

The development process in small business: Towards a conceptual framework

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PIENYRITYKSEN KEHITYSPROSESSI

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Käsitteellisen viitekehikon rakentaminen

Tutkimusprojektini tarkoituksena on kuvata ja ymmärtää pienyrityksen kehitysprosessia yrityskulttuurin, pienyrittäjän liiketoiminnallisen oppimisen sekä liikeidealähtöisten johtamistehtävien näkökulmasta. Aineisto on kerätty pääasiassa haastatteluilla ja tutkimustulokset perustuvat intensiiviseen tutkimusstrategiaan.

Tutkimustuloksissa korostui erityisesti 1) yrityskulttuurin osalta yrityskulttuurin erittely, yrityskulttuurin välittymismekanismit, ja kehitysprosessien luonne, 2) liiketoiminnallisen oppimisen osalta oppimisen päädimensiot sekä oppimisen viitekehikko ja 3) johtamistehtävien osalta kokonaisuuden ymmärtäminen, asiakaslähtöinen liiketoiminta, liiketaloudellisen ajattelun sisäistäminen, pyrkimys sisäiseen johtamiseen sekä teknologian hyödyntäminen.

Avainsanat: kehitysprosessi, pienyrityskulttuuri, liiketoiminnallinen oppiminen, johtamistehtävät

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The Original article in English

1 BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The present undertaking, »The Development Process in Small Business», took impulse from a work written in collaboration with Christian Junnelius and Lena Sonkin under the auspices of the Scandinavian Institute of Administrative Research (SIAR); the approach was that of process thinking — »The development of business activity is a living function subject to constant change and adaptation to changes in the environment. In any enterprise a number of processes are always under way simultaneously and in many cases these sequences are in-

terconnected in a variety of ways.» (Jahnuainen—Junnelius—Sonkin, 1980, p. 10). The work emphasizes the constant change in structures and key men in business and the development of knowledge of business as examples of the dynamic character of business activity.

Setting out with this process-oriented approach a first report on the project was compiled (Jahnuainen 1982), the central notion being the processes of development in business undertakings. This part of the project represents a phase of preliminary understanding in which sources in the literature and independent reasoning produced a basis for the establishment of the concept.

This preliminary study sought angles from which to approach the problem. One was a stratified conception in which the development of a business was analysed at the levels of line of business (cf. Andersson et al. 1983), firm (Greiner 1972 and Näsi 1981) and business idea (Norman 1975). A second mode of approach was the analysis of development phases (Lievegoed 1973 and Malaska 1980), in which the process is conceived in successive stages with their preceding pressures for change and subsequent crises. A third strategy was to outline the management tasks of the entrepreneur from the standpoint of business knowledge, the emphasis falling on perception of the whole, controlled learning, management of interest groups, creation of new business and maintenance of basic functions (Jahnuainen 1982, p. 30).

On the basis of these preliminary considerations the following research strategies were selected for the project:

a) Concentration on small business.

It was decided to confine the study to firms employing under 50 persons. Other possible criteria such as turnover or active role of the entrepreneur were not taken into consideration (cf. Glader 1975). One exception in respect of size of firm was Tamfelt Ltd, which with some 1000 employees constitutes a substantial en-

terprlse on the scale adopted but which from the standpoint of developing the research method here formed an important component in the project. The size of Tamfelt would not seem to have caused problems in analysing the results of these researches.

b) The management standpoint

The problem is considered from the point of view of the management, so that the approach is deliberately subjective (cf. Miettinen & Malaska 1980). In addition to the small entrepreneur the study focused in one case on an owner-manager and the department manager level (Tamfelt), and in another on a hired manager and the entire staff (SK-Kone).

c) Development study

In the process approach three concepts above all come to the fore, namely change, development and success. Of these, change is the most neutral term. Success, again, is frequently associated with economic success, while 'development' can be seen as a desired change for the better, the assumption being that the management's values are based on generally accepted necessary and sufficient prerequisites for survival (cf. Malaska 1980). On the basis of these definitions the concept of development would seem to be the most appropriate for the present study in that it best corresponds to the reality; in other words, the change for the better any businessman envisages, even if it does not always materialize. As the specific object of the process approach the above-mentioned preliminary considerations brought into focus above all the small-business culture, the entrepreneur's business learning, and management tasks.

