

IMPACT OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON EDUCATIONAL
INSTITUTIONS AS LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS



By

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ABSTRACT

In an era of sheer competitiveness and constantly changing environment, there is a need for organizations not only to adapt but also be proactive in order to meet challenges. This is where learning organizations jump in as the most viable option where it's important to note that they cannot work in a vacuum but they need to interact in terms of sharing information and transferring it and any problems that surface in due course need a systems thinking rather than focusing on parts.

The term learning organization is not a new one, it has been around since the 1990s and it has gained popularity overtime. There are no predetermined SOPs for learning organizations to exist, any organization that shows signs of learning, big or small, could be included in the category. Garvin and Edmondson (2008) introduced the Learning Organization Survey which outlines the basic blocks that make up the structure of a learning organization and the same survey was used in this research. However the culture of a country could also have an impact on how rapidly an organization may absorb external changes through improvement of its processes and procedures, similarly the mindset of the people from a particular ethnicity could very much have an impact on the existence of learning organizations in various regions.

The main aim of this research paper is to analyze the effect of national culture on the viability of educational institutions as learning organizations. A sample of 150 teachers was surveyed from Army Public School and College, Sialkot. A quantitative analysis was undertaken first by measuring the respondents on national culture dimensions and then on learning organization dimensions. Bivariate correlations were measured in order to find out the relationship among

variables under scrutiny. The results suggest that since Pakistan is high on collectivism and more short-term oriented, these two dimensions have a significant impact on the working of the institution under study. Due to collectivist behavior of teachers, they work well in groups and score well on psychological safety. Another finding is that due to short term orientation towards life, there's not much time left for reflection and analysis.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to some very special people in my life whose support and encouragement has made its completion possible.

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother whose support and patience has made it possible for me to put in time and effort. She not only encouraged me to get it done in time, but also lent a kind ear to the progress that I had been making. And of course her regular prayers for my success are what I will never forget.

Second, I would dedicate this thesis to my grandparents who have always believed in my capabilities and supported me throughout my masters program. I am extremely grateful to them and their patience.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The concept of learning organizations is relatively novel in a developing country like Pakistan. A lot of literature that may be applicable in western developed countries might take a completely different standing in the context of developing countries. The role of country variable has been studied but in the context of new forms of work organizations, and many variables like GDP and other economic factors were found to impact the readiness of organizations to change into learning organizations (Schuler, 1993; Spina, 1996; Ettlie, 1997). And similarly many other studies in the West suggest that national culture is one good reason why organizations may switch to the newer structures found in work organizations (Schneider, 1989; Harrison, 1994).

Importance of Learning Organizations

Organizations in the 21st century need to change in order to survive in a world that is subject to rivalry and competition based on technological advancements and the knowledge exchange. With the passage of time, there has been an ongoing debate on the importance of knowledge created by individuals in an organization (Drucker, 1992; Thurow, 2003; von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Employees cannot be developed alone in isolation and their development is dependent on a learning culture and processes that encourage learning. This is where the importance of learning organizations emerges as an inescapable phenomenon. Although Pakistan, like many other developing economies, is not abundant with learning organizations but the fact that any organization which collects, shares and analyzes knowledge can be a learning organization cannot be overlooked.

Similarly when it comes to national culture, in particular, many recent studies have explored that national culture could be extremely important for management to devise policies and for organizations to adapt strategically (Metters, 2008). And also, many HRM studies have paid attention to different regions and national cultures where the importance of setting suitable procedures in line with the varying cultures has been analyzed (Budhwar and Sparrow, 2002).

The influence of national cultural dimensions on the learning organizations in Pakistan has not been studied separately or in other words the extent of dependency of educational institutions as learning organizations on the cultural variables has not been analyzed and hence requires some amount of research.

Purpose of the research

This paper contributes to the previously mentioned debate by exploring the relationship between learning organization variables and national culture variables. First, the evolution of the concept of learning organizations is reviewed, followed by the importance of a learning corporate culture, educational institutions as learning organizations and the importance of country culture with respect to learning organizations including the introduction to the dimensions of national culture given by Hofstede (1994), the author. Second a theoretical framework of variables is derived from the literature, which are further measured and analyzed. Finally, findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are addressed.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relationship of national culture variables on educational institutions viability as learning organizations. The sample taken comprised of 150 teachers from Army Public School and College, Sialkot who were surveyed and the results compiled. The teachers were surveyed first on the viability if the institution to fall in the learning organization category and then the impact of national culture dimensions i.e. power distance,

collectivism, short-term orientation, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity on the working of learning organizations was measured. Such research has been undertaken previously as well.

Research Question

RQ: To what extent does the national culture influence educational institutions in their pursuit to become learning organizations?

