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THE INFLUENCE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON BUILDING A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Summary

The organizations of the 21st century more and more often see their human resources as the most valuable asset they hold. This is why they create wide range of opportunities to develop and self-improve for their employees. Such approach is aimed at increasing involvement, higher effectiveness, innovativeness and thus constant improvement of competitiveness. However this is not possible without employee constant learning and their self-actualization. In this way the learning process is stressed as essential element of every modern company. As a result of this thinking one of the key tasks for a company is to create proper environment which would generate and feasible knowledge. This is where organizational culture might prove very useful. The main objective of the article is to demonstrate the influence of organizational culture on molding learning organizations. The content has been drawn up based upon literature study as well as in-depth interview conducted with the computer programmer working for Google, Ireland. The study is a consequence of authors' interests in the fields of organizational culture as well as learning organization.

1. Introduction

The contemporary approach to enterprise management reflects the fact that an organization is affected by various factors originating in close and distant environment, which constitute a certain context in which it functions (Bukowska, 2005, p. 455). With each decade the competition is becoming fiercer and the companies which do not learn and do not introduce changes are doomed to failure (von Oetinger, 2004, p. 35). As Kotter points out (2007, p. 191) at the end of the 20th century a great number of organizations experienced growing difficulties with proper functioning, mostly due to fossilized structures, systems, applied practices and organizational culture. According to

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the author, these factors were more of a barrier to introducing changes than facilitated them. On the other hand, the experience of enterprises from East Asian countries point at ultra-positive dimension of organizational culture, including learning categories. Thanks to this we can talk of specific bipolarity of the organizational culture phenomenon in an enterprise. The aim of this article is to prove the positive influence of organizational culture on building and developing a learning organization.

2. The concept of a learning organization and its role in shaping competitive advantage

As many scientists and entrepreneurs emphasize, the source of competitive advantage in organizations of the future will be their ability to adapt. From this point of view, modern organizations must resemble a chameleon. Both the shape and the outlook of such an organization should be subject to constant changes following modifications of the environment and its requirements towards the organization (Miller, 1998, pp.139-140).

Organizational ability to change is not a new concept. Also the organizations whose employees demonstrate willingness and ability to learn are nothing new. We should notice, though, that individual learning is not always a positive phenomenon for an organization, as employees may learn something undesirable for an organization (they may, for example, notice that it is enough to work effectively only two hours per day because their supervisor cannot effectively monitor the effects of their work), or they can learn to perfect their own work without any benefits for the team (Fazlagić, 2010). That is why it is essential that an organization should articulate the issues that are to form the basis of employees development and it should not emphasize only the motivation for constant and conscious learning.

A learning organization is any form of an organization which enables its members to learn and, as a result, it facilitates achievement of valuable results in shape of innovations (product, marketing, organizational, etc) which leads to better competitive position of an enterprise (Kożuch, 2007, p. 255). In such an organization the key values are (Yukl, 2006, p. 310):
- learning,
- innovativeness,
- initiative,
- flexibility.

In a learning organization all employees should be involved in solving problems, thanks to which they gain valuable experience. What is important, in learning organizations, each employee has wide access to knowledge. According to Senge – the creator of the learning organization concept, in this

type of structures people always look for new possibilities of obtaining desirable effects, create new models of unconventional thinking, develop in teamwork and learn constantly (Senge, 2008, p. 26). M. Bratnicki (1998, pp. 109-110) also points out that in a learning organization:

- all employees see themselves as people learning on behalf of the enterprise, take responsibility for their individual development, are aware of the risk related to constant changes,
- traditional supervisor-subordinate relationship is being replaced with self-management, employees are pro-active and take up initiative,
- there is spirit of self-development; employees take responsibility for the learning process; organization provides space for development; employees are treated as mature individuals,
- the way it functions resembles the consortium of small businesses; each treats work as their own business and shows typical vitality, energy and effort; the success of such an organization is in the interest of each employee,
- the organization as a whole creates, gathers, spreads and uses new knowledge and maintains and develops key competencies due to which it achieves competitive advantage in the market.

By definition, a learning organization creates possibilities of development for all its employees and is also able to learn itself and transform as a community.