2 LINKAGE OF THE PROJECT TO THE RESEARCH FIELD

There is a considerable literature, in both book and article form, on the development processes in business. Of particular significance for the present undertaking were the studies of Steinmetz (1969), Greiner (1972), Lievegoed (1973) and Norman (1975), Churchill & Lewis (1983) and Malaska (1980). The researches on the development processes in small business stress development phase thinking and the different modes of action applied in different phases. Another dominant feature in these works is description of forces making for change and crises. An important source on the line of business level was the study of development processes in this sphere by Andersson et al. (1983), which opens up a variety of angles on the different character of different business lines and the mechanisms at work in them. For a conception of the nature of the development process itself an important source was the work of LeBreton & Henning (1961) on planning processes. Among other works closely allied to the development process and emphasising the role of the entrepreneur the studies by Marjosola (1979) and Hartikainen (1985) were consulted in the present context. There are also a wide range of scientific papers dealing with business culture and choice of approach. Here particular mention may be made of an article by Ailaire & Firsirotu (1984) and the work by Alvesson & Berg (1988), both of which were of assistance in pinning down the appropriate angle on business culture, the leading ideas and the modes of action prevalent in small business. In respect of the development in the content of business culture, again, the studies by Davis (1985), Deal & Kennedy (1983) and Peters & Waterman (1984) were of greatest influence.

The conception adopted here of the business learning of the entrepreneur derives in first place from a talk given by Johan von Wright (28. 11. 80) and the doctoral thesis of Eero Ropo (1984). In evolving the theoretical background to learning the approach was deliberately confined to the studies of cognitive learning conducted in the sphere of so-called instructional psychology. Cognition is here taken to mean all the processes involved in human observation, thought, memory, problem-solving and in general information processing. Learning is taken to mean change in awareness, in the structures

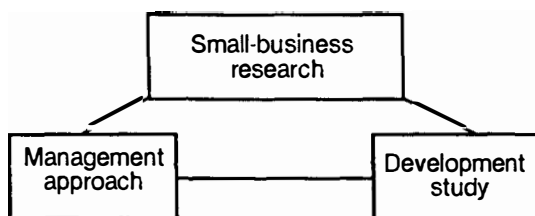


Fig. 1. Basic choices in research strategy

of knowledge and in the processes which receive information and feed back knowledge as mental models and outward action.

In the matter of management tasks as conceived in terms of task phase a great deal has indeed been written (see for details Ahlstedt 1960). The classical work by Fayol (1916) on administration gave impulse to this mode of analysis in classifying tasks into categories such as planning, organization, and control. Analyses on these lines in the Finnish literature include that of Ahlstedt & Jahnukainen (1971), which groups the functions of management under planning, development of organizational system, manning of organization, leadership and control.

A basis for the grouping of management tasks according to the business idea, which is the approach adopted in this undertaking, was found especially in the literature on the business idea itself (Normann 1975 and Jahnukainen—Junnelius—Sonkin 1980) and in the business culture studies setting out from success factors (see for example Peters & Waterman 1984).

In summary of the researches carried out on the development process in small business it would seem justified to undertake a holistic appraisal of the overall development process in business activity in one and the same project, covering the discrete aspects of small-business culture, business learning and management tasks from the standpoint of the business idea.

3 RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study was to define and understand the development process of the small business from the point of view of small-business culture, the entrepreneur's business learning and his management tasks as seen in the light of the business idea.

More specifically the objectives were

- a) to construct a conceptual framework for analysis of the development of small-business culture
- b) to construct a conceptual framework covering the business learning of the entrepreneur
- c) to construct a conceptual framework covering management tasks from the business idea standpoint
- d) to collect these conceptual frameworks into a single entity

Achievement of the goals of the project called for an intensive research strategy (Lilja & Tainio 1975) in which the objects of study are few but where it is sought by means of comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967) to obtain as much information as possible about each of them.

