LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS: THE PROGENY UNVEILED

Zeb Jan

Dean Management Sciences, Army Public College for Management and Sciences, Pakistan

shrprofessional@gmail.com

Abstract

This study attends to the issue of connecting the philosophy of "The Learning Organization" as presented by Peter Senge to the strategies that can translate this philosophy into practical application. The philosophy of the Learning Organization revolves around the human psychology and extends to Organizational behavior, while connecting this cross disciplinary phenomenon, the researchers feel lost as to how set the underlying indicators for judging their sample for a contextual setting of a Learning Organization. The paper translates the five key concepts of The Learning Organization into certain characteristics, the presence of which invariably leads to the understanding of the underlying philosophy as that of the Learning Organization. The strategies designed for the promotion and attainment of these specific organizational characteristics would automatically lead to its transformation from usual classical organization into a learning Organization. The presence of these characteristics would help the researchers to identify a Learning Organization while conducting research on issues related to this concept or its background environment, hence, eliminating biases that could possibly occur due to inappropriate sample identification.

Keywords: Learning organization model, management paradigm, characteristics of learning organization, Contextual setting of Senge's Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

The Concept of Learning Organization is not new in the business world. Peter Senge coined this term in 1990's which entice the academician till today in order to further explore its depth and reality. Once an individual penetrates in the depth of this concept it feels to be a living Utopia. Being a concept of perfection, it is hardly seen to be implemented in totality. The philosophy of learning organization is a combination of five different base philosophies i.e Personal Mastry,

Team building, Shared Vision and System thinking, hence, making it difficult for the organizations to develop and adopt an integrated approach.

Even if the organizations try to implement a strategy incorporating the five ruling concepts of "The Learning Organization" they fail to develop a link between these five components. An obvious reason for all this is that the concept presented by Senge is his philosophy needs to be translated in to a practically applicable management model.

While studying issues within the contextual setting of a Learning Organization, most of the time the researcher faces data biases due to lack of any standard model that would help them categories their sample organization as a Learning Organization. Senge, the founder of this concept, has provided the sufficient details in his book The Fifth Discipline on the philosophy of The Learning Organization, but those discussions are all on developing a clear perception of this philosophy.

This philosophy is a combination of human psychology and group behaviors extending all the way through to organizational behaviors and aligning it to the organizational vision. The concept is a perfect solution for a major portion of the management related issues. If followed in letter and spirit it could become a problem solver for any kind of issues that an organization may confront in the present or in future.

This study attempts to identify the key features that could translate Seng's philosophy into a tangible framework making it convenient for the organizations to exploit the benefits of the concepts. As engraved in this concept, it provides you a window from where the management can view and asses their internal systems in connection with the contextual settings, conveniently identifying the bottle necks and hurdles within the organizations.

According to Frese & Keith(2015) Organizations using the strategy of employee empowerment and employee freedom for enhancing performance are resorting to incorporating the Learning Organization philosophy in their systems. And therefore, instead of avoiding errors resulting from employee psychological and abstract behaviors, managers must be trained in dealing with the management of such errors.

Thompson and Mabey (1994) highlighted a fact discussing this contextual nature in developing countries that adaptation of business setups to rapidly changing business environment may become a challenge for the managers, as these are managed under the bureaucratic governance style, resulting in slowing down the pace of change (Kiggundu, Jorgensen and Hafsi, 1983). As of today, in 2016 this scenario has crippled the systems functionality in many of these developing countries.

On the other hand, the economy shifts worldwide has also upset the developed economy and the resources of the developed countries are also sucked into this whirlpool of poorly managed adaptation process. In such circumstances, Seng's Learning Organization concept would prove to be a lifesaving strategy for many of the big and small enterprises as it helps ensure the smooth flow into the changing situation reducing the cost associated with friction encountered during the change process.

