

## Organizational Learning: Core Issues for Mustering Growth in Learning Organization.

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### Abstract

This article focus on how learning serves as a means of transforming organization`s fortune and exploring factors influencing learning and the role of human resource development practitioners in creating opportunities for, and supporting, lifelong learning. This article examines one aspect of that project – factors inhibiting and enhancing learning in work, specifically in large, learning-oriented organizations. These factors are categorised at organizational – human resource, board of directors, time and time pressure, simultaneity and window of opportunity and event occurring within and outside. Functional – focuses on the history, culture and learning style and pattern of inculcating ideas; Group and Followers levels. Experiential learning theory offers a dynamic theory based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction. These two dimensions define a holistic learning space wherein learning transactions take place between individuals and the environment. This approach is adopted by reviewing current research on individual learning styles and managerial problem solving/decision making, the process of team learning and organizational learning. This work describes how this approach can serve as a useful framework to design and implement management education (learning) programmes in work setting, management training and development.

### Introduction

The factors for gathering and managing knowledge are many and diverse within a learning organization, considering the scope and span at which the organization chooses to operate within its related industrial sector. Hence, this study is carried out in order to help managers of organizations, human resources practitioners, management and readers on how to carefully and selectively take into cognisance the typical general issues or influencing factors that are to be present in a learning organizations in order to actualize their fundamental objectives ; which are context, history, and survival. Lane (2001) discusses this factor saying, “assumption of most organizational learning theory is that learning is socially constructed, that is, what is learned and how learning occurs are fundamentally connected to the context in which that learning occurs” (p. 704). In the new perspective, organizations are seen as learning systems and the management process is viewed and should be seen as a process of learning. Learning lies at the core of the management process when learning it is defined holistically as the basic process of human adaptation. This broad definition subsumes more specialized managerial processes such as entrepreneurial learning (Corbett 2005, 2007, Poltis 2005), strategy formulation (Ramnarayan & Reddy 1989, Van Der Heijden 1996, Kolb, Lublin, Spoth, & Baker), creativity (Brennan & Dooley 2005), Boyle, Geiger & Pinto 1991, Ogot & Okudan 2006, Potgieter 1999), problem solving and decision making (Donoghue 1994, Jervis 1983, Kolb 1983, Selby et. al. 2004) and leadership (Robinson 2005, Kayes, Kayes & Kolb 2005). How the culture, or context, of an organization functions is part of an influencing factor on the type of learning organization it will be.

A sensitive aspect of organizational learning which this study is also interested in bring to the fore of managers in an organization is that they should not lose out on its learning abilities when members or employees of the organization leave, become most of our ineffective and declining firms were and are posed with the challenge of losing best hands to other well structured organization in terms of their specialized skill, creativity, innovative and technological know-how. The over reliance and dependence on few hands called best brains neither at the

management level or lower cadre of the workforce in an organization has a adverse weight of cost implication, rather management should be more concerned in building a structure that will sustain transfer of knowledge, skills that will be spread across boards, levels and strata in the organization. The concept of organizational memory means that effective learning organizations should not only influence the current members, but also future members due to the experiences, beliefs, and norms that are accumulated along the way. Creating a learning organization is only half the solution to a challenging problem (Prahalad & Hamel, 1994). Equally important is unlearning some of the past that has not moved the company forward on a path of healthy growth. Organizations and management really need to be swift, smart and responsive to the dynamism of the environment in developing, institutionalising and legitimising a work culture and history that values effectiveness and accuracy, creativity, and encourages innovations as a requisite to stir the desire to learn that will produce new ideas or products (Kiely, 1993; Prather, 2000; Sternberg, 2003; Thompson, 2003). Shallcross (1975) shares the role of the leader in creating an open environment to new ideas - "the role of the leader in creativity training is one of providing a climate that is nonjudgmental, of helping each individual to realize personal uniqueness and the uniqueness of others" (p.626). Suh (2002) concurs with the importance of managerial encouragement for the innovating thinking of the worker in the areas of planning, learning, and production.

Amabile (1998) points to six general categories of effective management practice in creating a learning culture within an organization: (1) providing employees with challenge; (2) providing freedom to innovate; (3) providing the resources needed to create new ideas/products; (4) providing diversity of perspectives and backgrounds within groups; (5) providing supervisor encouragement; and (6) providing organizational support. Lastly, the issue of survival is the basic premise for becoming a learning organization. Ortenblad (2002) "according to the critical literature most or all organizational learning theorists indicate that survival is an important object for learning" (p. 95). This concept is basic to human nature, survival of the fittest. In order for an organization to exist long term, it must learn more than just new fads or moments of knowledge, it must learn consistently over time for this is a learning organization.

