

A Qualitative Research to Define the Successful Decision Making Competencies in Public Sector: Evidence from Turkey

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to determine the perceptions on “strategy” of the executives in the public institutions, as well as to define the strategic decision making competencies of them through a case study method. To this end, 168 executives were asked to indicate a critical incident about the behaviors - antecedent of succesful strategic decision making- of an executive/leader whom they accept as successful strategic leader. It was also aimed to determine what these executives understand from the term of strategy. The interview forms were interpreted by two researchers seperately through the content analysis method and the management competencies related to a succesful strategic decision making and the perceptions of managers toward the term of strategy were determined. According to the results of analysis, 8 strategic decision making competencies and the frequency table of the perceptions towards the the term strategy (definitions of strategy) were derived.

Key words: Strategic Decision Making, Competency, Strategic Decision Making Competencies, Content Analysis, Public Sector.

Introduction

Considering that the concept of “management” is almost perceived as “strategic management” it is then understood how prominent the strategic management becomes for the executives in every echelon. Thus the true perception of strategic decision making competencies becomes increasingly important (Lim, 2012).

On the other hand, it is also observed that there appears some inconsistencies in the researches conducted on the strategic decision making concept (Elbanna and Child, 2007). Moreover, researchers studying on the relations of strategy and culture assert that it is as well necessary to focus on the effects of the cultural variations and world views of the executives on their strategy applications (Fleming et al. 2009; Gerhart and Fang, 2005; Etgar and Rachman-Moore, 2011; Wang et al. 2012; Elbanna and Child, 2007; Wilson, 2003; Pettigrew, et. al; 2002; Brouthers, et. al. 2000). It is therefore an academic and managerial necessity to define the “perceptions of strategy” and “strategic decision making competencies” of the executives.

Moving forward from the views and assessments above, it is aimed in this study to define the perceptions (ideas) of strategy as well as those of the competencies of the successful strategic decision makers in a public institution through the interviews/questionnaires including critical events and open-ended questions. To this end it, is assessed that this study, having been conducted in qualitative research format, will contribute in the studies aiming to define and improve the strategic competencies of the executives.

In the following part of the research, the concepts related to the strategic decision making and competency modeling is priorly explained which is followed by the part of methodology in which the method of content analysis is also explained. Concerning the part of findings the frequency tables are provided on the two main research issues; one being strategic decision making competencies and the other being the perception of strategy. Finally, under the part of discussion and conclusion, primary findings of the research study are interpreted as to put forward the propositions for the researchers and practitioners.

Strategic Decision Making

Strategic decision making is placed in the center of the researches triggered by the studies of Miles and Snow (1978) and Porter (1980) which were completed 30 years before and have been influential since then (Eisenhardt and Zbaracki, 1992:17). However development an informative systematic on the strategic decision making which may be regarded as the backbone of the strategic management, have long been a challenging issue for the academicians.

Considering that the strategic decision making is regarded as a decision making type of unclear conditions even in the strategic decision making related researches having been conducted 30 years before (Schwenk, 1984:111), it should not be a surprise to witness that this unclarity reflects upon the methods and findings of the studies on strategic decision making. That is why the researchers dealing with the strategic decision making process are all focused on the different premises, characteristics and results (Huff and Reger, 1987; Rajagopalan et al. 1993).

Eisenhardt and Zbaracki (1992:17), even in their research completed 20 years ago where they had investigated the last 30 years of studies on the decision making issues of those times, putting forward the idea that the thoughts, senses and behaviours of the decision makers had been neglected, thus asserted that a more realistic approach towards the concept of strategic decision making should be developed. In the concurrent researches sharing the same approach, different findings have been reached as well. For example,

the individuals having a wider scope of strategic decision making may perform a more powerful analytic ability and cognitive competency (Bird, 1988; Hitt and Tyler, 1991). However the reliability of such a finding is quite dubious in our country.

On the other hand, strategic decision making has also been assessed in organizational level yielding some different results. For example, it was put forth that the speed of decision making is higher in the centrally biased organizations (Wally and Baum, 1994). However the reliability of this finding is also dubious for some cultures including Turkey. Thus it should not be over estimated that the reliability of the researches on strategic decision making both in individual and in organizational levels are highly dependant on the cultural variations and features.