Assumption of the Study

With the given rationale the assumption of this exploratory study is given as- The identification of the applied model of the Learning Organization philosophy would facilitate the strategy formulation for transforming classical organizations into a Learning Organization as well as facilitate in identification of such contextual settings

In order to discover a practically applied model we need to keep the five main concepts of Learning Organization in view.

REVIEW OF THE SENGE'S LEARNING ORGANIZATION PHILOSOPHY

The foundation of this philosophy is rooted in the five popular concepts presented by Senge. These concepts as abridged are-

Personal Mastery

it relates to individuals' unbiased understanding of themselves in the context where they exist so as to be able to comprehend the reality about their existence and capabilities. The individuals should be able to seek the discrepancies in their skills, knowledge and behaviors. Further extending, the concept is not just about individuals knowing themselves, but also about knowing the impact they create on their surroundings through their actions and behavior.

The concept also encapsulates that role of the individuals where they are entrusted with the responsibility to eliminate these weaknesses in order to enhance their capabilities. The process is not a onetime effort by the individuals, but instead it warrants for a continuous observation of the ever changing surroundings.

Mental Models

this relates to the network of concepts that exist in human mind that plays an important role in learning. When an individual is confronted with a new or an unfamiliar concept, the individual learns about it only if it fits within their existing network of concepts that already exists in the individuals' mind. According to Senge (1991 and 2006) effective learning can only take place

when these existing mental models are broken and a new network of concepts is articulated in the individual's mind. In the process the old and new concepts adjusts in such a way that they start bearing logic to things, processes and ideas.

The mental models created as a result of this learning process are such that the individual then frequently apply these in their thinking process and incorporate them in their ideas.

Team building

This concept relates to the fact that a group of people cannot become a team unless each member is enabled and empowered to see him/her self as an articulate part of that team. Each member of the team should be able to understand how he/she is contributing to the output so as to precisely comprehend their placement and role in the overall performance of the team. This requires building of connection with each other at a metaphysical level and not just working together. Once this connection is established a team becomes a unit and the inter-unit task flow is more efficient.

Shared Vision

The concept implies that the organizational vision about its future should not be developed by a single executive or a leader. The leaders or the executives may show the direction and the future destination to their team, but the vision development process of the company should be taken up with participative approach. This practice would enable to enhance the perception of all the team members about organizational vision. In addition, it would create a sense of ownership of the tasks among all the members of the organization.

System Thinking

It highlights the importance of seeing the whole system i.e components and its objectives as an integrated and articulate whole. This implies that the roles and their impact as assigned to different teams must be judged on the basis of their overall contribution to the collective whole, rather than assessing individual outputs at the end of each process or task flow. This is the most complex component of Seng's philosophy. Seeing the whole system is normally beyond the capacity of the individuals working within the system.

Simultaneously, the individuals outside the system are unable to assess the internal bents and elbows of the systems. Once and organization achieve the capability of evaluating its processes and outputs in connection with each other and the final out put it can conveniently re-direct its efforts, eliminating all the wastes and bottle necks making it more stable and

sustainable. According to the concept of learning organization this is the final stage of this philosophy which enhances the immunity of the organization to the external shifts.

Parallel adoption of all these five founding philosophies of the learning organization is practically very difficult because of the sequence of process involved where the complete incorporation of one concept leads to the initiation of strategies for the second component. Here it is worth mentioning that the concept of shared vision and system thinking may be simultaneously taken up in strategies but the other three concepts must reach maturity level before an organization strategizes for implementation of system thinking. Mental models, personal mastery and the team building concepts fit into one another like concentric circles. Hence this means that any efforts of placing external circles (concepts) before arranging the internal circles (concepts) would mean only empty shells failing to acquire the benefits wrapped up in each circle of this philosophy. In order to design successful strategies the organizations need to understand from where to pick the thread.