The assumption behind this research question, in line with the literature is that there are certain practices of the learning organization which are influenced by the country culture. Hence an overview is given in this paper as to which are those dimensions of national culture that have a deeper effect on the viability of learning organizations in Pakistan's context and how managers can better understand employee behavior and develop them for a learning culture.

CHAPTER II

Literature review

The concept of a “Learning Organization”

As defined by Senge (1990), a learning organization is one “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and where collective aspiration is set free.” Senge (1990) mentioned that learning is important not only for individuals but for organizations as a whole which shows that every aspect is interlinked. The rationale that he gave for becoming a learning organization seemed quite an attractive opportunity. It was however known in some time that while learning was generally thought to be benefiting, it could never be enough to be successful. Sterman (1994) on the other hand pointed out that humans are known for being ineffective learners in difficult circumstances. He described that managers would continuously try to take remedial actions even after enough actions have been taken to balance things, which might as well disrupt the stability of a system. According to Cavaleri (2008) this kind of a learning process which creates low quality knowledge cannot benefit anyone and that in order for learning to be beneficial it needs to create knowledge which is high in quality and that is only possible through “experimentation, sound reasoning, knowledge evaluation and ongoing knowledge improvement processes”, all of which are part of the building blocks of learning organizations.

Senge (1990) gave the five disciplines that learning organizations capitalize on, namely; “personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning and systemic thinking.” When employees keep on clarifying and deepening their vision, instill patience within them and make appropriate use of their strengths that is when they have achieved personal mastery. It generally

relates to the identifying of strengths and weaknesses and then making use of them in order to develop oneself. A shared vision on the other hand may refer to the formation of a common goal oriented future which is known by all employees throughout the organization. This is how goals can be achieved and employees can work in complete harmony by feeling a part of the organization with an ingrained sense of purpose. Mental models have been defined as the collective thinking of a group of people and their beliefs regarding the world. Another element is team learning which helps in collecting view points of all employees in the form of a group and then making optimum use of the knowledge derived from them. Systemic thinking is another discipline that is defined by Senge (1990) as "a process of thinking that aids in identifying patterns and inter-relationships, seeing the bigger picture, avoiding over-simplification, overcoming linear thinking and dealing with issues holistically and comprehensively." This means that any issue cannot be analyzed alone, but it should be resolved by taking into consideration all other factors that could possibly have an impact.

Jamali, Khoury and Sahyoun (2006) in their research on the shift of bureaucratic organizations into learning organizations propose that when these five disciplines are combined they help the organization to attain its most important goals. They found out that the overall organizational performance was too complicated to be reduced to very basic elements that form the bigger picture. Hence learning organizations benefit by making the best use of the interrelationships, interactions and coherence among these five disciplines.

The fact that organizations by their very nature exist in order to learn cannot be overruled. However Daniels (1994) is one of those researchers who have stated in their research that there are no hard and fast rules for the existence of learning organizations. People like Calvert, Mobley and Marshal (1994) have stressed that there can be organizations which have certain qualities

similar to that of learning organizations but this is quite impossible that there would be flawless learning organizations.

Griego, Geroy and Wright (2000), in their research on the determinants of learning organizations came up with certain attributes that a learning organization should possess like “training and education, rewards and recognition, information flow, vision and strategy and individual and team development.” But all these don’t just stand alone in the battle field; these predictors require an appropriate learning culture understood by all employees within an organization.

Corporate Culture

Mary M. Hale (1996) has discussed Senge’s five disciplines by finding out that most organizations, particularly in the public sector are not well equipped to develop knowledge and the managerial workforce because in order to do so the public organizations need to switch from a rather conventional centralized decision making and power oriented politics and procedures to a structure that is based on the acquisition and production of knowledge. This further requires that existing and future managerial and leadership positions should be filled with bright, competent and energetic men and women who bring “relationship orientations and systems thinking to their work.”

Furthermore Jarvis (1998) in his research discussed that learning is all about deriving meaning out of experiences that we have had, then same is the case with learning in organizations as it is a social endeavor where employees usually work while communicating with their co-workers and it also takes into account the interaction with managers, customers and suppliers. He also implies that particular social and cultural settings facilitate learning. Vygotsky (1978) on the other hand claims that it is the individual level where all cognitive learning takes place therefore learning

can also take place by interacting with others. This research was basically a shift from individual perspective on learning towards a more social sciences view. Even after so much of social interaction, it was highlighted by Ted O' Keeffe (2006) that just bringing people together was not sufficient, what matters the most is developing an organization culture which is open to communication, appreciates differences in opinion and wants to adopt a learning approach in order to become a learning organization. Even before this finding, Hall (2001) emphasized that the way we attain knowledge is what we can call learning on the other hand, an organization culture supportive of knowledge creation and transfer is what constitutes a learning organization. This particularly sheds light on how important is an organization's culture for learning organizations to hold true.

