link to the availability of quality coaches apart from the resources available to draw them. In other words, the more successful the program, the larger the number of coaches who want to join the program. While this is seemingly simple on the surface, it is the very simplicity underlying success that is often so complex and difficult to implement (Eisenhardt and Martin, 2000; Welch and Welch, 2005).

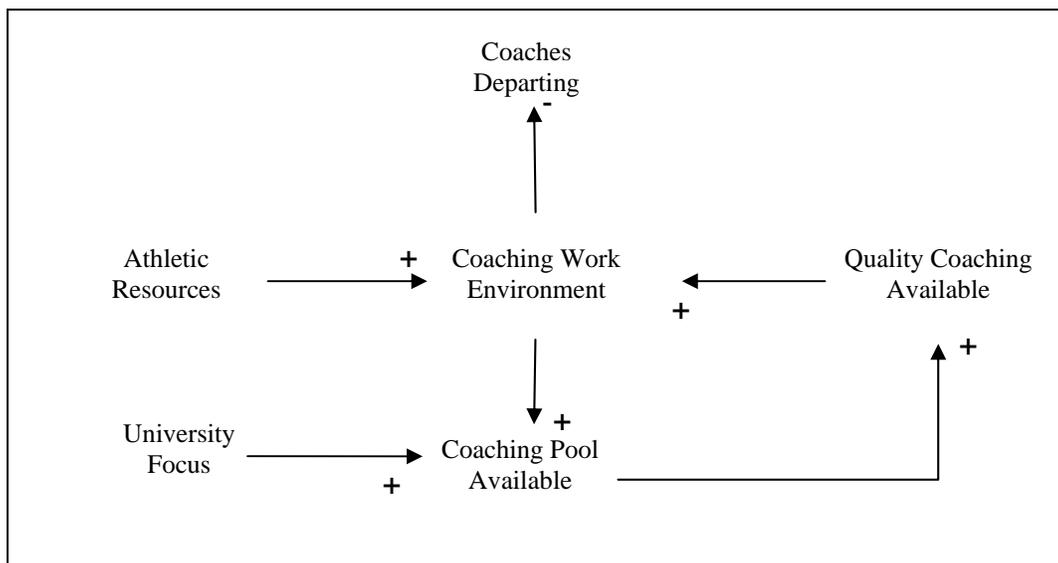


Figure 4. Coaching Environment

The ability of an organization to attract talent is also affected by the resources the organization has and the environment that a quality staff creates by the way in which they employ the resources. This is shown in Figure 4 with the links between athletes, athletic resources, quality coaching available and the coaching work environment. The observations of the behavior in the organization produced by these interactions and in discussions with coaches produced two key conclusions. The first was discussed by some coaches as creation of a “culture of winning.” It is developed in long hours of preparation and planning for all activity followed by similar long hours of evaluating the outcomes of these activities. This is followed by adjustment in the next series of preparations and planning. According to participants, an almost constant sense of urgency results. As one coach said, “the sense of urgency creates stress that pushes you to make sure you didn’t miss anything.” This continual focus on integration of resources is a significant part of achieving competitive advantage in this dynamic environment.

This is consistent with the focus on excellent execution that occurs in many high performing organizations (Welch and Welch, 2005). An extraordinary market strategy, a killer product development strategy and process or a great quality initiative means little without truly excellent execution. Fujio Cho, the CEO of Toyota, explains this key to strategy by focusing on the company’s relentless pursuit of continual improvement in virtually all processes of the business (Chandler, 2005). He says that there is great danger in losing momentum even if the company relaxes for only a moment. This same sense of urgency is what gives momentum to success in the organization in this study.

Achieving competitive advantage is also driven by the type of people an organization attracts and how these individuals compete once they are players or employees. This is reflected in the causal diagram of Figure 5 where the interactions among the key variables affecting recruiting, development and competition of the athletes are shown as is their relationship to achieving competitive advantage. The diagram displays a simple recruiting process that ensures adequate individuals with the adequate skills competing over time at a high level.

