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Learning Agility: The Nexus Between Learning Organization, Transformative Learning, and Adaptive Performance

Doo Hun Lim, Min Hee Yoo, Junghwan Kim, Spencer Brickell

Abstract: This study is to establish a model of learning agility connected with transformative learning and learning organization and identify the mediating role of learning agility on the relationship between learning organization, transformative learning, and adaptive performance.

Keywords: learning agility, learning organization, transformative learning, adaptive performance

Introduction

Organizational performance is a key indicator representing the competitiveness of an organization. Learning agility is a vital competency at the individual and organizational level to solve various problems caused by the internal and external influencers of an organization. Moreover, due to the speedy changing nature of global and technological environment, organizations are facing new conditions and challenges continuously and the need for agile individuals who can not only perform but excel in these conditions is integral to an organization's success.

Learning agility is a primary indicator of high potentials, or those who are identified as the future leaders (Eichinger, Lombardo, & Capretta, 2010). High potentials are identified in order to properly select and promote them into leadership roles within an organization. Research has found that those with learning agility traits not only seek out diverse experiences but learn value oriented and new ideas from them (Swisher, 2013). Hence, the need for connecting the learning agile with transformative learning in implementing organizational development initiatives is growing rapidly to develop future leaders. However, identifying and keeping the learning agile within an organization may be meaningless without an intentional plan to continually grow and develop these individuals. Thus, maintaining the learning agile can be best achieved within a learning organization atmosphere that develops and facilitates paths for individual and organizational agility.

Problem and Purpose Statement

Adaptation is a key individual as well as organizational competency in order to survive in the ever changing environment of global competition. Learning agility is at the core of such adaptive competency equipping adult workers and organizations with competitive edge. In a rapidly and abruptly changing environment, learning agility helps individuals and organizational members to overcome the prevailing stagnation of the ongoing crisis within the organization. The expeditious nature of change in modern workplace requires adult workers with agility to adjust, adapt, respond, and be resourceful in creating proper solutions needed for the organization.

Learning agility is a mental ability and willingness to learn from experience and subsequently apply personal learning to successfully perform jobs and tasks under new or first-time conditions (De Meuse, Dai, Eichinger, Page, Clark, & Zewdie, 2011). Learning agility motivates individuals striving to acquire knowledge, skills, and technical know-hows. The ability

to learn fast and adapt to changes in a timely manner has been increasingly important as key talent characteristics for recruiting new employees and developing existing employees in today's workplace organizations. Also, the notion of learning agility has been expanded to the field of leadership development. Learning agility is a primary indicator of high potentials, or for those who are identified as the future leaders of the organization (Eichinger, Lombardo, & Capretta, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to examine how learning agility is connected with the core principles of transformative learning and the double-loop learning of organizational learning through literature review. More specifically, this study aims to establish a research model to investigate the mediating role of learning agility on the relationship between learning organization, transformative learning, and adaptive performance.

Review of Literature

Learning Organization

As Jensen (2005) indicated, the key feature of learning organization is that "it is organized to scan for information in its environment, by itself creating information, and promoting individuals to transform information into knowledge and coordinate this knowledge between the individuals so that new insight is obtained" (p. 61). In comparison, from a systems theory perspective, learning organization comprises five key components in: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and system thinking (Senge, 1990). That is, one key aspect of learning organization is the continuous expansion of organizational members' agile capability through system thinking and sharing of visions for long-term success (Lim, Song, & Yoon, 2014).

Transformative Learning

Taylor (2007) explained transformative learning based on the two loci of learning: individual and sociocultural. Within the individual locus of learning the most widely established theory is Mezirow's psychocritical approach focusing on how adults make meaning through experience. Mezirow defined transformative learning as "the process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (1997, p. 5). Boyd (2003) viewed transformative learning from a psychoanalytic perspective emphasizing the inner workings of one's unconsciousness and ego. Daloz (1999), in his psychodevelopmental approach, held a similar perspective with Mezirow (1997) in which he believes individuals need to make meaning from experience. However, Daloz put emphasis on the significance of stories throughout the transformative process while Mezirow did not (Merriam et al., 2007).

