

Sindh Education Foundation as a Learning Organization

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Abstract:

In these days of competitiveness, there is so much talk about learning as a driver of organization's changing capability and building learning organizations that one gets tempted to look in to realities of these never ending learning mantras.

This research focuses on two important variables of Learning Organization (LO), a. Structure and b. Reward system and determines their relationship with learning capacity of an organization. Research hypothesized that if the knowledge sharing structures are enabled through positive and meaningful rewards, the personal learning resulting from the enabled system would translate into enhanced organizational capacity for action the purported aim of becoming a learning organization.

The study picked Sindh Education Foundation (SEF), a semi-government Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) as a case to test the hypothesis. Research was carried out through series of 20 open-ended interviews with SEF members across multiple-layers. Findings validated the research design and accepted the truth value of hypothesis.

Based on analysis the paper draws academic conclusions in the purview of learning organization, drives set of recommendations for SEF and suggest future avenues for research.

1. INTRODUCTION

The issues encompassing organizational learning and personal learning are interesting. They are intriguing because it poses the challenge of whether presence of personal learning necessarily translates in to organizational learning or vice versa. LO have many dimensions that include attachment to vision, team based learning, structural flexibility, motivation system and others. One may argue that structure and reward are ever present factors and does not offer any attraction for exploration but for people working within these are connectors to system – their actions and willingness to learn is much guarded by the opportunities or obstacles provided by structure and reward motivations. Leadership focused on creating LO will eventually decide the learning fate of organization but without the absence of structural and rewarding conditions required, leadership intensity will take no learning shape [1].

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Learning Organization: ‘Organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. [2]’

Noted work in the literature of LO is The Five Disciplines [3], which are namely: System Thinking, Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Building Shared Vision and Team Work.

- System Thinking is to deal with the long-term orientation of the organization. It is a framework for seeing patterns and interrelationships.
- Personal Mastery is about aligning personal vision to that of the organization.
- Mental Models are the sum of our total past learning. LO requires unlearning old models to learn new knowledge.
- Shared Vision breeds excellence and learning because people in the organization want to pursue these goals.
- Teamwork in LO context is ‘Thinking Together’.

Structure, Reward and Learning: *Structure* determines the liberty organization is providing to its employees in gaining new knowledge and sharing new learning. Whether the system has the substance to return value-additive knowledge that theory of LO advocates. It explains the extent to which organization allows employee's personal development by way of collaborative and challenging team work in a way the basic organizational learning unit, team, is nurtured.

Reward determines the employee's view toward organization and knowledge-sharing practices within the organization. LO demands higher sense of intrinsic motivation as reward system believing that when employees have intrinsic motivation they would automatically be performing for organization's collective learning. Reward dimension evaluates how much organization values employees and considers them important in overall achievement of its goal and vision so that they would feel motivated to contribute beyond their designated roles.

3. SINDH EDUCATION FOUNDATION

The Sindh Education Foundation (SEF) was instituted in 1992 as a semi-autonomous organization with the primary objective to "evolve programs for raising the standard of education and improvement of the literacy rate in Sindh." SEF's initial activities began with the provision of grants and loans to educational institutes and organizations. The current projects not only provide education, but also mobilize communities to meet their educational and developmental needs.

In 1997, the SEF introduced a collaborative strategy in the form of a public private partnership to revitalize government schools. This was known as the Adopt a School Program [4]. SEF is also involved in research publications, women empowerment and other community building projects.

SEF makes a good case to study for Learning Organization. Being a NGO, it is an outward looking organization that is interacting with community at large which gives spark to knowledge sharing and new learning. In past one year, SEF has seen lot of changes. Second half of 2003 witnessed system development changes and emergence of structural undertakings at SEF. Presently, organization is going through 'Regaining Trust, Conceptualizing and Envisioning' phase. There is an emphasis on improved action resulting from continuous learning. This is being done through a program named 'Professional Retreat' focusing on giving programs own sets of competencies and putting new ideas in programs.