This article is carefully carried out having in mind the most prolific methods of positioning human resources practitioners, managers, management and readers to gain an understanding into the practicality in adopting theoretical and systematic means of growing and developing knowledgeable institution and workforce through instilled learning culture and to see to the fact that organizations will not only be efficient in strategic, systematic and product know-how, but as well contribute to the improvement of learning culture among the growing firms in the industrial sector and the society at large.

### **Learning as a framework Change Itself:**

Organizations today are under challenge as a result of the break with the traditional authority, the growth of democratic or socialist ideology, economic affluence and consequent changes in needs and motive patterns, and the accelerated rate of change. There is a silent crisis between the people and the organizations. The survival of our society therefore depends on how well we acknowledge and understand these crises. Organizations are the framework through which most society's work is carried out and within which individuals seek to satisfy many of their needs. Organizations as instruments for meeting societal and individual needs, are sensitive to change in the expectation and demands from both quarters. Change in the organization particularly in the values of the workforce; have undermined the traditional relationship between organization and their members. This has led to a crisis for organizations that may only be resolved by the evolution of new organizational forms through learning Baridam (1999).

Many major organizations in this recent time loss their ability to effectively utilise the human resources available to them which signals a deformation, lack and absence relevant information required to exhibit optimality in their job. The decline in the historic rate of productivity improvement has lasted for years indicating that this is not a temporary problem, but subsequent for change in the organization. The growing inability of existing organizational forms to adapt to changing demands and constrains of our society calls for the development of new methods that will be able to deal with the emerging circumstances Chartered Institute of personnel management of Nigeria (2007). The survival of our organization is dependent on how well the managers are able to inculcate changing values of the workforce through learning and reinforcement of learning outcomes. One of

the striking characteristics of the present composition of workforce is the decrease in the median age of the workers, where managers are now dealing with better educated, younger workers. There is growing evidence that future employees will not accept outmoded styles of management. Baridam (1999). There is a drastic shift in the world over as countries become increasingly urbanized. The rising educational and learning level of the population in the organizations parallels increasing urbanization. There are ample of evidence to show that organizations cannot realistically expect to find sufficient employees with the old values.

**Sensitivity training (T-GROUP):** This is a learning intervention technique that attempts to give the person more insight into his or her own behaviour and how that behaviour affects others in the organization. It also seek to increase a person`s skill in giving feedback to others about their behaviour and to enable people to receive such feedback without the distortions caused by psychological defence mechanisms. Baridam (1999) the objective of this training as to enhance performance and effort within the organization lies in the followings:

1. the increase self-insight concerning one`s own behaviour and its meaning in a social context. This includes learning how others interpret one`s behaviour, and gaining insight into why one acts in certain ways in a particular situation.
2. Increase sensitivity to the behaviour of others.
3. Increase awareness of the type of processes which facilitate or inhibits group functioning.
4. Increase diagnostic skills in social situations, to provide individuals with explanatory concepts for diagnosing conflict situations, reasons for faulty communication.
5. Increase ability to intervene in interpersonal situations so as to increase satisfaction and performance.
6. Learning how to learn, by increasing abilities to analyze the individual`s own interpersonal behaviour.

The organization which succeeds is the one that is constantly learning and adopting new methods of directives brewed through the learning process to change technological, social, political and economic environment, personnel in the organization production, marketing, finance or purchasing is effected by change. It has to do the making doing things different such as diversification of product, replacement of obsolete routine, redesigning of jobs, improving organizational structure and proactive policies by introducing new attitudes, skills and perceptions, training employees for new and improved know-how.

### **Human Resource Factors Influencing Organizational Learning**

Organizations vary greatly in all aspects. Establishing an understanding of what influences organizational learning for the vast majority of organizations is extremely valuable. This would allow and give ample opportunities to individuals in many different organizations that would have been brainstorming, expecting and anticipating to benefiting from examining some key factors that would increase organizational learning in their setting. As it could only be integral part of the organization if it has been successively instituted and legitimized for future learning.

Lohman (2005) found the factors of initiative, positive personality traits, commitment to professional development, and interest in the profession, self-efficacy and love of learning enhanced the motivation for informal organizational learning. Conversely, an unsupportive organizational culture, others who were unwilling to participate, lack of time, and lack of proximity with colleagues negatively impacted this organizational learning.