As to its structure, the inquiry proceeded from the initial appraisal described in the foregoing (preliminary level) to the substance level seen first from the standpoint of business culture as represented in four successive cases (Jahnukainen 1985, 1986, 1987 and 1988). Thereafter attention shifted to development seen from the standpoint of the entrepreneur's own business learning (Ropo & Jahnukainen 1989) and on the other hand of his management tasks (Jahnukainen 1989) as reflected in two separate cases. The findings at this substance level, comprising both the actual content of this phase of the study and the preliminary conclusions drawn up to this point, are not reported separately in this summary account. The final conclusions and synthesis of these part-studies constitute the metalevel in the whole project. Possibilities of further research represent the level of vision and point the direction for the research process and understanding of the object of inquiry. The manner of proceeding in the project may be illustrated thus:

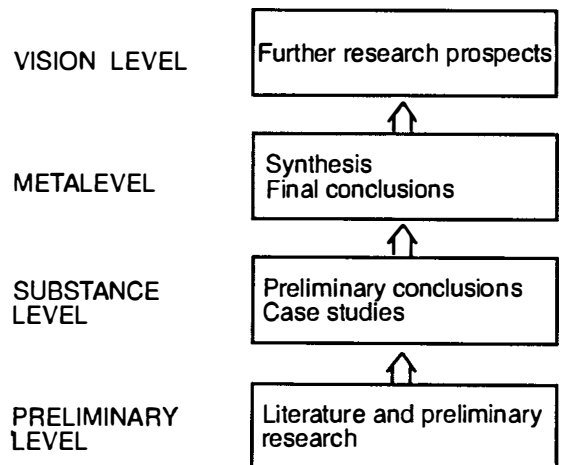


Fig. 2. Structure of research project

Data for this study were acquired mainly by means of thematic interview (see Hirsjärvi-Hurme 1982) where the subject was engaged several times in intensive discourse on certain

areas of interest. The duration of one interview period was generally from two to three hours. The interviews were recorded, the tapes being subsequently interpreted directly for report and preserved with a view to checking. One inquiry was carried out in the form of a questionnaire addressed to the staff.

4 RESEARCH RESULTS

4.1 Development of small-business culture

4.1.1 Final conclusions on Case Tamfelt

This part-study (Jahnukainen 1985) was a significant undertaking from the standpoint of descriptive method used here. To begin with, this was, in the present series, the first application of development phase analysis, and the approach proved successful. Development in the structure of organization, functions and group-organizational structures (for example management groups, projects etc.) could be broken down into clearcut phases subject to their own pressures for change. No attempt was made to describe possible crises, as this was not particularly relevant to the overall objectives.

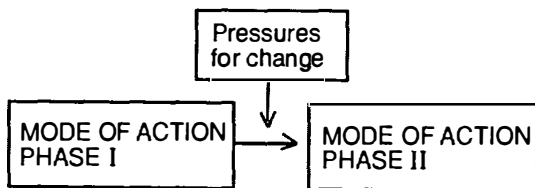


Fig. 3. Basic scheme of development in modes of action

The phenomenon under analysis — the development of organizational structures, functions and group-organizational structures — represents in the set of concepts formed of business culture the modes of action of the firm, whose development took place according to a variety of criteria.

The results indicate that the development of the modes of action can be described in a wide variety of terms; amounts produced, persons appointed, methods adopted, structure, standpoint and emphases. On the other hand it emerged that the pressures underlying phases of development were predominantly in the sphere of business activity proper, but that the

MODE OF ACTION	SPECIFIC ASPECT	CRITERION
Manufacture	amount produced	amount
Purchases; Managing board	post; management style	person
Finance Organization	budget; plan organizational model	method structure
Marketing; R & D	interest group	standpoint
Managing group	business activity	emphasis

Fig. 4. Criteria for development of modes of action of firms

business environment and personal factors also exerted an influence for change.