3. The concept of organizational culture and the causes of growing interest in it

According to Schein (1992, p. 36) organizational culture may be perceived as a model of basic assumptions – invented, discovered and developed by a group of people in the process of learning, dealing with problems of external adaptation and internal integration – functioning well enough to be considered just and proper to be passed on to new members of the community as an appropriate way of perceiving, feeling and reacting to these problems.

In such definition, organizational culture is a set of basic values, assumptions, interpretations and attitudes which characterize the organization (Cameron and Quinn 1988, pp.356-396) and "a kind of collective artifact (shared meanings, symbols, rituals, cognitive schemes), constantly formed and transformed as an organization is trying to balance the requirements of internal coherence with the needs to react discovered in the environment" (Bratnicki, Kryś and Stachowicz, 1988, p. 67).

Hofstede shows that organizational culture covers the way of thinking passed by the leaders to the group members and by the led ones to the leaders (Pocztowski, 2002, p.59). Practices in this area are the derivative of

organizational culture itself and cultural values of a particular country in which an enterprise functions. It should be emphasized that such relations functions on a feedback principle (Konecki, 2007, p.16).

Just as in case of learning, the phenomenon of organizational culture is not new, but its significance is growing. This can be attributed to a number of reasons, such as (Koźmiński and Piotrowski, 2006, p. 298) :

- economic success of Japan (over 10% economic growth in the whole decade of the 1960s and over 5% in the 1970s) and search for its origin. The comparative analysis of Japan and the USA clearly pointed at differences in organizational cultures and saw them as directly influencing the effectiveness of management (the 1981 publication by Pascale and Athos, entitled "The Art of Japanese Management" brought about hot debates on possibilities of implementing the Japanese model on the American grounds);
- revival of interest in qualitative methods in research on organizations and management. The interest in phenomena (including corporate culture) whose analysis hinders application of quantitative methods and forces the adoption of descriptive and explanatory style,
- growing competition and crisis of traditional management concepts, which forced companies to search for new factors guaranteeing success. Organizational culture which generated competitive advantage was thought to be "something possessed by Japanese companies" and "lacked" by others,
- interest in mythology and symbolism in the 1980s, especially rejection of the functional and acceptance of the individual, unique and expressive.

Organizational culture is an extremely complex phenomenon and its understanding requires to a large extent being "inside". In other situations, the knowledge of the culture is restricted only to acquainting with its visible or partly visible elements. That is why leading Japanese companies like Toyota are not afraid to publish information on sources of their competitive advantage (Liker, 2004). They realize that they cannot be "just copied" and adapted to a different organization. If the aim of the enterprise is to create culture which will influence the growth of effectiveness, innovativeness, flexibility, etc., then the key process takes place as early as during the recruitment stage. The most essential thing is to recruit people whose value are consistent with the values respected and professed by the enterprise. Otherwise we have a strong dissonance which, in time, will cause the appearance of counter-culture destructively affecting the organization (J. Martin, C. Siehl, 1983, p.64). Therefore strong positive influence of organizational culture on the effectiveness of an organization can be perceived when it behaves in accordance with the values it declares.

4. Organizational culture attributes which shape a learning organization

Robbins (2001, pp. 428-430) points out that the essence of organizational culture can be boiled down to seven basic features which play a key role in managing an enterprise. The intensity of a particular feature in an organization directly influences the organizational effectiveness. These are:
- innovativeness and risk-taking, that is the extent to which employees are encouraged to innovativeness and risk-taking,
- paying attention to details, that is the extent to which employees are expected to be precise, use analytical approach and paying attention to details,
- focus on results, determining the degree in which management focuses their attention on results, not on methods used to achieve them,
- attitude to people, that is the extent to which management takes into account the influence of results on people in the process of decision-making,
- focus on teams, showing the degree in which work is organized around teams rather than around particular people,
- the degree in which people are aggressive and focused on competition, and the degree in which they are lenient,
- the degree in which organization's activities concentrate on development or on preserving status quo.

Taking the above into consideration, we should emphasize that these features are especially important for the influence of the phenomena on the development of a learning organization. They base on key values, typical for learning organizations.