Shipton, Dawson, West, and Patterson (2002) investigated the manufacturing environment and found that only two of five variables were associated with organizational learning: approach to human resources management and quality orientation. Profitability, environmental uncertainty, and structure were not significantly related to organizational learning. Albert (2005) found that top management support and involvement of consultants also facilitates organizational learning and change.

From the positive perspective, individual, group and organizational perception, motivation, enthusiasm, involvement, equity, simplicity, clarity and understanding of role, increased responsibility, perception as a strategic partner, a developed learning culture, senior management support, organization re-structure, job design and redesign, and investment in human resources, orientation and induction, and the learning environment made a significant difference in organizational culture Albert (2005) .

### **Time Factors Influencing Organizational Learning**

Weber and Berthoin Antal (2003) describe six key dimensions of time that influence organizational learning: the organization's time perspective and orientation to time, time pressure, simultaneity, synchronization and windows of opportunity, learning cycles and life cycles, and history (p. 354).

**Time Factor:** Within an organization, individuals, groups, departments, or functions, may all hold very different perspectives of time and the implications time horizons hold for the necessity of learning. Therefore, it is important that the top leadership of the organization clearly determine the time orientation for the organization as a whole, such that decision-making and learning take place in a manner consistent with the organization-wide time orientation and perspective.

**Time Pressure:** Time pressure can influence learning from within the organization (top-down, bottom-up, peer-to-peer) as well as from external sources such as competitors, suppliers, customers, and communities. Time pressures can actually slow learning, as in the case when the organization is threatened by internal or external forces that paralyze the organization for fear that taking action could risk undesirable consequences. Likewise, learning and performance can be accelerated, for example, by the threat of deadlines or competitive maneuvers in the market.

**Simultaneity:** External events and opportunities happen simultaneously and at a pace so frenetic that no organization can take advantage of all of them, given finite resources and levels of knowledge. This aspect of time presents a risk to organizations that they will lose control over the timeframes of those activities they pursue.

**Windows of Opportunity:** This dimension refers to the sequence of events or the specific windows of time when organizations are best positioned and open to learning. The sequence refers to knowing which learning activities are best for certain times. Simply put, the right activity or learning moment at precisely the right time will lead to more effective learning. Windows of opportunity are relevant because there are times when organizations may be better positioned to embrace learning, for example during periods when the perceived threat to their survival is greater than the difficulty of learning.

**Experiential Learning Cycle:** Individuals are often reluctant to undertake further learning especially in the workplace. It is most important therefore that managers understand the way in which individuals actually learn if any training programme is to be successful Kolb (2005). Learning is contingent on a series of experience culminating into a real life cycle, as individuals learn through observation, experience, reflection, and transference to other new situations, so too do organizations incorporate learning cycles into their culture and behaviours. The success of an organization often depends on how quickly the learning cycles can take place. The life cycle of the organization also has implications for organizational learning. For example, the age of an organization - especially the older that it is, can lead to difficulty when adopting new practices and new learning because these organizations can become set in their ways. At times an older organization will battle "legacy" behaviours and cultural norms that are contrary to change and learning and adoption of new practices (Donoghue 1994, Jervis 1983, Kolb 1983, Selby et. al. 2004).

**History:** Weber & Berthoin Antal (2003) state, "History has an identifying effect for organizations" (p. 358). How an organization has applied learning in the past can be used to apply to learning opportunities in the future. The history, or identity, of an organization is in part built on the collective learning of individuals and groups within the organization over time. It is this historical dimension of time that actually captures all of the others and presents them as a composite of the effects of time on the organization's ability to learn. Weber and Berthoin Antal (2003) state that "the influence of history on the organization can be positive as well as dysfunctional" (p. 358). Organizations can use to their advantage and potential success their collective and stored knowledge. However, they must beware of obsolescence that may come with strict adherence to past practices and procedures, without the consideration of new learning and opportunities.

Individuals, when given time, opportunity, and resources are quite often capable of implementing change 'expediently' when compared to teams or organizations. The lag in time that so often hinders organizational change is called 'organizational inertia' – a situation Starbuck and Hedberg say can arise from "slow sense-making processes and ineffective information systems...[or when] individuals learn without their organizations also learning" (Dierkes, et al., 2003, p. 335). One possible resolve to this dilemma is the Japanese concept of Kaizen – an applied system for implementing continuous improvement through small steps (Maurer, 2004). If

we conceive of organizational learning as a necessary means for continuous improvement, then it is not a far stretch to also realize that learning – taken in small, applied steps, makes sense. Starbuck and Hedberg state that “continuous improvement, the daily challenging of status quo, supports the notion that everything can be improved....[and that] evolutionary learning in small steps seems to work better than does revolutionary learning, [especially] during periods of repeated success” (Dierkes, et al., 2003, p. 337).

