



*THE
PARADOXES
OF
LONGEVITY*

*STRATEGIES
FOR LONG-TERM THINKING
AND ACTION*

THE PARADOXES OF LONGEVITY

It's in our nature to sustain life. From the point of view of biology and evolution, the focus is on passing on our own genes – and thereby on ensuring the survival of the species. In addition, however, we lend our existence meaning and significance by creating things that will continue to exist beyond our own lives and place the individual in a wider context. For example, by setting up institutions like companies or political parties, which in turn are founded on an aspiration to exist for as long as possible.

As a consequence, mechanisms and strategies to keep companies, organisms, individuals and communities alive as long as possible are to be found at all levels of human culture as well as in nature. The outcome of an analysis of these strategies shows, perhaps counter-intuitively, that there are no standard problem-solving approaches for longevity. Instead, it is characterised by twin paradoxes that operate on different levels:

1. Strategies that may lead to longevity typically contain opposing elements. Every strategy is coupled with a conflicting complementary strategy. One example is the ability to think long-term and develop forecasts which, however, will only be effective if accompanied by agility and the boldness to react speedily to changes in the environment. The ability to withstand crises and develop resilience is equal in importance to a readiness to make sacrifices and, for example like the lizard, to shed part of the system to support the survival of the larger whole. Longevity also requires moderation, in other words, sustainable handling of the resources of nature, the company or your own body, but it also demands risk-taking and the Epicurean enjoyment that makes life more meaningful.

2. Longevity is contingent on finite existence. Individual longevity is not automatically coupled with that of a society, nor the longevity of parts with that of the larger whole. On the contrary: a society – at least with today's resources and technologies – can only survive by a link to the finite nature of individuals. The death of individuals enables the continuity of the system. The resulting areas of conflict lie behind many of today's key debates about the distribution of resources, the aging of society or solidarity between the individual and the community.

On the basis of these underlying paradoxes, we can deduce five hypotheses for companies, society and individuals that present longevity in a broader context.

For example, longevity calls for holistic thinking that connects the survival of parts with that of the total system. Also, longevity only makes sense if it is associated with quality or ideals. Longevity as an end in itself is unlikely to be successful. On the contrary, clinging on to unsuccessful structures or failing to make changes in the business environment actually leads to a short life.

Of particular importance is the readiness to apply the many longevity strategies available to us instead of concentrating on just one. It is of course important to be aware of your personal strengths and weaknesses or those of your own corporate culture and to focus on one or more main strategies accordingly. But you can't just stop there. On top of that, confrontation with your own existence – as a company, party or individual – is a fundamental prerequisite. There is no patent recipe for longevity. The choice of the right strategy differs from institution to institution, from individual to individual. Which is why the journey into the distant future starts with a look in the mirror.

THE CONFLICTING STRATEGIES OF LONGEVITY



SACRIFICE ← vs. → PRESERVE

Longevity combines strategies that either maintain or sacrifice weak parts of a system in order to strengthen the whole.

Restructuring: readiness to discontinue unsuccessful products, departments or strategies to safeguard the company as a whole	Sacrificing parts of a system: Salamander casting its tail to ward off attacks, leaves falling from trees as protection in winter, sick or weak animals being left behind to protect the herd	Medical rejuvenation methods: implants and stem cell therapy, preservation of organs in liquid nitrogen for future reanimation (cryonics)	The body's self-generation mechanisms: wound healing, cell renewal by adult stem cells
Sacrificing body parts: amputation	Relinquishing goals: career change	Maintaining traditions: national public holidays, monument preservation and history lessons	Protecting the body: healthy lifestyle, balanced diet, regular physical activity
Not-for-profit support of other societies: development aid, debt relief	Economic structural change: discontinuing branches of industry, stopping subsidies, parting with traditional economic sectors (mining, coal, agriculture)	Corporate regeneration: preserving old companies in need of renewal by gentle innovation and restructuring instead of merger or sale	Solidarity-based insurance models: integration and protection of the weakest members of society
Self-sacrifice: investing a lot of time and energy to reach an aspirational goal to secure affluence, self-realisation and status			

EPICUREANISM ← vs. → MODERATION

Longevity is the result of the right proportions. The dose decides whether a thing is poison or remedy.

Community experiences: festivals and excursions as rewards and to build team spirit and productivity	Sustainability: preservation of nature's regenerative ability	Balance of Epicureanism and discipline: healthy and varied lifestyle
Group experience: public holidays and festivals as social practice to forge identity	Modesty: avoidance of greed, arrogance and hubris	Resource efficiency: rationing of food (piranhas eat a prey shoal of fish over a number of days)
Satisfying the sensory organs: consumption of luxury foods, drinks and tobacco	Natural selection: reduced reproduction of less fit individuals to prevent overpopulation	Even balance: allocation of expenses, investments and reserves as the basis of flexible decisions
		

AGILITY ← vs. → VISION

Longevity is enabled by strategies that embrace short-term agility and long-term visions in order to take correct situation-dependent action.

