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INSTITUTIONAL THEORY AND STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

by

Mia Raymond, Gerry Johnson, and Royston Greenwood
(Strategic Management: A Multiple Perspective Approach, edited by Mark Jenkins and V. Ambrosini, Palgrave)

I Basic Principles

The arguments put forward in most books on strategic management are typically based on two core assumptions. The first is that the world of the manager – the external and internal environment of organisations – is an objective reality capable of examination and analysis. The second, and related assumption, is that managers themselves behave in an essentially rational analytic way to make sense of that world. Institutional Theory is based on an alternative set of assumptions that centre on the concept of *social construction* – i.e. that the external and internal world of organisations is that which is subjectively understood or perceived by people in those organisations. That is, managers – beyond being influenced by social norms and expectations – perceive the world in a particular way and then behave accordingly. In consequence, they help create a world as they see their perceptions.

The basic principles of Institutional Theory are now summarised, and the remainder of the chapter shows how these relate to key issues in strategic management.

1. Organisations are not autonomous agents seeking an immediate economic, operational but are not self-referential social web of norms and expectations that constrain and shape managerial choice. These social norms – or *logics* – provide overarching frameworks for interpreting social situations and possible appropriate purposes and behaviours. A manager's choice of strategies is, thus, not as self-referential as had a rational entrepreneur's social prescriptions.
2. Social prescriptions are transmitted to organisations through such agencies as the state, professional institutes, consultants, analysts, the media, and other carriers of ideas and beliefs about appropriate managerial conduct.
3. By conforming to social prescriptions, organisations secure approval, support and public endorsement, thus increasing their 'legitimacy'.
4. Social prescriptions may become 'taken-for-granted', i.e. institutionalised, and thus very difficult to change or resist.
5. Conformity to social prescriptions rather than attendance to the 'task environment' (e.g. markets) may adversely affect efficiency and other economic measures of performance, but may improve long term chances of survival. When an organisation is confronted with multiple, potentially conflicting, logics that prescribe different courses of action, it faces *institutional complexity* – a situation that can generate tensions, conflict and organisational instability.
6. Because similar organisations experience similar social expectations and pressures of conformity, they tend to adopt similar strategies and managerial arrangements. This is the process of 'isomorphism'.

II The Case Study

2.1 The Situation

Quali, Riprock and Gold (QRG) is one of the larger accountancy firms in the world after the 'Big 4' (PricewaterhouseCoopers, Deloitte, Ernst & Young, KPMG, Grant Thornton). Established in the late century, its origins were in auditing, but it now offers many professional services including tax and financial advice, corporate recovery, management consultancy, and information systems.

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