Taking into account the five ruling concepts of The Learning Organization and the strategies translating these concepts into features that distinguish a Learning Organization from a conventional organization, we find variation in the nature as well as intensity of these features. Such variation marks the different stages of this process of transformation. In the given scenario the model characteristics those have been identified for the Learning Organization can help in assessment of such research context on case to case basis, therefore, eliminating ambiguities. Many of the concurrent HR, OD and BPR strategies stems out of this philosophy, but each of these strategies are seen separate to one another and hence, are unable to give desired results. While assessing different organizations using the "Learning Organization" window one can find multiple characteristics indicative of the presence of this philosophy in patches, but it could hardly be seen in totality. Depending upon the priority their improvement strategies, these different organizations exhibit different characteristics projecting their level up on the success ladder towards their destination of becoming a learning organization. An attempt had been made to compile all those characteristics that are reflective of the five concepts of learning organization ultimately defining this philosophy into an applied model.

As mentioned earlier, in the pursuit of sustainability, organizations aspiring to achieve the desired status of a Learning organization may not be passing through a concurrent change in all the given five aspects. Moreover, these organizations may be passing through different phases of development and hence, one may identify these five processes at different points in time. This means that some of the attributes of a learning organization could be more prominent and could be easily comprehended, whereas, some may be in their embryonic stage so may not be detected clearly.

Though the fact remains that all the attributes may not be all prominent at one time, still the traces of these attributes can be found indirectly in some activities going on in integration with other processes of the organization. For example, an organization may be following the ground rules of team building and teamwork but may not have yet achieved a stage where the concept of system thinking, the case may be, that individual of an organization may be passing through a transitional stage of developing new mental models but may not have yet attained the stage of personal mastery. In a nutshell, all the characteristics identified as that of a learning organization may not be all seen at one time within the organization but still with available traces such organizations may be identified as a learning organization. Based on these arguments, the following characteristics can be attributed to the model of a Learning Organization-

MAIN FEATURES OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION MODEL

The analysis carried out on the five ruling concepts of Senge's philosophy and the evidence collected through secondary search helped in identification of the factors that could be translated into the following characteristics of an organization identifiable as a Learning Organization.

1. Learning culture
2. Creativity and innovation
3. Interactive processes with its environment where it exists
4. Continuous skill development
5. Participatory decision-making
6. Two way feedback
7. Employee empowerment
8. Commitment and motivation of individuals to do their work
9. Knowledge management approach
10. Team work spirit
11. Self assessment- individuals and teams
12. Knowledge search and research

Learning Culture

A learning organization continuously transforms to adapt itself to the changing environment. This means that in such organizations learning is not a onetime task. There is a system and a culture that promotes learning all the time. Sharing the success and failure stories are not just for the purpose to laden someone with the blame of failure or remind others of their incapability or applaud someone for success. According to Tyson(2005) "Overall the implementer is

concerned with promoting a positive work environment within the organization, believing that, with greater encouragement, the staff and the management will become more self-confident".

In a learning organization these stories are treated as case studies for learning and the manager's attitude is forgiving about the past mistakes. The employees are given the opportunity to rectify their mistakes and not to be penalized for their mistakes. The staff is encouraged to share information with each other. More interactive environment is provided to the staff where they hold discussions and dialogues and are able to learn from each other's opinion.

The managers not only encourage learning through internal interaction but they provide opportunity to their staff to interact with other organizations and individuals outside of their own organizations.

Creativity and Innovation

In today's dynamic business environment, the use of creativity and innovation in products and services is thought to be a perfect solution for retaining sustainability and competitive edge in the market (Miller Hosley, Lau, Levy, F. K & Tan, 1994). As it is an expensive intervention, the managers are usually reluctant to introduce it within the organization.

In a learning organization the search for finding the best ways to deal with situations continues, therefore, creativity and innovation are one of their main tools for reaching their targets. With this objective individual freedom is strongly promoted so that they are able to test their new ideas. Again patience is also a common practice as the possibility of failure is high in such an approach.

In order to improve performance a firm must encourage employees for new and fresh ideas in their routine work-patterns(Huysman, 2000).A learning organization not only encourages creativity and innovation on individual's end but the approach is an integral part of the all the different processes and procedures. This is how they stand out among their competitors.