As such, it is a frequently emphasized fact that the individuals from different cultures may adopt different approaches in decision making (Hofstede, 2001; Carr and Harris, 2004). This assertion was also reflected in the studies on strategic decision making and the studies dealing with the differences in the strategic decision making of the executives from different cultures have gained prominence in the strategic management literature (Cheng et al. 2010; Axelsson et al. 1991).

Another focus in strategic decision making studies is the issue of models and/or approaches (types) in strategic decision making. It may in general be referred that the two main/dominant models/approaches in strategic decision making literature are; ideal (synoptic) approach which foresees rational decision making depending on the assessment of all the options available and a more realistic incremental one paying attention on the nature of the actual decision making and foreseeing the selection of the best option among the most important choices (Hang and Wang, 2012:93). However it also observed that these two options can not be differentiated from each other in practicality.

In summary, even though many researches have been conducted in strategic decision making for the last 40 years by the academicians and practitioners, the concepts of strategic management and "strategy" are still open to investigations as problematic areas (Kelly and Gennard, 2007; Nooraie, 2012). In this context, in the framework of the above mentioned assessments it is understood that the researches to be conducted in the areas of strategic decision making should be tied to the cultural and individual levels. Moving forward from this necessity, it is aimed in this study to gather more realistic and practical findings towards the definition of our own executives' strategic decision making competencies.

The Concept of Competency and Competency Modeling

Although initially introduced into the literature in 1950s, the concept of competency modelling was introduced by the studies of David McClelland (in 1973). McClelland (1973), criticizing the the deficiency of the classical IQ tests to represent the performance developed a competency based metric approach in evaluating the performance. In the essence of this approach lies the employment of the distinctive behaviours between strong and poor performances in the identification of the performance measurement (Stevens, 2012: 89).

McClelland (1973:8), emphasize that in order to evaluate the effectiveness of performance it is necessary to understand what the individual is actually doing and as well to carefully analyse the behavioral output and to identify the nature of the defined jobs. These may be referred as competencies later.

Considering the competency definitions, knowledge, capability and ability which are effective on the performance are seen to be prominent in this context (Athey and Orth, 1999; Campion et al. 2011; Soderquist

et al. 2009; Chen and Naquin, 2006; Parry, 1996). Thus, competency modelling refers to the sum of knowledge, ability and capabilities necessitated to demonstrate performance in a job. (Kochanski, 1997; Mansfield, 1996; Mirabile, 1997; Parry, 1996; Rodriguez, et al. 2002). According to Boyatzis (1982: 21), who is referred to in any study on competency and who became utmost influential in the spread of the concept of competency in the academic and business circles, competency is comprised as the features of an individual as motives, specifications, abilities, self images and social roles to make him/her demonstrate high performance in the work.

The concept of competency is referred solely at an “organizational” context in the “management and business” literature in the beginning whereas it is more widely accepted in the area of Human Resources Management in the context of job competencies and individual competencies later. Hamel and Prahalad (1990), asserting that an organization should depend on its inherent capabilities on the products and services to maintain its competitiveness, name these competencies as “core competencies”. Hence, in the literature, the individual and job related competencies being dealt within the context of Human Resources Management are referred to as “individual competencies” or “job competencies” whereas the organizational competencies are referred to as “organizational” or “Core” competencies. Similarly, concerning the competencies of the successful executives, we can mention the “executive competencies” (Burgoyne, 1989; Collin, 1989; Raelin ve Cooledge, 1995). In this context, the organizational and the executive competencies are in harmony with each other (Abraham et al. 2001: 842). Moving forward from the definition of competency, management competency can be defined as the sum of knowledge, capability and abilities performed by the executives having considerable effects on business performance enabling them to demonstrate high level performance in their managerial actions (Çetinkaya, 2009: 220; Mert et al. 2010:104).

