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Shared vision: a development tool for organizational learning

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Background

Shared vision refers to a clear and common picture of a desired future state that members of an organization identify with themselves – essentially a vision that has been internalized by members of the organization. It is also a universally agreed and expected position that the organization will take. Shared vision is closely associated with organizational learning. It has been frequently identified as a factor influencing knowledge acquisition and knowledge dissemination activities.

Why shared vision?

A shared vision is intended to generate a clear organizational purpose and promote the necessary changes in the organization so that it can achieve its desired future outcomes. It is a response to the question, “What do we want to create?” Baker and Sinkula (1999) noted that the critical aspect of a shared vision is that when it is universally known and understood it gives the organization a sense of purpose and direction. A shared vision helps to create a sense of commonality within the organization and provide coherence to varied activities. People who truly share a vision are connected and bound together by a common aspiration.

In addition, a shared vision provides guidance on what to preserve and what to change. This is an important aspect in a fast-changing environment where change is expected and employees need to distinguish between what needs to be changed and what remains the status quo. Without shared vision, individuals are less likely to share desired organizational outcomes. Individuals are less likely to know what the organizational expectations and outcomes are. The lack of a universally understood organizational focus lowers the motivation to learn.

The concept of shared vision is an important foundation for proactive learning because it provides direction and focus for learning. This, in turn, fosters energy, commitment, and purpose among organizational members. A shared vision helps to clarify an organization's direction on what to do and what to learn. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) argued that an organizational intention drives the knowledge creation process. This intent usually takes the form of a corporate strategy, the most critical element of which is a shared vision.

There is a strong link between shared vision and organizational performance. Based on in-depth interviews with senior executives from a broad spectrum of US industries, Calantone *et al.* (2002) found that shared vision has a positive effect on an organization's innovativeness, which in turn affects organizational performance. Shared vision also influences organization performance as measured by growth in sales, profits, employment and net worth.

Organizational learning

In organizational learning, consistency in purpose and attainment of goals can be enhanced through shared vision. Some scholars go so far as to say that shared vision is a prerequisite

in developing any organizational learning capability. This is because a shared vision helps to create a supportive learning environment by aligning the various activities towards a common goal. While adaptive learning is possible without shared vision, generative learning occurs only when a group of people is striving to achieve something that matters deeply to them.

Shared vision helps to inspire employees with compelling, consistent, clear pictures of what they want. In an ambiguous and uncertain environment, even if employees are motivated to learn, it is difficult to know what to learn. With shared vision, managing through a maze of conflicting interests in an organization becomes easier and less stressful. Therefore, empowering people toward a collective vision is a key characteristic of organizational learning.

Benefits of shared vision

Shared vision is essential in organizational learning as it provides a general guide on the knowledge needs. This broad direction helps to determine the types of knowledge that are needed and the types of knowledge acquisition and dissemination activities that should be encouraged. For example, if the organization's vision is to expand internationally, then members may be guided to acquire and disseminate more information on overseas markets.

Shared vision will also ensure that only relevant and pertinent knowledge is acquired and subsequently disseminated within the organization to achieve the business goals. If employees have a shared vision, then the knowledge acquisition and dissemination processes can tolerate some inefficiency. This is because a shared vision helps to set the broad outlines for strategy development and leaves the specific details to emerge later. Every action may not be exactly on target but all actions will be pointed in the right direction.

Another benefit of having a shared vision is that employees throughout the organization can make decisions that are synergistic with the organization's business outcomes. There is no need to run those decisions up the chain of command because every employee, not just senior management, has a clear idea of the organization's strategic outcomes. Therefore, shared vision replaces other forms of control as the driver of consistency of purpose within the organization.

Conclusion

A shared vision sets the broad outlines for strategy development and leaves the specific details to emerge later. This broad direction is essential as it provides a general guide to members of an organization on what knowledge to acquire and disseminate. A shared vision also provides a reference point where there exists a diversity of viewpoints. Therefore, shared vision is very important for organizational learning because it provides the focus and energy for learning to take place.

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