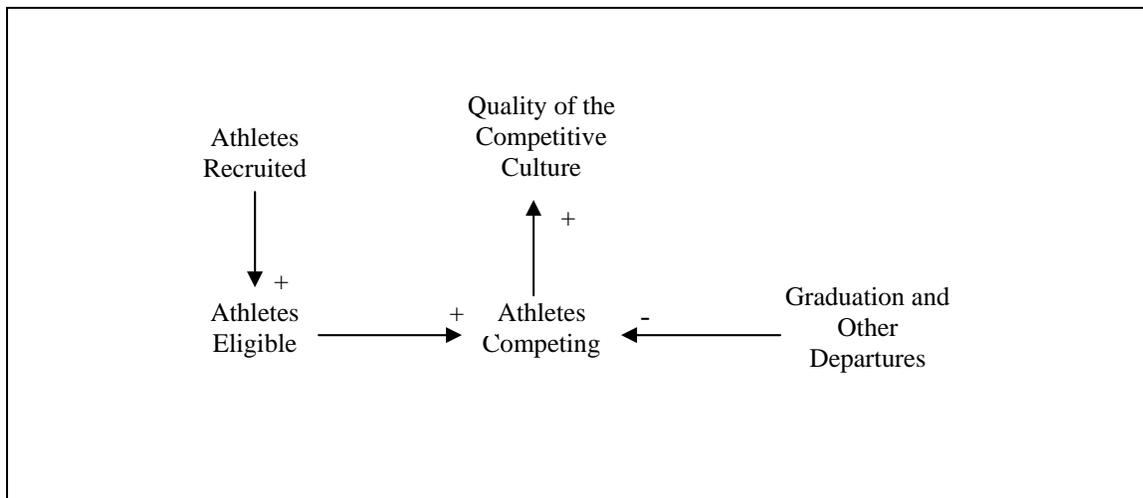


Figure 5. Athletes Source and Competitive Structure.

This culture of competition must be constantly redeveloped and refined because of the high human resource turnover involved. Even in environments with lower

turnover rates, it is a critical element in success over time. Thus, it is paramount to recruit individuals with the traits that lead to developing and sustaining a quality competitive culture. This is true in business as well where the focus in recruiting is often on obtaining particular skill sets or expertise. While these attributes are important, our findings indicate that the desire to compete is also key, and it stems from an innate nature that leads to continually contributing to the competitive culture of the organization. In one recruiting evaluation meeting where two individuals were being discussed, one coach said “he’s not as fast or as quick but he is a warrior. He is a competitor who wins! He’s who we want.” Getting people with that competitive spirit drives competitive advantage.

The structure of the *quality of the competitive culture* is further explained using elements from Figure 6. The systems available to support a competitive culture are essential, and they are created by the people in the organization over time. For this organization, these include the information system, the filming and film analysis system, the training and medical support systems and the public relations and marketing system. Since the technology and facilities for such systems are available to virtually any competitor, their inherent nature provides no real sustainable advantage. This is consistent with the RBV which maintains that heterogeneous resources cannot alone provide competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Rather it is the way in which an organization deploys, manages, reconfigures, or integrates them (Peteraf and Bergen, 2003). It is not simply having the systems that create advantage, but how they are employed in the operations of the system. It is here in superior operations that an advantage can be gained. Again, the key is the quality of the individuals involved and how they function together for advantage. This team based functioning is the responsibility of each individual in an organization and generally flows from the top manager's approach. Creating a sense of constant urgency and attention to detail were keys in this organization to produce the advantages sought through what essentially are common systems in the organization's competitive arena.