The final conclusions to be drawn from the findings at Tamfelt may be illustrated as follows:

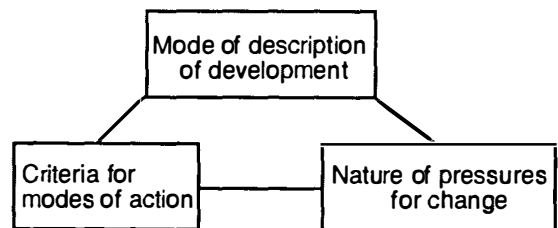


Fig 5. Final conclusions on Case Tamfelt

4.1.2 Final conclusions on Case SK-Kone

This part-study (Jahnukainen 1986) was important for a holistic conception of small-business culture in that it sought to analyze the leading ideas of the management as well the modes of action. Further, it was sought to elucidate the transfer of business culture to the organization, this being investigated by means of a questionnaire addressed to personnel. The aim was to establish how far the management's leading ideas and conceptions of the modes of action were realized in the staff's awareness and actions. Effective transfer of the management's attitudes produced a strong business culture in which management and employees thought and acted in the same way in the basic requirements of business life.

As a result of this inquiry it was possible to construct a basic scheme describing the transfer of small-business culture whereby this process may be more clearly understood.

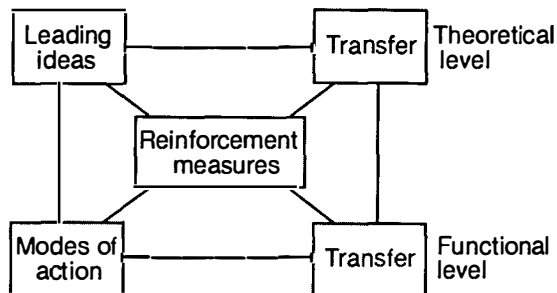


Fig. 6. Basic scheme of transfer of small-business culture

The study showed the managing director's leading ideas to be on the one hand business-oriented (growth- and results-conscious and client-directed) and on the other associated with people (openness, resource activation and management-centred). On the whole the managing director's leading ideas may be said to have been transferred relatively better than modes of action were realized at the practical level (64 % and 52 %).

From the practical standpoint perhaps the most concrete finding concerned the measures the managing director had taken to improve transfer of his ideas and establish a solid business culture. Such steps included various modes of information, training, changes in staff and the role of middle management.

The final conclusions to be drawn from Case SK-Kone may be schematized as follows:

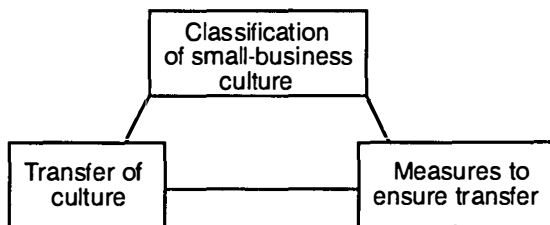


Fig. 7. Final conclusions on Case SK-Kone

4.1.3 Final conclusions on Case Tammer-Marin

The significance of this part-study (Jahnuainen 1987) for the project as a whole lay in linking small-business culture to the entrepreneur's business learning through the development of leading ideas. Here changes in the entrepreneur's thinking as he developed from an artisan to an industrial entrepreneur were analysed in terms of his leading ideas. The study showed that these ideas changed in first place in that his viewpoint in certain dimensions shifted during different phases of development (e.g. from client-oriented to production-conscious thinking, and secondly in that new dimensions emerged (e.g. internationalization). This may be illustrated as follows:

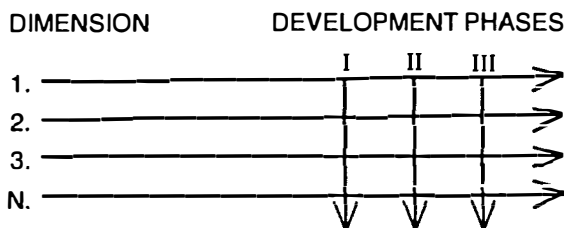


Fig. 8. Scheme of development in entrepreneur's leading ideas

A second significant observation was the difference in emphasis on the various key functions in successive phases. It emerged that this took place according to an inner logic which the entrepreneur directed. This pinpointed the importance of interaction between the theoretical level (leading ideas) and measures taken at the functional level.