### **Groups Influencing Organizational Learning**

Factors that influence group learning are explored by McConnell and Zhao (2004). In their study, they designed a diagram to show group learning in by integrating factors together. The first step was group planning. The planner has to be very clear about the learning task and the objectives. The learning community has elements that must be considered such as "creativity, norms, belief, and status"(p.7). Factors that must be considered "interaction, communication, negotiation, skills, strategies, feedback, leader, role play, brainstorming, and motivation" (p.7).Lastly in evaluation , the following factors must be considered, " performance, effectiveness, outcomes, contributions, history, experiences, and productivity" (p.7).

### **Follower Factors Influencing Organizational Learning**

Though shallow on the surface, Maxwell's (1993) definition of influence substantiates the effect influence can have within an organizational structure, particularly as it relates to lower level employees affecting organizational change. Maxwell states, "Leadership is influence" (p. 1). Peter Drucker, as cited in Goldsmith, Morgan, and Ogg (2004), states, "the great majority of people tend to focus downward,' writes Peter Drucker. "They are occupied with efforts rather than results. They worry over what the organization and their superiors owe them and should do for them" (p. 19). What is missing in this mindset is the ability to affect, or influence, change within an organization regardless of position. Goldsmith, Morgan, and Ogg (2004), state, "Organizations in all fields suffer when key employees cannot effectively influence upper management" (p. 20). These authors go on to suggest 10 guidelines for affecting change in an upward fashion:

1. When presenting ideas to upper management, realize that it is your responsibility to sell--not [upper management's] responsibility to buy.
2. Focus on contribution to the larger good, not just the achievement of your objectives. Strive to win the big battles. Don't waste your ammunition on small points.
3. Present a realistic cost-benefit of your ideas.
4. Don't just sell benefits.
5. "Challenge up" on issues involving ethics or integrity.
6. Realize that your upper managers are just as human as you are.
7. Treat upper managers with the same courtesy that you would treat partners or customers.
8. Support the final decision of the team.
9. Make a positive difference.
10. Focus on the future--let go of the past (pp. 20-24).

### **The Board of Directors as an Influence In Organizational Learning**

Tainio, Lilja, and Santalainen (2003) suggest, "Boards represent the interests of the firm's shareholders...they have the power to hire, fire, and compensate senior executives and to provide high level counsel. By performing these tasks, boards can facilitate or limit organizational learning" (p. 428). The insurgence of shareholders involvement is due largely to the mismanagement of many high profile companies in the 1990s, according to Tainio et al. (2003). This insurgence in board activity and influence on organizations has prompted significant changes in organizational learning. In turn, the situation has redefined the role of boards in many organizations. Tainio et al. (2003) suggest, "There is actually a fine line between managing a company and contributing ideas for managing a company" (p. 432). Boards who have become more active do not manage the nitty-gritty of daily operations; they press organizations to maintain high standards, closely watch goals and planning, and take a more active role in management succession (Tainio et al., 2003).

## **Learning Style**

The concept of learning style describes individual differences in learning based on the learner's preference for employing different phases of the learning cycle. Because of our hereditary equipment, our particular life experiences, and the demands of our present environment, we develop a preferred way of choosing among the four learning modes. We resolve the conflict between being concrete or abstract and between being active or reflective in patterned, characteristic ways. This posits that learning is the major determinant of human development and how individuals learn shapes the course of their personal development. Previous research (Kolb 1984) has shown that learning styles are influenced by personality type, educational specialization, career choice, and current job role and tasks.

A recent study (Joy & Kolb 2007) has shown relationships between learning style and culture of birth and residence. Analysis of country ratings on individual cultural dimensions suggests that individuals tend to have reflective learning styles in countries that are high in uncertainty avoidance and active learning styles in countries that are high in in-group collectivism. Individuals tend to have abstract learning styles in countries that are high in uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, performance orientation and institutional collectivism. Yamazaki (2004, 2005) has identified learning style cultural influences as well.

Much of the research on experiential learning theory has focused on the concept of learning style using the Learning Style Inventory (KLSI) to assess individual learning styles (Kolb 1971, 1985, 1999). While individuals tested on the KLSI show many different patterns of scores, previous research with the instrument has identified four learning styles that are associated with different approaches to learning —Diverging, Assimilating, Converging, and Accommodating. The following summary of the four basic learning styles is based on both research and clinical observation of these patterns of KLSI scores (Kolb, 1984, 1999a).