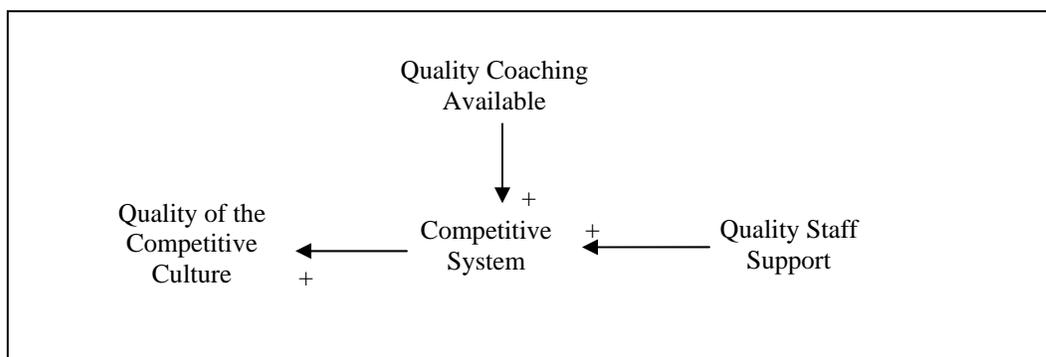


Figure 6. The Structure of the Quality of the Competitive Culture.

The quality of the competitive culture creates a sense that every opportunity is one to compete with an opponent as well as with one's self. To quote one coach, “after the play is over, it is no longer important. What you do in the next one is important.” Another individual expressed it as, “success is transitory. And so is failure. Prepare to compete. Success will follow.” Another said in an interview, “the greatest teacher is your competition. Study him and you have a chance to win on a play, in a game, in a season.”

Earlier, the concept of *quality athletes available* was introduced and shown to relate positively to *quality coaching available*. This was identified in interviews and in observations of the recruiting process as a critical element of success. A number of interpretations of what this meant were given. Of these, geographic advantage (athletes with within 250 miles of the university) was most often mentioned. This geographic advantage can be enhanced by success itself, because long-term success creates a national presence for a program (or a business) through media exposure. This is analogous to a company establishing, reinforcing, and defending a brand that carries some market advantage. The data introduced earlier about successful programs would indeed support this. Where the pool of athletes offers a natural advantage, football programs generally prosper. The pool is expanded as resources and success creates an ability to enter any market and compete for the top talent.

This pool of quality athletes is produced in communities where strong high school football programs are a tradition and where there are larger available pools of athletes. The nature of the structure is shown in Figure 7. There is a positive (reinforcing) feedback loop between the public’s interest and success overtime. These types of loops, both positive and negative, create the complexity in a system and create the dynamic behavior of organizations (Sterman, 2000). It is why we see industries cluster in a geographical area where the cluster creates a larger available pool of talent.

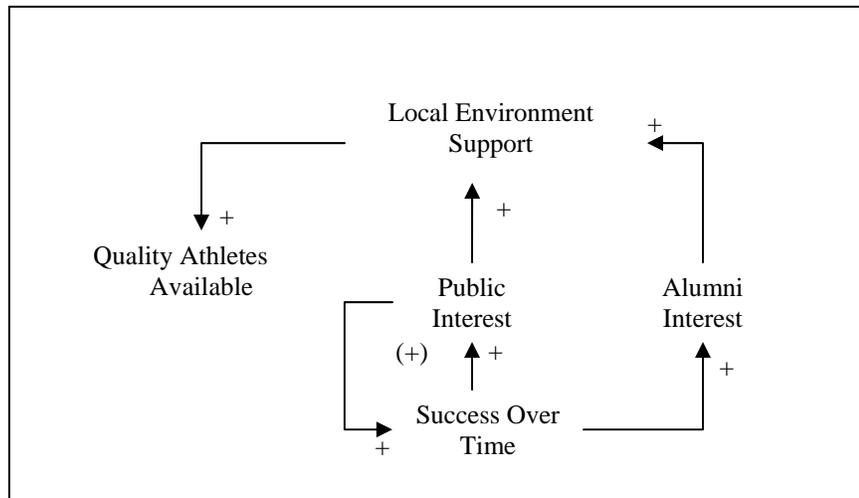


Figure 7. Available Athletes Structure.

Success also creates greater alumni support, which along with public interest, leads to a strong local environment of support. The supporting environment and interest in competitive football is an inherent element of the culture in some parts of the country, and it is strengthened by a local university’s success. For business, the environment of public and community support can provide a similar advantage.