Although it has an ever increasing area of applications, competency modelling still lacks a sufficient conceptual fundamental as the exact meaning of competency may vary according to conditions it is referred to (Schippmann, 2000). The real advantage of this process put forth by McClelland (1973) is the possibility to establish a direct linkage between the behavioral competencies and performance outputs, rather than a linkage between the individual and cognitive specifications. However the approach of McClelland (1973) is still far from sufficiency in defining the executives’ competencies. Because the performances of executives proportionally includes less observable behaviours while they inherit an adaptation responding to the inner and outer changes (Stevens, 2012: 90). That is why there appeared different views on the employment of the competencies. While the prior pivots of the competency see the competency movement as a revolutionary

phenomena (Lawler, 1994; McClelland, 1973; Boyatzis, 1982); some other researchers criticize the validity of this approach (Stevens, 2012; Barrett and Depinet, 1991). Therefore, even though the competencies have been in usage since 1970s there are still some debates on some issues such as; the levels of the competencies (individual/organizational), their measurabilities (observable / abstract), their degrees (effective - high performance) and their types (general / managerial, definite / technic). Therefore the researchers have developed some methods like critical events technique (Flanagan, 1954), behavioural events interview (Boyatzis, 1982), leader evaluation centers (Finkle, 1976; Bray, 1982).

In the critical events technique used in this research and is as well regarded as an approach depending on the technique of research (Uyargil, 2008) it is requested from a mixed group of employees, through the interviews and meetings to describe the critical (exemplary) events leading high/medium and low performances by referring to the experiences. Later on the exemplary events are analysed as to define the specifications, knowledge, abilities etc. to deliver the competencies (Armstrong, 2006: 196; Boyatzis, 1982: 50).

Method

The method adopted in this research is qualitative method which is a type of method during which the qualitative techniques such as observation, interview and document analysis are employed and where a qualitative process is followed as to put forward the perceptions and events are put forth in a natural, holistic and realistic manner (Yıldırım ve Şimşek, 2003: 19). Although there may be different techniques employed in the qualitative researches the mostly preferred of them is the method of content analysis (Holsti, 1969). Content analysis is generally used to analyse the indefinite themes and the sub themes if there is any. (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2003). In this research also, the method of content analysis is conducted in the analysis of the data gathered from the participants.

The content of this research is comprised of the low and medium level executives in a public institution and the non-executive employees in it. In this context the sample group is comprised of the 250 employees and executives of this organization dispersed into the 5 campuses in Ankara and in Istanbul. Survey method is used to collect data within this research where two questions were asked to the participants:

1. What do you understand from the concept of "Strategy" What is strategy in your mind? How can you describe strategy?
2. Think of an executive (leader) that you are familiar who makes strategic decisions. Which competencies (specifications, abilities, behaviours and attitudes) of this executive do contribute him to make successful (correct, resulting) decisions? Give an example that this executive makes a strategic decision.

Hence, the ideas of the participants on the concept of strategy as well as the specifications (strategic decision making competencies) of the executives making strategic decisions are described. The subject people of the interview are collocated by sampling method and 175 out of 250 interview forms distributed to the participants were returned back. Thus the proportion of returned forms is 70 %. After the content analysis there were

no competency identified in 7 out of 175 returned forms. Therefore 168 forms are found eligible for the evaluation. Of the subject people 35 % is mid level, 65 % is low level executives and non-executive employees. Average age is 35 and all the participants are university graduates.

Findings

Returned interview forms (including bilateral interviews as well) were undergone to the content analysis by two researchers. Starting from the examples provided by the participants on high performance, the competency themes of the executives in the relevant organizations, perceptions on the concept of strategy and their frequencies are listed by the researchers in an independent manner from each other. The consistency among the coders (researchers in this study) poses importance with regard to the data security during the content management. In this context the consistency between two different coders results in the content analysis are calculated in a way put forth in the formula of Miles and Huberman (1994) as; $\text{Agreement of the views} / (\text{Disagreement of the views} + \text{Agreement of the views}) \times 100$. In accordance with that approach the ratio of inter-rater reliability of the coders is found as 91 %.

Afterwards the themes and points on which two coders have disagreements have been brought to conclusion by the discussions and interpretation meetings with the participation of two additional high level specialists. As such the results of the content analysis in connection with the frequency levels attained on the concept of strategy and those of on the decision making competencies are shown in the Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

In this context totally 17 different depiction of strategy were gathered in accordance with the analysis of the participant perceptions/descriptions. The frequencies of these descriptions vary between 1 and 85 as shown in the frequency tables.