Many East Asian organizations which build their competitive advantage on organizational culture (for example Toyota) are learning structures, that is such structures in which the method of operation contributes to the exchange and creation of new knowledge, essential both for the interest of the whole organization and for its particular parts (Bendyk, 2004, pp.223-224). This process is strengthened by such cultural background elements as socialization process, values, management systems, everyday practice, artifacts, etc (see Figure 1 and Table 1).

Figure 1. The influence of organizational culture on building a learning organization

Learning organizations may draw knowledge from various sources. However, as Jack Welch, one of the best world managers, points out, no employee will be able to innovate, self-develop or generate added value for the company, if they do not identify with it (Hoffmann & Piłat, 2010, p. 212). That is why the objective of organizational culture is to create the climate which would encourage learning. Table 1 presents examples of various culture-based practices which greatly facilitate creation and operations of learning organizations. The examples quoted were mostly based on Google company, which is an unquestionable leader among learning organizations.

Table 1. Organizational culture attributes which shape a learning organization

Culture-based attribute	Examples on the basis of Google company
Socialization process	• team work, • international staff (Google branch in Dublin employs people from 38 countries all over the world), • arranging social space in enterprises (for example: library, canteen, playroom with table football, snooker tables, volleyball courts, various video games, pianos, table tennis and gyms in which yoga and dance classes are run), • creating free space as „open office", allowing employees to work in one room (there are only a few separate offices), • weekly after work meetings on Fridays, in which both new staff and top management take part, • integration and training trips, • company support in developing off-work interests (for example mountain biking, wine-tasting, flying, Frisbee, etc.),
Key values	• learning, • innovativeness, • initiative, • flexibility, • self-development, • quality (perfectionism), • speed,
Management system, policies, norms	• avoiding red tape, • flat organizational structure, • employee empowerment, • down-top initiative of employees, • system of awards and bonuses (for example for the best innovative products),
Artifacts, daily practices	• informal dress, • ocal accents typical of a particular place, from mural paintings in Buenos Aires to cable cars in Zurich, which reflect the atmosphere and character of each office, • omnipresent laptops – standard equipment enabling programming, sending e-mails and taking notes at any place, • informal addressing other members of an organization, • common language, rich in terminology understood only by organization members, • mentors (for example Larry Page and Sergey Brin), • rituals,

Source: own elaboration on the basis of an interview with Google programmer and information materials available at http://www.google.com/corporate/culture.html.

In Google, there is a strong belief that employee involvement in implementing innovations depends on how free they feel when presenting their ideas and opinions. It often happens at lunch time, when people can sit at any table they want and talk to members of other teams. What is more, Google's organizational culture strengthens the feeling that a single employee, irrespective of their length of service, education or position in a company, contributes to the company success. This accounts for considerable freedom of interpersonal relations, where everyone can approach Larry Page or Sergey Brin (company founders) and talk about their proposals concerning streamlining or totally new projects. Weekly meetings on Fridays mostly serve the purpose of integrating all employees and developing their feeling of belonging to the community. However, an accepted practice at these gatherings is discussion on new ideas of particular members and possibility of sharing knowledge. The examples above clearly demonstrate how important organizational culture is for employees' learning and self-development.

All the examples presented above are for the quoted enterprise tools which managers can use in managing the learning process. After using them, it is possible to shape the culture models in the company, and, in consequence, achieving intended objectives (Morgan 1997, p. 205). In case of a learning organization, these aims are mostly connected with developing the best practices concerning generating and distributing knowledge.

5. Conclusions

Specialist literature more and more frequently observes that modern organizations are equipped with adaptive and cognitive abilities, just like living organisms. This analogy with living organisms is to emphasize that such organizations do not need external stimuli in order to develop constantly. Their development, however, must take place through generating, acquiring and processing knowledge, which boils down to developing mechanisms of individual and collective learning. This process should be built above all on such key values as self-development, innovativeness or initiative. It is vital, however, that these values were deeply rooted in the organizational culture, whose major task in this dimension is to create and strengthen behavior promoting generating and distributing knowledge. This is reflected in a number of organizational culture attributes, which can be associated with the socialization process, key values, various policies, norms and daily practices. Numerous examples from Google company, a leading learning organization, show that applied practices are mostly very simple solutions. That is why it should be quite easy to adapt them in other organizations.

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