In Taylor's (2007) second locus of learning, societal views are emphasized. The most discussed sociocultural theory is Freire's social emancipatory philosophy (Freire, 1970). Freire's approach is derived from poverty, illiteracy, and oppression and has a large societal framework focused on social change (Freire, 2005). The cultural-spiritual approach focuses on the importance of spirituality in the process of making meaning out of existence (Tisdell, 2005). Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner state, "the race-centric perspective focuses on the transformative learning of the group in an effort to raise race consciousness" (2007, p. 142). The last transformative learning perspective, planetary, is centered on the interconnectedness of the

physical world to the human world (Taylor, 2007). While the different transformative learning theories have different implications, transformative learning is essentially a process of evolving an individual's outlook to produce change.

Learning Agility

In their seminal work, Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) proposed that the learning agile actively seek out meaningful learning experiences, enjoy complex problems they have not encountered before, gain a great deal of insight by solving problems, and generally perform better due to their acquiring of new skills and knowledge. The Center for Creative Leadership (2012) described the learning agile as being more extroverted, original, less accommodating, resilient, and focused – which together results in tendencies toward innovating, reflecting, risking, and performing. Unpacking this relationship, there appear to be certain fixed traits common to the learning agile, but also behaviors that they perform to express these traits. Here, the key debating point is whether learning agility is more aligned to a trait – something that endures across an employee's career – or whether it is something that can be developed on the job. From a futuristic view, learning agility might be open to development. For example, if employees are encouraged to experiment, reflect, and apply their learning to new contexts, then some of the benefits ascribed to the learning agile might be realized more widely across an organization.

De Meuse et al. (2010) depicted that learning agility has four different facets of the construct: mental agility, people agility, change agility, and result agility. Mental agility is the extent to which an individual is comfortable with complexity and ambiguity, examines problems carefully, is inquisitive, and can make fresh connections between different concepts (De Meuse et al., 2011). People agility is the degree to which one is open-minded toward others, interpersonally skilled, and can deal readily with a diversity of people and difficult situations. Change agility refers to the extent to which an individual is comfortable with change, interested in continuous improvement, and in leading change efforts. Lastly, result agility is the degree to which an individual can deliver results in first-time and/or tough situations through sheer personal drive and by inspiring teams.

Adaptive Performance

At the root, adaptive performance can be defined as a person's ability to adapt to changing work environments (Hesketh & Neal, 1999). Pulakos et al. (2000) developed six preliminary dimensions of adaptive performance. The first, "solving problems creatively" involves developing new solutions to accomplish a challenging task. "Dealing with uncertain and unpredictable work situations" surrounds one's emotional capabilities and approaches to managing changing work environments. "Learning work tasks, technologies, and procedures" requires learning new methods to accomplish the same tasks. "Demonstrating interpersonal adaptability" and "demonstrating cultural adaptability" involves adapting to the interpersonal and cultural demands of working with others in an organizational setting. The last, "demonstrating physically oriented adaptability" surrounds a person's ability to adapt to changing physical environments. Pulakos et al. (2000) later added another two dimensions to adaptive performance, "handling emergencies" and "handling work stress." Given the constantly changing work environments these behaviors are considered increasingly important for organizations and adult workers within the workplace settings.

Relationships between Study Variables

Levitt and March (1988) examined the process of learning within the learning organization context which included learning from direct experience and interpretation of experience. The process of learning from direct experience includes two mechanisms: trial-and-error and organizational search. In trial-and-error the organization corrects or reattempts a routine after it fails. These organizational symptoms become critical indicators of and characteristics of learning organization. Lombardo and Eichinger (2000) stated that the learning agile consistently seek new opportunities to grow, evaluate experiences, and develop new methods of doing. Their findings of the learning agile are similar to those found in Levitt and March's (1988) study about learning organization mechanisms. Also, Lyytinen and Gregory (2006) posited that the exploration and exploitation of innovation within a company turn into core characteristics of learning organization. Based on these findings, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Learning organization is positively associated with learning agility.