Thirdly, it was possible to carry out a more profound analysis of the nature of pressures for

NATURE OF PRESSURES FOR CHANGE	CONTENT
Motivation	Desire to practise a profession and launch an enterprise
Information	Inadequate information on accounting
Knowledge	Control of growth
External factors	Immediate consequences of the oil crisis

Fig. 9. Analysis of the nature of pressures for change

change, the earlier classification into environment, business activity and people being replaced by another, namely the entrepreneur's motivation, information and business knowledge, together with factors beyond his control.

The final conclusions in the case of Tammer-Marín may be drawn up in the following scheme:

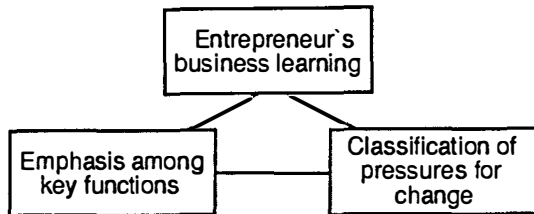


Fig. 10. Final conclusions on Case Tammer-Marín

4.1.4 Final conclusions on Case Vilanen

The contribution of this part-study (Jahnuainen 1988) to the whole project lay in its appli-

cation for the first time of level thinking in respect of line of business as against its earlier use solely to differentiate between theoretical and functional levels. It emerged from the results that this firm had passed through three phases of development with regard to business line during the period covered by the study.

A second finding was the pattern of concepts formed with respect to the content of small-business culture; management, information and organization. This classification subsequently proved fruitful in that it could be introduced for purposes of training in the analysis of the development of small-business culture. The scheme emerging from the results of this study may be set out as follows:

A third achievement in this part-study was to outline the nature of the development processes in a firm on a dimensional scale. The nature of these processes could be broken down into four categories, namely the dimensions of time, intensity, diversity and success, whose respective contents may be illustrated thus:

COMPONENTS IN SMALL-BUSINESS CULTURE	BUSINESS LINE DEVELOPMENT PHASES					
	I		II		III	
	DEVELOPMENT PHASES AT LEVEL OF FIRM					
	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
Management culture			LEADING IDEAS			
Information culture planning system accounting system computer technology			MODES OF ACTION			
Organization culture structure of organization informal network facilities			MODES OF ACTION			

Fig. 11. Basic scheme for analysis of smallbusiness culture

DIMENSION	CONTENT
Time	order duration
Intensity	overlap increase fall-off inconsistency
Diversity	specialization variance in manifestation
Success	economic crisis economic success

Fig. 12. Outline of the nature of development processes in small-business.

The final conclusions to be drawn from Case Vilanen may be set out as follows:

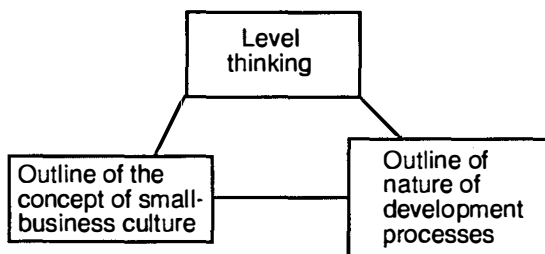


Fig. 13. Final conclusions on Case Vilanen

4.2 The learning process — Final conclusions on Case Mäkinen

The chief accomplishment in this part-study (Ropo—Jahnuainen 1989) was the attempt in itself to combine business studies and educational research in the study of the entrepreneur. This proved both possible and rewarding, encouraging further collaboration in this direction.

The actual result of the study may be seen to consist in the outline which emerged in the main dimensions of the entrepreneur's business learning; these were seen to comprise formation of hierarchical and coherent knowledge structures, an increase in knowledge, and proceduralization of the knowledge base and the degree of insight achieved.

Thirdly, mention may be made of the creation of a framework for the entrepreneur's business learning. This involves development in his modes of action, pressures making for change

and conceptions of business. The framework to emerge here was the following:

DEVELOPMENT IN MODES OF ACTION	PRESSURES FOR CHANGE	CONCEPTIONS OF BUSINESS		
		LEVEL I	LEVEL II	LEVEL III
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
N.				