The overall resources a university has affect the types and number of athletes that can be recruited and which athletes ultimately are recruited. This is especially true for the academic resources available to the athletes. The key elements of this structure are shown in Figure 8. The university's academic resources and the quality of its student body drive the rankings that place it in a given tier nationally. These national rankings generally are accepted and are available annually in such publications as US News and

World Report and others. The more highly ranked the university, the more likely it is that a broader group of athletes will be interested in it. Once recruited and enrolled, the more likely the athletes are to remain eligible and to matriculate successfully toward a degree when greater academic university resources are available. Most athletic departments maintain strong athletic academic support resources and study centers which when melded with the university's academic resources create a competitive advantage in recruiting. These resources, however, require money and so factor into the total budget of any athletic department and are not without bound. But in the most competitive programs, a great deal of emphasis on these structures is evident. They ensure the eligibility of athletes over time thus producing an advantage. As one coach said, "Without academic support, we don't have a team."

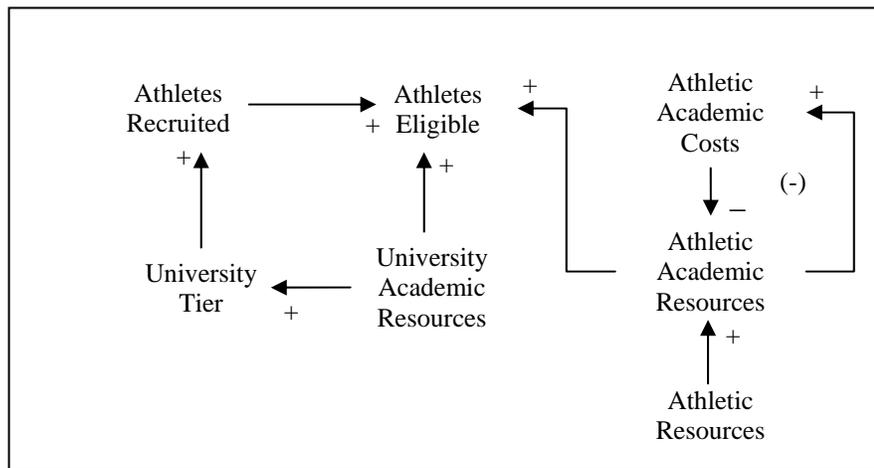


Figure 8. University Resources Structure

This also is true for the type of athletic facilities that are available. These facilities do vary widely in successful programs, but are attributes of all of them. In the most successful programs these include large stadiums, weight training facilities, extensive practice and practice support facilities, a medical and rehabilitation center, coaches support areas and offices, filming and film analysis facilities, and administrative support facilities. Of course, they all need extensive staff in these areas. Another key part of this support structure is the press and community outreach centers, programs and staff. The success of the program over time allows the investment necessary in these facilities and programs to maintain an advantage or to meet a competitor's investments to prevent it from gaining an advantage in this area. This structure is shown in Figure 9. The analogous support structures in business are no less critical. Providing personal and family support facilities are key features in attracting talent in many organizations as are the typical benefit programs of many organizations. As they do in the system studied, these elements provided an advantage through the people they attract and retain.

