



Learning Organization

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Introduction

A learning organization is the term given to a company that facilitates the learning of its members and continuously transforms itself. Learning organizations develop as a result of the pressures facing modern organizations and enables them to remain competitive in the business environment. A learning organization has five main features; systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning. The Learning organization concept was coined through the work and research of Peter Senge and his colleagues (Senge, 1990). It encourages organizations to shift to a more interconnected way of thinking. Organizations should become more like communities that employees can feel a commitment to. They will work harder for an organization they are committed to.

Characteristics

There is a multitude of definitions of a learning organization as well as their typologies. According to Peter Senge, a learning organization exhibits five main characteristics: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, a shared vision, and team learning.

Systems thinking: The idea of the learning organization developed from a body of work called systems thinking. This is a conceptual framework that allows people to study businesses as bounded objects. Learning organizations use this method of thinking when assessing their company and have information systems that measure the performance of the organization as a whole and of its various components. Systems thinking state that all the characteristics must be apparent at once in an organization for it to be a learning organization. If some of these characteristics are missing then the organization will fall short of its goal. However O'Keefe believes that the characteristics of a learning organization are factors that are gradually acquired, rather than developed simultaneously.

Personal mastery: The commitment by an individual to the process of learning is known as personal mastery. There is a competitive advantage for an organization whose workforce can learn more quickly than the workforce of other organizations. Individual learning is acquired through staff training and development, however learning cannot be forced upon an individual who is not receptive to learning. Research shows that most learning in the workplace is incidental, rather than the product of formal training, therefore it is important to develop a culture where personal mastery is practiced in daily life. A learning organization has been described as the sum of individual learning, but there must be mechanisms for individual learning to be transferred into organizational learning.

Mental models: The assumptions held by individuals and organizations are called mental models. To become a learning organization, these models must be challenged. Individuals tend to espouse theories, which are what they intend to follow, and theories-in-use, which are what they actually do. Similarly, organizations tend to have 'memories' which preserve certain behaviours, norms and values. In creating a learning environment it is important to replace confrontational attitudes with an open culture that promotes inquiry and trust. To achieve this, the learning organization needs mechanisms for locating and assessing organizational theories of action. Unwanted values need to be discarded in a process called 'unlearning'. Wang and Ahmed refer to this as 'triple loop learning'.

Shared vision: The development of a shared vision is important in motivating the staff to learn, as it creates a common identity that pro-

vides focus and energy for learning. The most successful visions build on the individual visions of the employees at all levels of the organization, thus the creation of a shared vision can be hindered by traditional structures where the company vision is imposed from above. Therefore, learning organizations tend to have flat, decentralized organizational structures. The shared vision is often to succeed against a competitor, however Senge states that these are transitory goals and suggests that there should also be long term goals that are intrinsic within the company.

Team learning: The accumulation of individual learning constitutes Team learning. The benefit of team or shared learning is that staff grows more quickly and the problem solving capacity of the organization is improved through better access to knowledge and expertise. Learning organizations have structures that facilitate team learning with features such as boundary crossing and openness. Team learning requires individuals to engage in dialogue and discussion; therefore team members must develop open communication, shared meaning, and shared understanding. Learning organizations typically have excellent knowledge management structures, allowing creation, acquisition, dissemination, and implementation of this knowledge in the organization.

Benefits:

1. Maintaining levels of innovation and remaining competitive
2. Being better placed to respond to external pressures
3. Having the knowledge to better link resources to customer needs
4. Improving quality of outputs at all levels
5. Improving Corporate image by becoming more people oriented
6. Increasing the pace of change within the organization

Barriers:

Even within or without learning organization, problems can stall the process of learning or cause it to regress. Most of them arise from an organization not fully embracing all the necessary facets. Once these problems can be identified, work can begin on improving them.

Some organizations find it hard to embrace personal mastery because as a concept it is intangible and the benefits cannot be quantified; personal mastery can even be seen as a threat to the organisation. This threat can be real, as Senge points out, that "to empower people in an unaligned organisation can be counterproductive". In other words, if individuals do not engage with a shared vision, personal mastery could be used to advance their own personal visions. In some organisations a lack of a learning culture can be a barrier to learning. An environment must be created where individuals can share learning without it being devalued and ignored, so more people can benefit from their knowledge and the individuals becomes empowered. A learning organization needs to fully accept the removal of traditional hierarchical structures.

Resistance to learning can occur within a learning organization if there is not sufficient buy-in at an individual level. This is often encountered with people who feel threatened by change or believe that they have the most to lose. They are likely to have closed mind sets, and are not willing to engage with mental models. Unless implemented coherently across the organization, learning can be viewed as elitist and restricted to senior levels. In that case, learning will not be viewed as a shared vision. If training and development is compulsory, it can be viewed as a form of control, rather than as personal development. Learning and the pursuit of personal mastery needs to be an individual choice, therefore enforced take-up will not work.

In addition, organizational size may become the barrier to internal knowledge sharing. When the number of employees exceeds 150, internal knowledge sharing dramatically decreases because of higher complexity in the formal organizational structure, weaker inter-employee relationships, lower trust, reduced connective efficacy, and less effective communication. As such, as the size of an organizational unit increases, the effectiveness of internal knowledge flows dramatically diminishes and the degree of intra-organizational knowledge sharing decreases.

Some problems and issues In our discussion of Senge and the learning organization we point to some particular problems associated with his conceptualization. These include a failure to fully appreciate and incorporate the imperatives that animate modern organizations; the relative sophistication of the thinking he requires of managers (and whether many in practice they are up to it); and questions around his treatment of organizational politics. It is certainly difficult to find real-life examples of learning organizations (Kerka 1995). There has also been a lack of critical analysis of the theoretical framework.

Based on their study of attempts to reform the Swiss Postal Service, Matthias Finger and Silvia Bürgin Brand (1999) provide us with a useful listing of more important shortcomings of the learning organization concept. They conclude that it is not possible to transform a bureaucratic organization by learning initiatives alone. They believe that by referring to the notion of the learning organization it was possible to make change less threatening and more acceptable to participants. 'However, individual and collective learning which has undoubtedly taken place has not really been connected to organizational change and transformation'. Part of the issue, they suggest, is to do with the concept of the learning organization itself. They argue the following points. The concept of the learning organization:

Focuses mainly on the cultural dimension, and does not adequately take into account the other dimensions of an organization. To transform an organization it is necessary to attend to structures and the organization of work as well as the culture and processes. 'Focusing exclusively on training activities in order to foster learning favours this purely cultural bias'.

Favours individual and collective learning processes at all levels of the organization, but does not connect them properly to the organization's strategic objectives. Popular models of organizational learning (such as Dixon 1994) assume such a link. It is, therefore, imperative, 'that the link between individual and collective learning and the organization's strategic objectives is made'. This shortcoming, Finger and Brand argue, makes a case for some form of measurement of organizational learning – so that it is possible to assess the extent to which such learning contributes or not towards strategic objectives.

Conclusion:

Some of the issues that Learning Organizations wanted to address within Institutions is fragmentation, competition and reactivity. Fragmentation is described as breaking a problem into pieces. For example each organization has an accounting department, finance, operations, IT and marketing. Competition occurs when employees are trying to do better or "beat" others in an assignment instead of collaborating. Reactiveness occurs when an organization changes only in reaction to outside forces. Only doing an assignment because it is assigned and not continually creating. These are deeply rooted in many of today's organizations as a product of capitalism and the drive to generate more profit. The change becoming a community and a learning organization is called a "Galilean Shift".

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