White and Weathersby (2005) enquired over the issue if each one of us could work together in harmony as participants of an "extended professional community" then we would in this way be balancing out our personal goals of individual achievement at the same time we would be working towards group achievement which is supportive enough for a learning organization. In their point of view, we as individuals and even in groups could make optimum use of our knowledge repositories based on learning organizations and similarly apply those concepts to create a learning environment. Then the question arose as of how to learn which was well answered by Ortenblad (2005) who found out that learning was an ongoing process and in order to respond to change we need to start with two things; "learning how to evaluate how we do what we do and then having the courage to change and improve it." Birdthistle and Fleming (2005) suggested that "strategic reviews and culture change are critical ingredients in developing the organizational learning capabilities of small and medium sized family firms." This shows that the action plan and enablers are considered an important feature for learning organizations to exist in

practical working of a business firm. Similarly in a study by Maria (2003) on the Malaysian public sector, found that it is the culture of the organization that determines the amount of innovation carried out by the employees. She found out that “embedded systems, leadership, continuous learning and team learning”, are the basic elements which form a learning organization and hence these elements explain more or less innovation in organizations than any other variable.

Educational Institutions as Learning Organizations

Patterson (1999) was amongst the early researchers who mentioned that universities could be learning organizations too implying that gradually universities have also started to shift towards learning organizations as the external competitive environment provides them a challenge to face.

The old and new institutional theory very appropriately characterizes that higher education institutes might find it extremely hard to adapt and innovate (Drugovich, 2004). One reason could be that educational institutions are known for accepting change slowly. A very inspiring leadership is what is required to work according to proper governance which would help the institute to innovate or adapt. And he found that leaders are the ones who should find out how to make use of both old governance procedures and also the latest ones relating to learning organizations. An example could be that in order to support curriculum up gradation and improve the institute's financial position and its ability to respond to extraneous factors, there should be task forces created and other important measures be taken.

It was pointed out by Mavin and Cavaleri in 2004 that the faculty or teaching staff thinks of itself as “knowledge creators” who are not usually very eager neither are they empowered enough to either learn or build knowledge as representatives of their institutions.

Hence not only being a knowledge creator is important, one can't practically undertake it if not empowered enough. Similarly it is essential to understand that it could be risky to create learning oriented communities comprising members of the teaching staff, even if they go step by step and not at once. It could foster problems for the institute. It was further highlighted that as faculty members, teachers may be alone in their devotion and willingness toward creating their workplace as a learning organization. Here it is important that top management should be actively participating because in taller structured organizations, teachers who haven't been with the organization or institute for long may bring the issue to the top management. (White and Weathersby, 2005)

Many studies have one by one revealed that many educational institutions try to avoid or find a way around change even though the fact that change is a part of their very existence cannot be overlooked. (Oakes & Lipton, 2001) On the contrary throughout history there have been many explanations of model schools displaying the qualities of a learning community, which is a fine combination of a learning organization and that of a defined community of learners.

In a learning organization there is a conflict existing between the “central mission and openness to new ideas” (Fullan, 1999). The mission is what keeps the organization intact; however, it must be noted that in order to solve important issues such as meeting or exceeding educational standards, the school should be proactive and look outward for new approaches and successful practices. When Garvin (1996) advocated trying to use novel techniques and grasping the best

practices of others, he was pointing towards the same circumstances. Hiatt-Michael (2001) stated that for schools to operate as learning entities following a particular vision, management needs to trust their employees in their ability to work individually towards fulfillment of overall organizational goals.

In an examination of educational institutions in the higher education sector of Malaysia, Kumar and Idris (2006) found out that there were important and direct correlations between the seven dimensions of the learning organization as represented by the DLOQ and the knowledge management as perceived by the employees which was basically the dependent factor. "Team learning, embedded systems and the provision of leadership" were three such elements which showed positive relationships, this can be linked to the appreciation of differences, systems thinking in learning organizations and leadership that reinforces learning respectively.

In the last few years a comparatively new term came into existence which was solely customized for the community college (Terry O'Banion, 1996). It was basically a reflection of the process of learning starting from its inception till its application. The authors and researchers called it a "learning college" which is much more suitable when it comes to highlighting the very essence of a "community college" that considers learning as a first milestone rather than words like the "learning communities" and "learning organizations." The aim of the learning college is to stress solely on learning and become a platform for learners where they may gain the most effective educational experience inconsiderate of place or time barriers. The major task that needs dire attention of people who wish to create learning colleges is to bring about a change in mindsets of management who consider time, place and efficiency as hindrances, rather they should have an internal locus of control and enable an environment where employees or teachers may learn to their fullest.