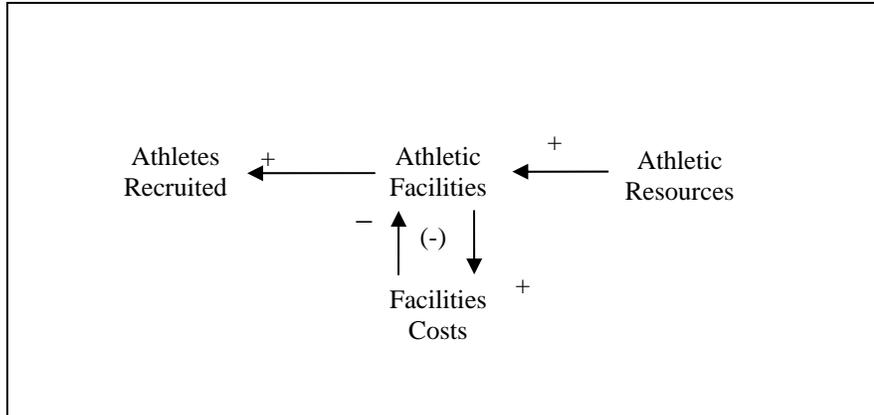


Figure 9. Athletic Facilities Structure

This discussion has focused structure of the recruiting process and the key elements in it. There is more to it than structure, be it simple or complex structure. It is the constant attention to it that is needed. In the intense environment of the game day, the emphasis on recruiting was not lost. A typical game day included review of plans, individual preparatory meetings, meals and the development of a quiet, intense focus to the tasks at hand. There was no spirited talk, light banter, idle conversation or wasted time. Yet, at the last meeting before traveling to the stadium, each coach reviewed his recruiting responsibilities and observations from his “Friday night trip.” Respondents indicated that this was done so that everyone could know the importance placed on it. Structure and process are important, but involvement and emphasis are also keys to a sound process. Although the need to focus on recruiting seems obvious, many executives give it limited emphasis in their organizations (Hymowitz, 2005). Recruiting is critical in developing competitive advantage because so many of the other elements depend on its outcomes; namely the people who work in the organization.

All of the costs shown in these diagrams can limit how competitive a program might become. Success in attaining competitive advantage breeds future success if it is carefully managed. It is success that creates the opportunity for direct revenue, external support from conferences, bowls, media and merchandise sales. It also creates private support of the programs from alumni and interested individuals in the public. Continual investment in the facilities, people and programs are necessary to remain competitive. This structure is shown in Figure 10.

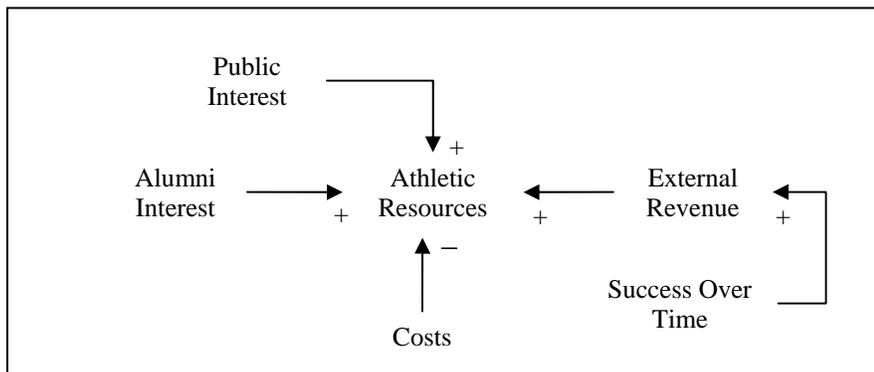


Figure 10. Athletic Resources Structure

Summary and Conclusions

Given the structure of this competitive system, there are several things one can conclude from looking at it carefully and analytically. The first is its inherent complexity and information feedback nature. The system is in constant flux and development, primarily because of the turnover of people and partly because of the evolving nature of competition. How competitive advantage is established and maintained in these hypercompetitive environments revolves around several key principles that can be translated to and further explored in a system dynamic model. These principles are derived from the review of the system's structure in the causal model. They are as follows:

- create and maintain a competitive culture;
- constantly evaluate and reevaluate available talent;
- constantly focus on the details of operating processes;
- create a constant sense of urgency.

Creation and maintenance of a competitive culture was shown as a key component in the causal diagram of the system and defined as the *quality of the competitive culture*. This competitive culture is one strength that enables an organization to establish and maintain a competitive advantage. As suggested by the RBV, many resources are not homogenous. Everyone has access to the same systems and has the same potential to leverage them. The ability of managers, whether coaches or senior executives, to establish a high quality competitive culture is one element that differentiates one organization from another. It is determined by the quality of the individuals involved, their competitive intensity and what they stress and focus upon to establish the culture.

