The Application of Organizational Learning Theory to Omani Academic Library Collaboration

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Abstract

The primary aim of this research is to identify the changes required to the situation of Omani Academic libraries in order to initiate a collaborative program. The theory of organizational learning is used as a method to change the behaviour and attitudes of main actors and deal with issues related to resistance to change and lack of understanding. After a lengthy intervention process and three group interviews, actors from different participating libraries agreed to identify and determine activities for implementation within their system of mutual collaboration that would reflect the needs of academic libraries. They also agreed to be involved in a communication system, a collaborative professional development system, and in establishing partnership and strategic management systems.

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1. Introduction

Literature both in the public and business and economic fields has focused on organizational learning theory, resulting in various definitions and models of organizational learning according to the nature of the organization. In order to map the landscape of organizational learning, Beeby and Booth (2000: 81) defined it as a “change in behaviour and underlying mindsets, and in the redesign of organization practices”. Similarly, Garavan (1997) defined this concept as referring to the development of new knowledge and behavioral change. According to
Gieseck and McNeil (1999), organizational learning means the intentional use of new knowledge to foster continuous development and enhance an organization’s services.

Organizational learning can be used as a method or technique to change the behaviour and attitudes of members or leaders by facilitating learning and developing new ways to manage change. Garavan (1997) and Castiglione (2006) assumed that learning usually has significant results and leads to professional growth. Castiglione (2006) added that organizational learning enhances communication and collaboration among work groups. In return, communication and collaboration improve and increase the development of staff learning, which leads to improvement in the performance of participants (Jalloh, 2000).

LIS literature on organizational learning highlights its importance for libraries intending to establish collaborative initiatives. For example, achieving communication skills by understanding different approaches to conflict management is required for successful negotiation and discussion between libraries and vendors or publishers (Edwards and Walton, 2000). The nature of electronic resources requires librarians, especially those responsible for facilitating interlibrary loans, to enhance their technology skills in order to improve access to e-content (Wood and Walther, 2000; Alem and Mclean, 2005).

In this research four Omani academic libraries were involved in a lengthy intervention process that included individual interviews, three group meetings, and a workshop. The participating libraries were Sultan Qaboos University Library, Nizwa University Library, Sohar University Library, and Dhofar University Library. This paper describes the learning that has been achieved through the different processes of the research.

2. Research Methodology

The early investigation of this research identified a lack of understanding of the significance of working collaboratively, inability to identify the collaborative activities that the situation of Omani academic libraries required, and lack of communication and coordination between the main actors of the situation. A workshop involving members from different participating libraries was used as learning method to enhance the understanding of organizational people about the significance of working collaboratively and explore and address the required changes related to attitude, structure, and procedures of the problem situation. It also assisted in understanding the reflections on learning and professional development. This method was found to be the most appropriate means of disseminating information, awareness raising and formulating an on-going plan.

During the workshop, the participants were divided into three groups, according to their roles, to discuss the action required for implementing collaboration activities among Omani academic libraries. The three groups comprised directors, technical services staff, and user services staff. The discussion focused on the learning process and achievement throughout the research stages. Moreover, the discussion covered the changes required to the current situation to enhance collaboration at the present time and in the future. The changes which had been agreed upon and defined as feasible and desirable during individual and group meetings were also discussed in terms of how these ideas could be turned into a system and implemented in the real world situation.

3. Attitude change

Libraries can be affected by obstacles and challenges that might impede attempts to establish collaborative activities. These problems include resistance to change, which can arise during the early stage of collaboration as a result of lack of understanding and inter-group conflict. It can originate from a number of sources, such as self-interest, mistrust, and different perceptions and goals (Wagner and Hollenbeck, 1995). Fear of loss of autonomy may lead to a decision not to take on a new role. Employees may see the change as not significantly impacting their organization (Balogun and Hailey, 2004). Mistrust can occur when participants feel unfairly treated because they believe that the developers of the proposed project are intent only on meeting their users’ needs without focusing sufficiently on their needs (Ellis and Dick, 2000). Differences in perceptions and goals lead to a lack of shared vision (Edwards and Walton, 2000).
Such behavioral problems can never be resolved without finding a method to create a new understanding of the situation that reflects the views of all participating libraries. Organizational behaviour literature provides suggestions for minimizing the behavioral barriers and changing the attitude of organizational people. System owners are encouraged to enhance awareness through courses to assist library staff in learning about and understanding the collaboration system. The system should also offer a learning environment for staff at different levels, enabling them to manage conflicts and increase their commitment. According to Ellis and Dick (2000: 202), the learning stage allows system owners to be more interactive with other members of the organizations, able to build collaborative relationships, and willing to take responsibility. Edwards and Walton (2000) advised participants to define the problem and clarify responsibility. They suggested some tools for advancing communication, such as establishing joint training and group email (Edwards and Walton, 2000). Interdependence is necessary to interpersonal relationships as well as the development of super-ordinate goals, which can be achieved by identifying a set of performance targets gained only by working together (Wagner and Hollenbeck, 1995). One of the more common suggestions is that participants share decision making in order to implement and select the appropriate approach to change (Jennings and Wattam, 1998).

4. Procedural change

Before the implementation of a collaboration system can take place, the scope of the required change in collections and services needs to be identified. Every participating library needs to examine its capability to engage in the collaboration system and identify the divisions and services that need to be involved in the change process (Balogun and Hailey, 2004). Another important element in ensuring the successful implementation of change is the capacity of each participating library. Organizations should clarify the amount of resources that can be invested in the change initiative. Capacity includes three main areas: cash, time, and staff (Al-Harrasi and Al-Aufi, 2012). These factors affect the function and level of change. In fact, the investment of too little money and time may prevent delivery of the changes needed (Balogun and Hailey, 2004). Changes in procedures may require changes in staff attitudes. Therefore, before the procedural change is implemented, libraries need not only to examine the readiness of their staff to engage in the processes of change, but also to agree on the desired outcomes of change.