Interactive Processes with the External Environment of the Organization

As learning organizations seek to adapt itself with the changing environment, therefore, it seeks to continuously analyze the environment that it exist in. Just as the development of their human capabilities occurs, the processes of the organization also continuously respond to the changes in environment.

Processes like production, designing, quality control systems and marketing etc are continuously directed by the information the organization receives from its customers,

competitors and the market. The research and development department is a setup that helps the learning organization to respond efficiently and effectively to the environment.

Continuous Skill Development

In response to the adaptation strategy, the learning organization focuses on continuous skill development of the staff. Organizing the vision of the staff is where the skill development process starts and then on the basis of its requirement it seeks formal training of its staff. Curtis, Dreachslin and Sinioris (2007) establish that once the gaps between the skills and job requirement is eliminated, the process should not stop, instead it should be continuously upgraded. According to Rinke (2004) due to the continuously changing environment individual has to be a learner lifelong.

The pace of skill development of employees depends on internal environment, management style, their connection to the management goals and clear communication to the employees (Jagasia, Baul & Mallik, 2015).

Various types of skill development strategies are used by the learning organizations, which include- job rotation, job enrichment, formal training, long term career development plans, mentoring and coaching etc. Skill development in a learning organization is a permanent feature of all its plans and processes in order to bridge the gap caused by external changes. According to Dreher and Dougherty (2005) "the manager needs to identify an entire set of internally consistent HR practices to promote key employees behavior."

Participatory Decision Making

In an organization, every individual is expected to perform his/her role effectively, which requires access to information on the changes occurring in the surroundings. Decision-making is a process that ultimately leads to some sort of a change, creating impact on people's work. This is one of the reasons that in a learning organization participatory decision-making approach is adopted so that the employees understand the need for such a decision and according adjust their role and tasks as are required by that decision.

Two-way Feedback

As learning is a process that occurs at different levels and among all the senior and junior employees, therefore, two-way feedback is another strong feature of the Learning Organization to expedite the learning process. Gerard (1996) establishes that "Feedback is at the heart of individual and group learning". The communication system is so designed that upward and downward movement of the feedback is possible.

The manager also learns about his work through the feedback from the employee. This helps him to adapt his pattern of work. Though it is a difficult job to differentiate between a healthy feedback and misleading feedback, but here the manager's analytical skills come into play to solve the problem. Tyson (2005) suggests, that for a senior management to operate effectively through teams, it is important that an open dialogue with the team members is allowed in order to fully understand the organizational issues and the employee perspective about them.

Employee Empowerment

The term empowerment is being quoted very frequently with a little concern for the very essence of this concept. In many cases, on one hand the employees are expected to follow the set processes and no one interrupts them as long as they do so. In such cases, the management claims to be practicing employee empowerment, whereas the manager rarely asks if the team actually agrees with that pattern of work.

On the other hand, in some cases some individuals within the organization are charged with the duty for maintaining internal control and for this they are allowed to adopt any means available to them. Here again, the senior management claims to have delegated power to the employees, ignoring that such a delegation of power may affect the other employees against whom it is used. In both these cases the term empowerment is not being practiced according to its underlying essence. Empowerment is to make employees in-charge of their work and to choose the best way to execute and monitor their task without infringing upon the freedom of other team members who should also be enjoying the same kind of empowerment.

In setting the HR policies the organization must give representation right to the employee, so that their views and needs are incorporated in the guidelines. Some managers may be reluctant to such kind of freedom but strategies like these are very instrumental in achieving employee satisfaction.

According to Rinke (2004) "winning managers invest in their team members by telling them more than they want to know, empowering them and providing them with the tools that will enable them to stay on track". A learning organization seeks such strategies in order to hold a shared vision across the board and ensure long term association of the employees. This is also the founding ground for developing strategies for system thinking.