With knowledge being developed and held within individuals, learning is dependent upon individual learners. Jensen (2005) discusses that learning is context-dependent or, the knowledge a person creates is influenced by the situation during the learning process. This phenomenon is especially true within learning organization context (Jensen, 2005). People transform their knowledge based on the context of the situation (Jensen, 2005). Transformative learning is such learning that changes, or transforms, an individual's belief or knowledge. Hence, a connection is developed between learning organization and transformative learning (Imran, Ilyas, Aslam, & Ubaid-Ur-Rahman, 2016). Based on these findings, we propose:

Hypothesis 2: Learning organization is positively associated with transformative learning.

Learning agility is naturally linked to the concept of the transformative learning, which is drawn through the critical reflection during the learning process. Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (Mezirow, 2003). Transformative learning has grown to include several different theories such as psychocritical theory (Mezirow, 1997), psychodevelopmental perspective (Daloz, 1986), and psychoanalytic approach (Boyd, 2003). While these theorists define transformative learning differently, at the root, it is about learning process to change an individual's perspective about the world. This aspect of transformative learning shares similar characteristics with learning agility because both emphasize the sensitivity in an individual's actions or reflection during experiences and how that changes or develops the individual. Therefore, there following hypothesis can be put forward:

Hypothesis 3: Transformative learning is positively associated with learning agility.

In Pulakos et al.'s (2000) eight dimensions of adaptive performance, the major indicators are dealing with uncertain work situations, handling crisis situations, solving problems creatively, learning new tasks, and demonstrating interpersonal adaptability. The relationship between adaptive performance and learning organization is well documented in many organizational studies. For example, employees' behaviors and performance are considered the byproduct of interacting with their environments (Lewin, 1951). In addition, the foundation of the learning

organization is employee motivation as motivated employees are excited, energized, and engaged in their work (Stroh, Northcraft, & Neale, 2002). Thus, we can find a close tie between learning organization and adaptive performance as the former becomes a precursor of the latter. Therefore, we developed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Learning organization is positively associated with adaptive performance.

Transformative learning is a learning process that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (Mezirow, 2003). As compared, the eight dimensions of adaptive performance share similar processes and outcomes of transformative learning. Successful adaptive performance results in a changed behavior after adapting to a new environment and completed transformative learning results in growth through after an experience. Also, transformative learning is identified to facilitate adaptive employee performance in various organizational settings (Song, Lim, Kang, & Kim, 2014). Based on these findings, we propose:

Hypothesis 5: Transformative learning is positively associated with adaptive performance.

Effective learning organization culture provides opportunities for those with learning agile traits to show adaptive performance. Research done by Bahrami et al. (2015) found a significant relationship between learning organization culture and organizational agility by studying four teaching hospitals in Iran. From this study finding, inferences can be made that effective learning organization culture provides opportunities for those with learning agile traits to shine and perform. Also, from the perspective of double loop learning described by Schön (1983), organizations learn from the feedback and results of the initial process and make changes accordingly. During this process, the learning agile within a “double loop” learning organization are expected to adapt from the initial feedback and adaptively perform. Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 6: Learning agility will mediate the relationship between learning organization and adaptive performance.

Schön (1983) identified two kinds of transformative learning reflection; reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. The prior is an individual’s ability to reflect on the action while it is occurring and the latter is an individual’s reflection after the fact. These reflections are used to grow through or during an experience, which is a trait of those identified as the learning agile. This is similar, if not the same, to adaptive performance that constitutes as an employee’s ability to adjust behavior according to the environment (Pulkos et al., 2000). Based on this rationale, we propose:

Hypothesis 7: Learning agility will mediate the relationship between transformative learning and adaptive performance.

Methods

The population of this study consisted of employees from a wide range of firms in South Korea utilizing a sampling frame proportionally allotting different industry categories. For measures, we plan to use the following instruments: Watkins and Marsick's (1997) Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ), Stuckey, Taylor, and Cranton's (2013)

Transformative Learning Outcomes scale, Eichinger and Lombardo's (2004) Learning Agility scale, and Charbonnier-Voirin and Roussel's (2012) 19-item Adaptive Performance scale. For data analysis and model testing, we will perform structural equation modeling (SEM) along with descriptive statistics, confirmatory factor analysis, and a common method bias test.

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