Cultural readiness to change: open debate, liberal structures, outward orientation, awareness of competition as prerequisite for a society's renewal	Relocation: movements outside or inside a territory in response to changing conditions (climate, availability of prey, reproduction)	Persistence: tenacity in achieving work and personal goals as source of success and satisfaction	Future orientation: implementation of political visions as a long-term social goal
Change of form: changing colour for courtship or to deter enemies (chameleon)	Self-critical thinking: continuous challenging of personal and business goals	Corporate principles: corporate philosophy as a compass for market changes, development of loyal corporate culture, authenticity and quality of the company's products	Loyalty to values: remaining true to yourself and your own values as a prerequisite for self-confidence and self-assurance
Culture of innovation: development of ideas and products to create unique selling propositions and increase adaptability to changing customer needs	Ability to learn: adapting behaviour patterns because of new personal or work challenges	Supporting social justice: equality of the sexes, prevention of excessive rich-poor divides	Anticipation: looking into the future to adapt to market changes in good time
Plasticity of the brain: the brain's ability to change depending on the use of its different functions			

COOPERATION ← vs. → DEMARCATION

Longevity becomes possible through cooperation with others to improve efficiency and exchanges of experience and through demarcation from competitors to protect own interests.

Alliances and partnerships: constructive coordination of interests between equal partners	Coordinated social communities: herd, pack and swarm behaviour to ward off enemies successfully and procure food	Threat avoidance: flight in order to preserve life in response to attacks	Self-defence: preventing and warding off attacks
Social contacts: friendship and trust as sources of happiness and satisfaction, personal networks as precondition for career success	Joint Venture: project undertaken together by independent companies with shared risk	Developing USPs: brand identities for sustainable differentiation between competing companies	Territoriality: demarcation from adjacent populations to avoid conflicts
Symbiosis: partnership between individuals of different types/species with advantages for both partners		Autonomy: national borders to safeguard territorial integrity	Protecting inventions: patents, secrecy
		Healthy scepticism: scrutiny of the trustworthiness of other people, particularly of business partners, to minimise risk	

CREATIVITY ← vs. → ROUTINE

Longevity is achieved through strategies that create quality through routine activities and through creative practices that produce innovation in order to survive under changing conditions.

Evolutionary mechanisms: changes in DNA, gene flow (migration of individuals between populations) and recombination in sexual reproduction	Repetition and custom: daily shaving, unchanging working hours, free weekends	Rituals to secure a Corporate Identity: company parties, regular days set for exchange of information
Self-realisation: carrying out of meaningful tasks as a basis for satisfaction and happiness	Social rituals: religion, festivals, customs, traditions for maintaining a community	Courting behaviour: mating foreplay as part of sexual selection
Encouraging creativity and active corporate development: in-house competitive mentality, revenue participation, creative pauses, times out, flat hierarchies	Reproduction: creating offspring to ensure the long-term survival of a species	
Personal legacies: work, art, successful progeny as impact beyond your own life	Social innovation: new social practices to solve social problems	
Developing young talents: active involvement of the young generations in developing corporate strategies		

DIVERSIFICATION ← vs. → SPECIALISATION

Longevity is achieved by specialising in order to develop unique selling propositions and by the greatest possible variety of competences for adaptation and improvisation

Biodiversity: large variety of flora and fauna guarantees stability of an ecosystem	Life with variety: combination of family, work and personal interests	Food specialisation: species-specific prey to share resources reduces competition (type D orcas in the Antarctic are specialised in hunting minke whales)	Expert status: specialist knowledge to secure career success and personal development, increase in problem-solving competence
Encouraging cultural diversity: mixed population as source of renewal and creativity	Product diversification: extension of product range by in-house development, mergers and acquisitions or cooperation	National and regional clusters: countries or regions with different economic focus increase total efficiency by foreign trade	Product specialisation: increase in productivity in a defined area, greater control and security in development and production, avoidance of lack of credibility
Minimising cash investment risk: spread of investments across different formats	Sexual activity: different reproductive partners increase the dissemination of our DNA	Niche existence: adaptation to small ecosystems to reduce competition between species	Individualisation: development of a personal style to excite attention
Stable economic growth: development of different branches of industry, striving for a balance between exports and imports			

FIVE HYPOTHESES ON LONGEVITY

1. LONGEVITY SHOULD NEVER BE AN END IN ITSELF

Longevity should never be an end in itself, because a long life is not synonymous with high quality.

2. LONGEVITY COMBINES CONTRADICTIONARY ELEMENTS

In combination, even mutually contradictory mechanisms such as preservation and sacrifice or moderation and Epicureanism can lead to longevity.

3. LONGEVITY NEEDS SHORT LIVES

Long-term endurance sometimes also requires short-lived elements, giving up business units or subordinate goals to protect a larger whole.

4. LONGEVITY DEMANDS CONTINUITY

Realising who you are – identifying the «DNA» – is the basis for focusing on a longevity strategy.

5. LONGEVITY REQUIRES DIVERSIFICATION

We have a whole toolbox of longevity strategies at our disposal. Longevity requires a readiness to consider other strategies as well, depending on the situation.