Similarly after the analysis of the exemplary events totally 39 different strategic decision making competency were defined as mentioned by the participants to be relevant with the executives in the organization. Concerning the frequency table, the competency frequencies vary between 1 and 78 where the total number of frequencies is 656. Among them; "decisiveness", "sophistication", "far fetchedness", "analytic thinking", "openness to communication" are the mostly depicted competencies. Concerning the second phase of the content analysis 39 competencies defined are summarised and regrouped into 8 main competency categories as shown in the Table 3 by 4 people expert group (2 of whom are the authors of the study).

Table-1. Content Analysis Results: Strategy Definition Frequency Table

	DEFINITION/MEANING	FREQUENCY
1	Method adopted to reach the targets/objectives	85
2	High level planning and decision making process	19
3	High level management	13
4	Competition management process	11
5	Objective – Oriented Resource Planning	9
6	Objective oriented planning	6
7	Objective oriented Systematic steps	6
8	Methods to shape the future /Foreseeing the future	4
9	Long term management process	3
10	Ways adopted to reach the success	3
11	Art of decision making	2
12	Ways adopted to reach the vision	2
13	Success – oriented planning	1
14	High level rule definitions	1
15	Expevtations management process	1
16	Art of analysis	1
17	Thinking management	1
	TOTAL	168

Table-2. Content Analysis Results: Strategic Decision Making Competencies Frequency Table

	COMPETENCY	FREQUENCY
1	Decisive	78
2	Sophisticated	53
3	Far fetched	52

4	Analythic Thinking	50
5	Communacative	36
6	Respecting the employees	25
7	Risk management and risk taking	23
8	Having vision	22
9	High leadership features	22
10	Intelligence	20
11	Understanding the big picture	19
12	Transfer of authority	19
13	Experience	18
14	Self reliance	18
15	Ability to motivate the people	18
16	Innovative and creative	17
17	Courageous	17
18	Strong minded	16
19	Cool - headed	16
20	Taking initiative	15
21	Toleration	12
22	Foresighted	10
23	Balanced and consistent	9
24	Savory	9
25	Organization capability	9
26	Endurance	8
27	Reliable	7
28	Modest	7

29	Patient	6
30	Defining the right priorities	5
31	Having Genuine ideas	4
32	Proactive	4
33	Ability to control	4
34	Taking responsibility	2
35	Realistic	2
36	Educative	1
37	Serious	1
38	Flexible	1
39	Disciplined	1
	TOPLAM	656

Table-3. Competency Grouping Of Strategic Decision Making

	COMPETENCY GROUPS	FREQUENCY
1	Decisiveness and resolution (decisiveness, self reliance, Strong minded, patience and endurance)	126
2	Visionery (foresighted/far fetched/visionary, understanding the big picture, innovative and creative)	120
3	Knowledge and Experience (sophisticated, experienced)	71
4	Analythic thinking (analythic thinking, intelligence)	70
5	Risk acceptance (risk acceptance and risk management, taking initiative, courageous, cold headed)	70
6	Employee focused (open to communication, respecting the employees)	61
7	Management and leadership (high leadership features, motivator, transfer of authority)	59

8	Savory (tolerant, savory, modest, reliable)	36
	TOTAL	613/656

Discussion and Result

Generally speaking these studies accomplished on the issue of strategic decision making which is deemed to be the most problematic and most fundamental area of the strategic management show that the the strategic decision making are affected by the cultural and individual factors and therefore the applications of the results of the research studies attained so far to the different cultures may pose some negative concerns.

That is why it is deemed necessary to take a current overall picture of our own strategic management affairs by taking both the local social cultural motives of Turkey and as well the inherent organizational cultures of the national organizations. In this context, especially the conclusions regarding how the concept of strategy and the competencies linked to it are perceived may be beneficial for us to evaluate the current situation in comparison with the desirable conditions, as to define the gaps properly and take the necessary precautions appropriately. As such, it is aimed in this study to reach some findings on the overall strategic decision making competencies and and on the perceptions of the executives on the concept of strategy. The findings attained are summarized in three different tables as described in the previous part, the detailed evaluations of which are mentioned below.