Commitment and Motivation

The five core concepts of personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and system thinking are embedded in commitment and motivation of the individuals working within the learning organization. In a learning organization, commitment and motivation are found at its

highest level, which could be seen from the roles they perform at work. Commitment at part of the leadership is the prerequisite for the establishment of a learning organization.

It is the leader's commitment that influences others to become part of the process. If we say that the leader's commitment is the key to the process then it will not be incorrect to say that employees' commitment is the engine that takes the process forward. According to Curtis, Hefly and Miller (2009) comment that work environment must be managed in a way that it ensures the committed work by the employees

Knowledge Management Approach

As continuous learning is the foundation of the learning organization, availability of knowledge is important to promote such learning. It is the learning of the knowledge stacked in the databases and human memories of that organization that facilitates in carrying out activities and decision-making. This implies that knowledge management is an integral aspect of the learning organizations' model. Advocating the same perspective of knowledge Aggestam (2015) says that it is preserved in human minds, databases and repositories and for optimum results it is incorporated in organizational SOPs.

The employees need to have access to such kind of knowledge in order to run the affairs innovatively and effectively. Knowledge management is a regular activity, where sorting and knowledge hunt is carried out on regular basis to ensure the timely availability of information to the employees. Such a system in a learning organization is well articulated with all the departments and with all the levels of employees to ensure effective task flow.

Team Work Approach

Learning organization's components including system thinking, personal mastery and shared vision are all factors of the cause and affect chain, that reflects upon corporate culture as seen in values like loyalty, supportive behavior, creativity and aestheticism etc, and working patterns like team functioning if practiced in true spirit"(Lim, 2016).

In a learning organization individuals are given freedom to supervise their work but their efforts to perform at work are coordinated across the team to achieve team performance. The tasks are usually assigned to the individuals in the form of teams where their performance is associated with the performance of other team members.

This is one of the significant reasons that team-learning is promoted in a learning organization. The concept behind the team building is that the combine capabilities of the team members has synergized effect, hence, raising performance manifold as compared to individual's performance. System thinking, an another fundamental approach to learning

organization, is also best promoted when the individuals see their role as a team members and are further able to connect their assignment in the perspective setting of its context. To promote this spirit, individuals are evaluated in teams and are rewarded in teams, so as to keep them motivated for team work and giving team performance.

According to Castaneda, Kolenko & Aldag (1999) "Certain organizational characteristics such as cultural norms, centralized control process and formal evaluation/reward system can foster the development of unique personal effectiveness strategies and practices" (1999). It may develop personal individually but such a team would lag behind in delivering effective team output. If the other organizational systems are integrated with performance management system, then it generates the emergence of such unique practices which leads to innovation and creativity.

The aforementioned characteristics highlight the model of The Learning Organization and would provide similar contextual setting for operations as incorporated in this philosophy.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the logic and facts presented in the arguments above and by other researchers as referred the conclusions drawn are forwarded as-

1. Learning Organization is a philosophy that would require transformation into implementable strategies in order to transpire the living utopia into tangible model

2. The philosophy of a Learning Organization, incorporated into its five ruling concepts, could be easily perceived once the main characteristics of the Learning Organization as listed in this study becomes prominent which invariably result from the psychological contract to this philosophy by the senior management

3. Once the given characteristics are identified within the organization, the status of the transformation could be conveniently scaled against the level of accomplishment of becoming a learning Organization. Such kind of clarity in contextual identification can help eliminate the biases in the analysis.

WAY FORWARD

Once the characteristics have been identified for transforming a classical organization into a learning organization a further search could be conducted into identifying and designing strategies for each component of the learning organization i.e. Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Team Learning, Shared Vision and System thinking. Here it is worth mentioning that the concepts of team learning and shared vision are in practice by the management and one can easily find strategies for incorporating these approaches in their policies and procedures.

But Personal Mastery, Mental Models and System Thinking would require detail analysis of the contributing factors for devising any implementable strategy.

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