

Leveraging change through leadership processes



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Approximately 30 years ago Chris Argyris (1978) posed the question, “ What is an organization that it might learn?” To this day, this question framed around the concept of learning organizations has garnered a variety of definitions, research, and perspectives across an array of disciplines. From education to fortune 500 companies, the constant across disciplines/professions is the overall positive outcomes produced by leaders who foster a learning organization. A leader who can create a culture of practice, commitment, shared vision, and purpose, will be able to find success. With that said, the important thing to understand is that creating such a culture takes time and goes beyond simply making policy. The challenge lies in the hesitation of many leaders who are evaluated on their ability to avoid mistakes instead of making decisions. As Kahneman (2011) stated, “ We are prone to blame decision makers for good decisions that worked out badly and to give them too little credit for successful moves that appear obvious only after the fact” (p. 203). Subsequently, while the need for the development of more learning organizations has increased throughout the 21-century, the promotion of leaders to do so is absent.

According to Fiol and Lyles (as cited in Argote & Miron-Spektor, 2011) “ Most researchers would agree with defining organizational learning as a change in the organization’s knowledge that occurs as a function of experience” (p. 2). The key terms in this definition are change, knowledge, and experience. To be effective during times of change and/or in a dynamic profession an organization must be knowledgeable. The acquisition of knowledge comes from learning through cognitive practice and experience. Furthermore, not only must an organization be knowledgeable about their respective field, but

they must also be knowledgeable about their environment, competition, and most importantly, their staff/employees. “ A complex environment calls for a complex style of leadership...” (Slater & Narver, 1995, p. 7) and a reconstruction of the mental models that restrict systems thinking.

Work by Argyris and Schon on organizational learning is focused on how individuals work together and countering the errors that create complexities within an organization. This detection and correction of errors (Smith, 2001, 2013) is at the core of what was coined “ single-loop and double-loop learning.” Regarding organizational learning:

When the error detected and corrected permits the organization to carry on its present policies or achieve its presents objectives, then that error-and-correction process is single-loop learning. Single-loop learning is like a thermostat that learns when it is too hot or too cold and turns the heat on or off. The thermostat can perform this task because it can receive information (the temperature of the room) and take corrective action. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies and objectives. (Argyris & Schön, 1978, p. 2-3)

The successful detection of error requires a leader and the organization to get their team acting together towards a shared and defined vision (Senge, Lucas, Dutton, Smith, Cambron-McCabe, & Kleiner, 2000).

Senge defines learning organizations (as cited in Hussein, Mohamad, Noordin, & Amir, 2014) as “ organization where people continually develop their capacity to achieve results they desire, whereby new patterns of

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thinking are nurtured, collective aspirations are freed and people learn to learn together” (p. 1). This definition summarizes five primary components of organizational learning coined “ The Five Disciplines”. Senge (1990) five disciplines of organizational learning and success are: (1) personal mastery, (2) mental models, (3) shared vision, (4) team learning, and (5) systems thinking. Developing a culture of personal mastery builds competency amongst individuals and trust in each team members capabilities. Being aware of mental models allows for improved creative processes and innovative opportunities to be developed. Having a shared vision garners unity and commitment amongst all stakeholders. Committing to team learning contributes to all pares involved growing together to achieve the desired outcomes. Lastly, “ systems thinking provides a different way of looking at problems and goals...” (Senge, at al., 2000, p. 78).

García-Morales, Jiménez-Barrionuevo, and Gutiérrez-Gutiérrez (2012) studied the impact of transformational leadership on the effectiveness of an organization through the lens of organizational learning and innovation. Transformational leadership is a dynamic leadership style that is focused on analyzing the environment and connecting with individuals in order to effectively navigate towards a set goal. García-Morales, et al. (2012) refers to work by Dibella, Nevis, and Gould, defining organizational learning as the capability of an organization to maintain and improve performance by acquiring, sharing, and utilizing knowledge. The authors surveyed 168 CEO’s of international automotive or chemical companies to identify any correlation between transformation leadership, organizational learning, and organizational innovation. Based on their analyses the researchers found

four significant or positive correlations between transformational leadership, organizational learning, and organizational innovation:

(1) a positive relation between transformational leadership and organizational learning and innovation, (2) a positive relation between transformational leadership and innovation directly and indirectly through the construction of competencies focused on learning..., (3) a positive relation between organizational learning and innovation. The innovative organization learns and knows how to make and keep itself competent., (4) a positive relationship between more organizational learning and innovation and organizational performance. Organizations' complexes of essential production and technology competences or resources and capacities sustain the sources for achieving sustainable competitive advantages. (García-Morales, et al., 2012, p. 6-8)

This study identified that leadership, specifically transformational leadership, has a strong and positive correlation in operating an effective learning organization and organizational innovation.

Megheirkouni (2016) studied the impact of transformational and transactional leadership styles on enhancing organizational learning in for-profit and non-profit sports organizations. Transformational leaders are defined as leaders who are focused on investing in the development of their subordinates as leaders to better accomplish the desired goals. “ The components of transformational leadership are idealized attributes, idealized behaviors, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration” (Megheirkouni, 2016, p. 3). On the other hand, Megheirkouni

(2016) defines transactional leaders as individuals who utilize punishment-reward systems to achieve set goals by utilizing contingent reward, management by exception-active and management by exception-passive. Crossan, Lane, and White (as cited in Megheirkouni, 2016, p. 4) define organizational learning as "...the process of change in thought and action at individual and collective levels and how this process is affected by the institutions of the organization". The author surveyed a total of 207 for-profit and non-profit sports organizations (98 for-profit and 109 non-profits) on the relationship between transformational-transactional leadership styles and organizational learning. Based on the authors analyses, the study identified four themes that both contradict and support research findings by other authors: (1) for-profit sport organizations were identified as having a significantly higher mean of transformational and transactional leadership traits than non-profit, (2) the mean of organizational learning was a little higher than in for-profit sports organizations than non-profit, (3) only a single component of transformational leadership (idealized influence) was identified as having a significant impact on organization learning, (4) the management by exception-active component of transactional leadership was identified as having a significant impact on organizational learning. This study highlights the possibility of multiple leadership styles (transformational-transactional) being impactful in a learning organization.

I identify the importance of being a good leader as the ability to apply different leadership styles and components at the right time. There is a time to apply a "stick and carrot" approach when attempting to motivate staff. With that said, ensuring to avoid using awards and punishment as one's only

motivating tactic is the marks of a good leader. This flexible approach to leadership will allow me to be effective in a dynamic profession in developing a learning organization. Moreover, I understand that a strong base of knowledge is required to be effective when being flexible in my approach to leading people. This base of knowledge is particularly important during times of change and innovation, such as implementing a new staffing structure. Combating stringent mental models that restrict progress and initiating double-loop learning is another challenge I face within my organization. I need to be aware of mental models in my organization to effectively apply double-loop learning and move towards systems thinking. Lastly, by having a mindset that is focused on personal mastery that is guided by a shared vision, I will be able to develop a learning organization.

“ We use the metaphor of “ getting on the balcony” above the “ dance floor” to depict what it means to gain the distanced perspective you need to see what is really happening” (Heifetz, Gragrow, & Linsky, 2009). This quote can be applied to the view of organizational learning/learning organization. The definition of these terms is as dynamic and flexible as the organizations they can be applied to and the leadership style that can make them possible. With that said, in order to see the broad scope of these terms, one must first break the mental models that stop us from going up to the balcony.

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