Fig. 14. Framework for the entrepreneur's business learning

The final conclusions to be drawn from Case Mäkinen can be envisaged as follows:

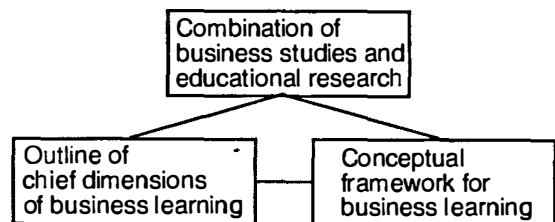


Fig. 15. Final conclusions on Case Mäkinen

4.3 Analysis of management tasks — final conclusions on Case Mainostoimisto

The main objective in this part-study (Jahnuainen 1989) was to create a new conceptual framework for the management tasks of the entrepreneur. Traditionally these have been grouped according to task phase (Fayol 1916 and Ahlstedt—Jahnuainen 1971). Here the point of departure was the business idea; the resulting scheme comprised the following tasks: overall understanding of the business, client-oriented activity, internalization of business thinking, self-motivated leadership and utilization of technology.

This part-study was linked to business learning through the analytical technique adopted. The management tasks were identified by means of a comparison between the success factors involved in the entrepreneur's first business and those in his subsequent undertaking,

the object being to ascertain what he had learned of business management in the interim.

This analysis was also linked to the earlier studies of business culture in that the objects of study, the success factors, constituted the entrepreneur's leading ideas and modes of action.

The final conclusions to be drawn from Case Mainostoimisto may be illustrated as follows:

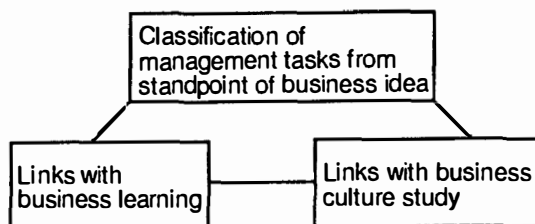


Fig. 16. Final conclusions on Case Mainostoimisto

5 SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH PROJECT

5.1 Synthesis of the research project as a conceptual framework

The project focused on three areas of development within the firm, namely small-business culture, business learning and management tasks. The chief emphasis at the outset was on an analysis of the development of small-business culture, with attention centering on analysis of development phases, the level approach, analysis of business culture, criteria for a classification of development in this, and pressures for change, the mechanisms transferring business culture and an outlining of the nature of development processes. The respective part-studies stressed different areas, interacted in evolving a set of concepts and established links between business culture and both learning and management tasks.

Thereafter the focus of interest shifted to an analysis of the entrepreneur's business learning, setting out from a study of small-business culture (Case Tammer-Marin) and reverted to a repeat study of the same firm now combining educational with business research. The chief results of this analysis were an outline of the main dimensions of business learning and the creation of a conceptual framework for this.

The last part-study involved a reassessment of management tasks on the basis of business idea thinking, emphasis falling on the tasks of overall understanding, client-oriented activity, internalization of business thinking, self-motivation and utilization of technology. This part-study was closely connected with both business learning and business culture.

Finally, the development process of small business may be summarized in the following conceptual framework:

5.2 Validity and reliability of results

In the matter of validity the question is how far it was possible to focus the interview items on aspects relevant to the field of inquiry. One factor which may be taken to have enhanced the validity of this research is that in respect of both theory and objectives it took shape as it progressed. This meant that attention could where necessary be redirected as the situation dictated. On the other hand the coverage of a study is also a matter of importance. Here this aspect was accounted for in that the emphasis in the respective part-studies was focused on different issues to the end that the overall picture should be the clearer.

As to the reliability of data collection, this was ensured by means of repetition. Study was made of the same aspects of business in the different firms regardless of emphasis, so that random factors could be more easily be identified. Also the same person was interviewed a number of times from a wide range of standpoints, the object being to eliminate random comments. Analysis of the results was qualitative, interpreting the content and significance of the subject's statements.