Looking at the frequency table of the answers of the executives to the questions related to the conceptual definition of the term of “strategy” In table 1, it is observed that the majority (50 %) is interpreting the concept as “the way/method folowed to attain the objectives/targets” It also observed that this description is followed by another description as “high level management planning” in second order (19 %) by frequency as placed in the second and third lines of table 1. And concurrently the descriptions highlighting the factor of “competetiveness” (6 %) and again the descriptions highlighting the “objectives” (13 %) follow respectiely. Finally the descriptions related to the “long term affairs” (4 %) comes next.

As such the “the attainment of the objectives” is observed to be the mostly referred issue in table 1. (50 % + 13 % = 63 %). In other words, the term of strategy is linked with the concept of “the employment of the prominent methods/ways/plannings and systematic functions to attain the objectives” As such, while the majority of the partipants define/perceive the strategy as a tool employed by the high management echelons to reach the objectives (63 % + 19 % = 82 %), competetiveness and future orientation which are the indispensable terms of the strategeic management literature, are mentioned in a lesser degree (% 6 + % 4 = % 10). There are 39 cmpetencies defined within the context of the strategic decision making competencies which have a total frequency value of 656. When examining the frequency table on the strategic decision making competencies in table 2, the first five of the mostly referred competencies are; “decisiveness” (12 %), “sophistication” (8 %), “farfetchedness” (8 %), “analythic thinking” (7 %) and “opennes to

communication" (5 %). However, competencies are grouped as shown in table 3 in order both to group the similar ones closely and to provide a more accurate priority listing of them. Thus the overall 39 competencies defined with 656 frequency settings in the study are regrouped under 8 competency groups having 613 frequency settings (as to cover 93 % of overall frequency settings in the study). According to this categorization 8 competency groups are respectively defined as; decisiveness and resistance (20 %), visionary thinking (20 %), knowledge and experience (12 %), analytic thinking (11 %), risk acceptance (11 %), employee focusing (10 %), management and leadership (10 %) and savvy (6 %). According to these findings, it is deemed high priority that he executive/leader should be decisive and resistant as well as he/she demonstrate a visionary attitude. Thus a farfetched attitude combined with a self reliant character are highlighted as the main features bringing high performance in decision making. However it is deemed necessary to emphasize that, although the dominancy of the personal features of the executives acquired within the study may constitute a symptom of the traditional high power distance and vertical socialistic character in our social culture, it may yet be a hasty inference to depend solely on one study and there needs to be similar other studies to support such a deduction. When evaluating the findings of the study on the basis of the consistency between the emphasis on strategy and that on strategic decision making, it is observed that the strategy is perceived as a structure in which the high executives benefit from their own personal features as the most important tool to attain the objectives. On the other hand, it is also necessary to consider that the inherent institutional culture of the subject public body of the study may be dominant since there is only one public institution that the study was conducted in. However, we, as the researchers, assess that our social cultural features have posed a considerable prominence on the findings we attained. In this context, in the studies completed by Mert et al. (2013:204) where the strategic management approaches are evaluated in connection with the social cultural dimensions, suggesting that the most appropriate approach of strategic management (the best strategy practise) is the planning of strategy initially by the executives which is to be followed by a SWOT analysis, and afterwards the attainment of harmony with the environmental and cultural factors, it is further suggested that the; learning, entrepreneurship, cognitive approach, those evaluated as individual-focused features, are lacking priority attentions in the implementation of strategy. It is thus assessed that the findings of this study are comparatively in line with those of the other study accomplished by Mert et al. (2013). Researchers of some studies on managerial competencies (Example., Boyatzis, 1982; Çetinkaya, 2009), assert that the competencies may show variations in accordance with the managerial levels (high, medium, low). As such, in this study, the strategic decision making competencies are defined towards the high level echelons. Therefore it will be useful to investigate if these competencies are varied according to the managerial levels or not in the future empirical studies.

There are as well some limitations of the study. By saying this, the defined competencies in the research are limited with the views of the participants. On the other hand, it is necessary to conduct other research studies in different organizations (in public or private sectors) with the inclusion of bigger sample groups to increase the generalability of the

results of this study having been conducted in only one public institution. Separately, it is worth mentioning that, besides the definitions of the strategic competencies, there is a necessity for additional qualitative and quantitative researches to shed light on how to measure these competencies. Another limitation of the study is that the high level executives are taken out of the sample group while it is only comprised of the low and middle group executives. Thus it will be useful to include the high level executives in the future researches to be conducted.

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