5. Structural change

Collaboration is based on collective efforts and requires all participants to contribute to planning, designing, and implementing the collaboration program. In the mid-1980s, when libraries in the United States were first considering setting up library collaboration programs, a committee was established to examine the situation of academic libraries in the United States and identify the challenges that they would encounter as well as how libraries could develop and implement collaborative programs to serve their users better (Bostick, 2001). Currently, the work of committees is still appreciated and considered effective in identifying common values and interests of libraries (Atkins, 2010). Committees vary in terms of missions and roles. In some cases they play the role of formulating strategy for collaboration systems (Voge, 1998), or they take on the responsibilities of coordinating the participating libraries and carrying out administrative work on behalf of those libraries (Thomas and Fourie, 2006).

Organizational leadership is another related theory widely discussed by scholars (Wagner and Hollenbeck, 1995; Ellis and Dick, 2000; Evans, 2004). The power and responsibilities of such leadership are viewed as a factor influencing organizational behaviour as well as organizational learning, organizational development and change. Leaders of a collaboration system can play a significant role in reducing conflict among representatives of participating libraries and increasing their commitment to the proposed program. Knoche (1997) considered the appointment of leaders for a collaboration program to be one of the critical factors in the success of collaboration. He believed that collaboration requires a special kind of leadership that is sensitive to the needs of staff and users and has the potential to develop meaningful relationships among them (Knoche, 1997).
6. Data analysis and discussion

During the course of this study the action workshop was used to implement the actions suggested by system owners and resulted from a long process of learning. The workshop proved useful in expediting consensus decisions regarding issues and processes that were relevant to this stage of collaboration, such as the process of developing the collaboration system in Oman and the teams that would be responsible for arranging meetings and scheduling the implementation of collaboration activities. This workshop, in conjunction with previous meetings, was instrumental in the formulation of procedures and structures for the Omani academic libraries and led to improvement in staff awareness and understanding.

According to participants in this study, there is a need for an ideology of team responsibility within Omani academic libraries. The team could promote collective work and take responsibility for arranging and tracking the development of collaboration activities. The team could also assess collaborative performance throughout different stages of the collaboration system. During the discussion among participants, a ‘strategic planning committee’ was developed to take on the role of planning, managing and evaluating the collaboration system. The committee involved directors and staff from various levels and representatives from Omani Library Association (OLA). It was also necessary to select a leader for the committee and the collaboration system. A senior staff member who was both the director of the library of SQU and president of OLA was nominated to lead the committee on the basis of his long experience in librarianship and collaboration among libraries. Participants believed that such leadership qualities were essential in the Omani academic library situation to encourage commitment and demonstrate trust among members. Shepherd et al. (1999) described the benefits of strong leadership to the collaboration program of the TriUniversity Group of libraries (TUG) in relation to dealing with disagreements between members, encouraging commitment and ownership, and enabling developers to concentrate on users’ needs.

7. Changes in attitude

In order to facilitate collaborative activities, beliefs, feelings and emotional elements of organizational people need to be considered. Collaboration is influenced by several attitudinal issues that need to be addressed; for instance, motivation of people to cooperate, their feelings towards collaboration, their willingness to communicate with staff from another library, their understanding of the significance of collaboration program, and trust among the group of staff (El-Sherbini, 2010). During the stage of investigating the problematical situation, some of these attitudinal issues were discovered within the situation of Omani academic libraries, such as lack of understanding of the significance of collaboration and fear of failure. Lack of understanding was due to lack of previous experience in library collaboration, while fear of failure was due to lack of human, technical and financial resources. It was believed that involving directors and staff in learning and communication processes would minimize the effect of these challenges and enhance understanding and thinking about library collaboration. The workshop allowed staff from different academic libraries to discuss, understand each other, share experience and ideas, analyze their available resources versus the requirements of collaboration program, and build personal and working relationships. According to Ani et al. (2005), communication between collaboration system owners enhances effective decision-making. Becerra et al. (2008) suggested building a trusting relationship through communication and successful exchange of knowledge between members of participating libraries.

The level of commitment demonstrated by directors and staff during the action workshop was very high compared with that apparent in individual and group discussions at the beginning of this research. The changes in attitudes of staff contributed to changes in other aspects of organization such as the structure and procedures. In more detail, the increase in readiness and willingness to be involved in a collaboration program drove the establishment of a strategic planning committee and prepared the way for more task-based systems such as an interlibrary loan system.
8. Conclusion

Collaboration is not only changing the procedures for providing information and services but also communication, training and professional developments, and management procedures. The decision-making process within the organizations, which was usually controlled by directors of libraries, will be handed over to a group of decision makers given the responsibility to represent their libraries. It became clear during the action workshop, and based on the learning processes of current research, that staff had reached the accommodation stage on deciding the feasible and desirable collaboration activities that can be implemented in the situation of Omani academic library collaboration.

In summary, the application of organizational learning theory as an approach for learning rather than problem solving led to concentration not only on the resources available to support the collaboration system, but also on the development of the mental processes of the actors and their perceptions of the reality. The shift in organizational learning led to changes in attitude and, consequently, to changes in the situation of Omani academic libraries.

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