5.3. Prospects for further research

This research project can be followed up in a number of directions. In first place the study of small-business culture can proceed on either intensive or extensive lines depending upon the objectives envisaged. A profounder understanding of the nature of the development processes would seem an interesting goal to pursue. Again, collaboration between researchers in business science and education could be promoted. Here one particularly promising field of inquiry would seem to lie in the business

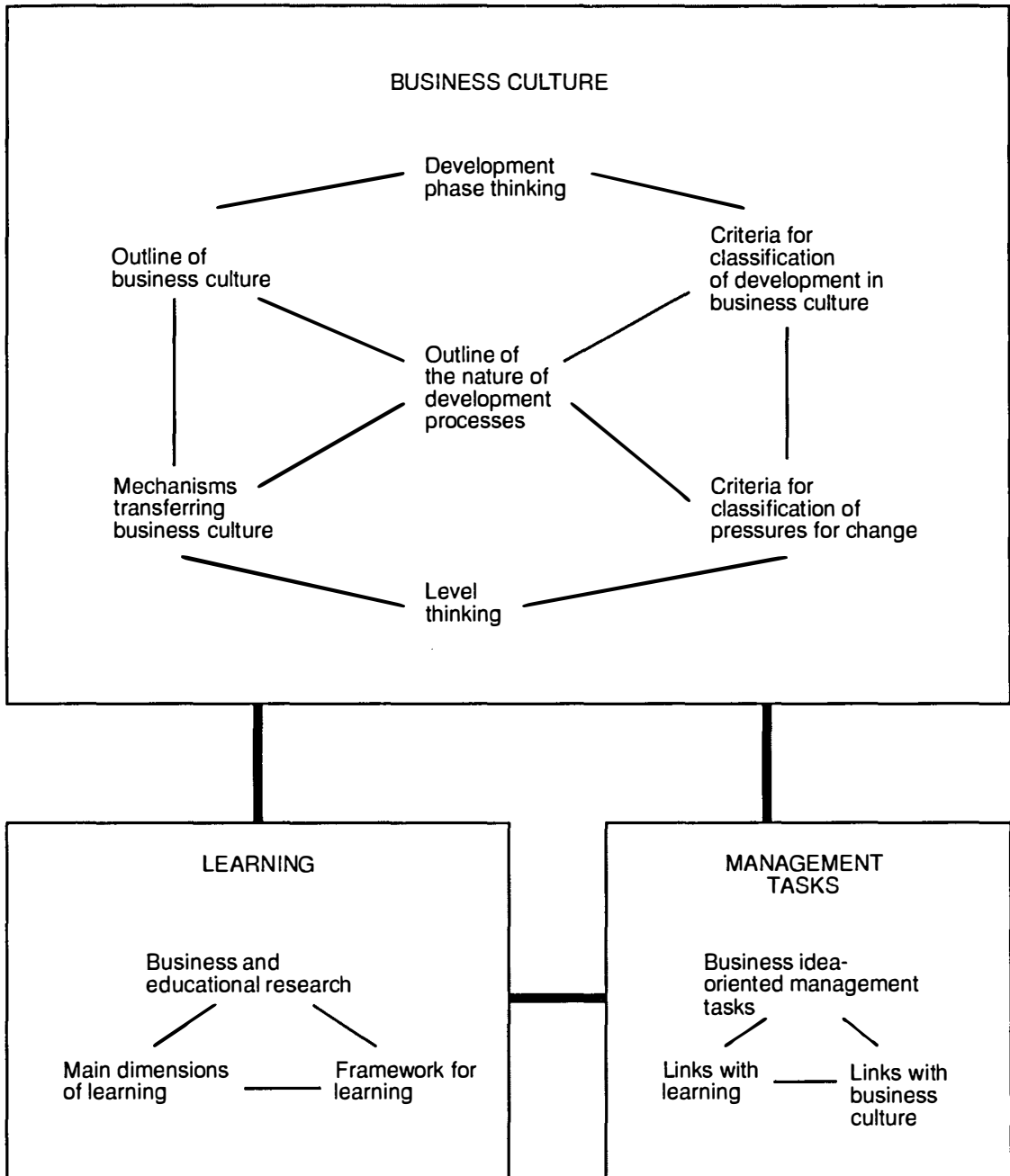


Fig. 17. The conceptual framework for the development process of small business

learning of personnel in small business. A third area might be the attainment of a profounder understanding of business idea-based management tasks. The testing of research results in firms of differing types would constitute an interesting challenge in this field of research.

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