One key to creating this culture is establishing and constantly reinforcing the need to compete in every situation. It includes viewing competition with others as an opportunity to not only win but to be better in the future. Whether one wins or loses in short-term tactical situations is not as important as what is learned from both winning and losing. A single play, a single sale, a single deal is important, but what you take from the experience is also key to attaining competitive advantage. In a competitive culture, organizational members approach the next play, the next sale, or the next deal with a memory of what was learned, not just what resulted from prior ones. Another key to competitive culture is learning from the competition by studying how they compete. Understanding one's competition stems directly from the quality of the competitive system, which is fostered by management and composed of the physical monitoring and evaluation systems in place.

Another key principle is a clear focus on the constant evaluation and reevaluation of available talent both inside and outside an organization. It is obvious that a recruiting focus is required in high turnover organizations because of the significant loss of people. What is not as obvious, however, is how intense and consuming this focus must be to gain competitive advantage in a dynamic marketplace. This intensity is manifest in the frequent, detailed and formal performance reviews of both players (workers) and coaches (managers). In most business situations, there are annual performance reviews, or perhaps more frequently in some organizations. While there may be frequent coaching in

business, it is rarely as frequent a formal process found in most competitive athletic organizations. In the subject organization of this study, the process was formal, thorough, and performed daily. As an example, at a review session for a previous game, which the team had lost, one coach commented, "I did a lousy job. I let it get away." Another said, "I've watched the film three times and I know I could've been better." The self-evaluation focused on individual responsibility and improvement is a key element in the execution that precedes competitive advantage. One coach commented, "I'm tough on the players when they make mistakes, but they make mistakes because of me. I can always do a better job of teaching." This type of individual attitude and self-evaluation process produces continual improvement that leads to advantage.

A second key element to this principle is the constant stress placed on recruiting and developing talent. Everyone in the organization must participate in the process, so daily attention must be placed on it. This is in sharp contrast to many business organizations, which enter a recruiting process only when there is an immediate need. Immediate need is important, but it is better to view management of recruiting and development as a long-term dynamic process in this type of dynamic market. As previously mentioned, people should not be evaluated simply for a set of skills, but rather for their competitive nature, intelligence and potential. In the winning organization we examined, an individual's competitive nature is weighted as highly as the skills possessed because of how critical it is in fostering the competitive culture.

The third principle is an almost consuming attention to the processes of the organization that goes beyond an interest in their nature and structure. It is in their performance – what they deliver. This focus is fostered by not only ensuring careful crafting of the processes, but with frequent, repeated attention to the details of how they are functioning. Some would call this micromanagement and believe it is negative practice. It is not making the decision for the individuals responsible for the processes or certainly not doing it yourself. Rather, it is an immersion in the details through probing behavior and discussions with the people operating the processes.

The goal of this attention to detail is to carefully prepare for and control every competitive opportunity. Effective execution of any plan depends on this attention to detail. Grand strategy or careful tactical plans are only as effective their execution. Deep process contingency planning is a key element in this process. For example in this football organization, pose the question, what do I do if my quarterback is injured? Put in a replacement is the obvious answer. Simple yes, but inadequate because it is likely the original game plan may not best suit his skills and ability. It is necessary to have a "contingency game plan" that fits this new situation. This is "surface contingency planning." "Deep contingency planning" would provide an option if the opposing team's quarterback was injured. Preparation of a plan for this contingency is deep planning and requires an almost obsessive preparation for any eventual outcome.

The last critical principle is to create a constant sense of urgency. None of the elements can be effectively established without this final step. This urgency stems from the attention given every competitive opportunity. Another element in its creation is to always perform detailed post competitive analysis, where the performance of every individual and the effectiveness of every process is carefully evaluated and covered in open forum with everyone. Correcting problems and reinforcing success are given strong attention with a sense of urgency to build on success and correct failure.

We have discussed the particular structure of the competitive system faced in NCAA Division I football programs. From this structure and how it is managed, we have offered insight into the key elements that are important to sustained advantage. We believe the elements we have discussed are analogous to most competitive organizations, especially to those where the turnover of people is high. Understanding the system structure, focusing on execution, and application of the principles we discussed produce the advantage that some organizations possess.

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