An individual with diverging style has CE and RO as dominant learning abilities. People with this learning style are best at viewing concrete situations from many different points of view. It is labeled "Diverging" because a person with it performs better in situations that call for generation of ideas, such as a "brainstorming" session. People with a Diverging learning style have broad cultural interests and like to gather information. They are interested in people, tend to be imaginative and emotional, have broad cultural interests, and tend to specialize in the arts. In formal learning situations, people with the Diverging style prefer to work in groups, listening with an open mind and receiving personalized feedback.

## **Culture as an Influence on Organizational Learning**

However, if an organisation has a culture open to learning, this makes it easier to change human resources development practices, such as devolving responsibility to managers and employees, and creating opportunities for learning within work activities. However, again, the number of positive references to a learning culture is smaller than the negative expressions. Related to culture is organisational structure. Changes in organisational structure, or in job design, can also support the development of a learning culture. New structures can provide employees with more opportunities for learning within work activities, allowing human resources development professionals to support work-related learning.

Another conducive factor is a flexible organisational structure, which enables jobs to be designed (and re-designed) to facilitate work-based learning and allow time for sharing and reflection upon learning.

Organizational culture holds profound implications upon those organizations who wish to increase their effectiveness through organizational learning. Burke (1985) quotes Schein who theorizes that organizational culture is the "basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment" (pp. 6-7). These assumptions and beliefs are learned responses to a group's problems of internal integration. They come to be taken for granted because they solve those problems repeatedly and reliably. "This deeper level of assumptions is to be distinguished for the 'artifacts' and 'values' that are manifestations or surface levels of culture, but not the essence of the culture" (Burke, 1992, p. 10-11).

Developing organizational culture that prizes learning, growth, and knowledge sharing must be tackled in order to promote organizational learning. Subtle and undermining forces in an organizational culture can sabotage attempts at improving components of the organization, or even attempts at organizational culture change. Leaders must be in touch with the pulse of their organizational culture prior to or while seeking to implement

change. Leaders do well to understand the history of their organization. In the process of making significant changes, one cannot fully or adequately understand the culture, relationships, nor underlying forces at work. Individuals who had been involved for several decades helped us appreciate our strengths and passions while candidly assessing difficulties and even failures. While listening to individuals share their individual experiences, family, and organizational stories, we gained valuable insight into the past and some of the personalities who influenced for good or ill the culture of the organization. While understanding one's history does not assume understanding of culture, it does at least help people gain a sense of where they fall within the history of the organization. While assessing the successes and becoming aware of failures, individuals and the whole of the participating persons discover more deeply the values, mission, and driving forces of the organization. In this instance, recalling previous instances of entrepreneurial behavior and resulting successes helped people to be open to new changes and new direction for the local church. Such success stories lessened the fears of change, while creating positive inclinations toward change in the future.

### **Recommendation/ Conclusion**

However, if an organisation has a culture open to learning, this makes it easier to change human resources development practices, such as devolving responsibility to managers and employees, and creating opportunities for learning within work activities. In fostering learning organization it becomes imperative for managers to work well together, engage in knowledge sharing, and are able to challenge, explore and test the relevance of ideas, as well as find applications for them in their management situations, then an effective learning community will have been established. These community participants will take responsibility for identifying and achieving their managerial development needs, and take an active role in assisting other group members to do the same (Prideaux, 1992). In trying to develop such a sense of community employee`s are provided with the structure and opportunities to become more closely acquainted with each other, develop group norms in collaborating, and share personal and work-life related issues which are relevant to their current and future career pursuits. This concept of collaborative learning requires members to become aware of how their particular way of seeing and understanding management issues need to be measured against the way others see the same issues, and be cognisant of such alternatives, regardless of whether or not they become converted to such other viewpoints (Bowden and Marton, 1998).

Employee`s of the course "Introduction to Organisational Behaviour" are required to form semi-autonomous work groups where each group undertakes responsibility for decisions such as time management, some aspects of the content and processes of the program, and the choice of the specific learning objectives for each contract, and how to achieve them. In some instances, to engender self-management skills, groups are required to devise a policy to help manage the group work, but also the equitable contribution of individuals within the group. Groups should engage in conversations that will help determine the guiding principles for issues that are anticipated to arise during and in the course of work. It could be practicable, that appropriate level of consultation, participation and delegation expected to occur between managers in any well-managed organisation is mirrored within the learning group. Informal feedback from employees has consistently indicated across the various cohorts of learning groups and in particular, the autonomy of the groups in working through and resolving issues will produce an authentic learning experience.

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