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Structure: The present structure as on paper is typically a functional structure headed by program heads and comprises upper, middle and lower management levels. Leadership believes that the structure on paper is for accountability purposes. The operational or thematic structure has same programs and staffing types but keeps the programs at top and top-management at bottom.

- 10 (50 %) out of 20 respondents find the structure of SEF to be functional and one led by hierarchies while same number of respondents felt it was an unstructured system evolving in to an openly fluid structure.
- Interestingly, all the respondents were able to point out weaknesses in structure hindering the pace of learning. General observations were problems with cross-functional learning, lack of support from top, and power restrictions when empowered actions were tried. Respondents noted confusion and partial dissatisfaction with the feedback system.
- From the set of Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes (KSA), it was found that learning most relies on training program in accomplishing learning objectives

while built-in learning mechanism within structure is weak. Around 15 respondents acknowledged the presence of trainings while 5 felt that trainings were not learning based. Knowledge and Skill dimensions of learning objectives are met because respondents usually relate their tasks with work component; however, attitude learning remains a question. 12 out of 20 respondents highlighted the role of leadership in shaping their behaviors but did not believe they had attitudinal learning objectives set for themselves.

- Attitudinal learning remains a problem – while in the process of change, it should have been attitudinal trainings taking the lead but the emphasis of change programs 'Professional Retreat' is more on revising programs and not mindsets. Behavioral adjustments are important especially in structural undertakings which SEF is slowly moving towards.
- Researcher noted that learning was more individualistic dependent than organizational supportive. It was noted that some employees who find structure to be tall see their personal learning taking place but some employees who find structure to be lean do not see their learning capacity growing while reverse cases were also found. This is because their education qualification, stay in organization and personal willingness varied but not because of learning capacity derived from structure. It is evident that there is lack of coherence across employees in understanding structure and its implications on learning.

In sum, respondents do find relation between structure and learning. Responses are divided as far the capacity of learning is concerned. Although employees want free flow of communication and openness across functions but they do not want to muddle through sea of informal and undefined communication.

Rewards: Data regarding both tangible and intangible rewards was collected.

- Respondents feel secure with tangible rewards they receive. Some do demand more equitability. Research deals with these rewards as learning contributors. All respondents believed it contributed to learning but not to extent desired.
- In answer to intangible rewards, lower staff is indifferent towards the attitude of management while managers believe they applaud the good work of their staff considerably. Managers responded that they do so for performance of their people and staff responded that they receive intangible rewards for their completion of targets. Intangible rewards include verbal appreciations, friendly environment, trainings and a monthly hi-tea session where good work of people is acknowledged.

- 17 out of 20 respondents said that SEF places strong emphasis on teamwork and working in teams as the motto of foundation. But they could not cite out reward motivations for teams. Respondents believe that learning is part of working in team but teams are not geared for learning as the system lacks tangible incentives for team and team members do not foresee any intangible recognition for team, which mostly is limited to individuals.
- 12 out of 20 people said they had intrinsic motivation to perform beyond their responsibility or beyond what they get paid for. However, 7 out of these 12 said they ever actually did something like that. The motivations in this case would be organizational benefits, personal growth, sense of ownership and social accountability.
- An intriguing question to validate previous responses was reason to get paid for – generally everyone believed that they had desire to learn and they learn a lot at workplace but 19 out of 20 individuals confirmed they get paid for doing or performing. Only one person thought that if the learning is there, performance will come, yet the reason to get paid was performing to that person.
- Essentially, the organization needs to get rid of dual structure. There is visible evidence of dissonance because of operational and accountability structures running simultaneously. One structure supporting decision making at lower level, with ability to share with and from supporting functions should be used for both operational and accountability purposes.
- The vision for change through professional retreat is to make SEF ‘an academically charged, theoretically strong and intellectually driven’ organization. This would not come unless people feel they are paid for same and in spirit true LO demands that people sense their reward attached to learning output, else the system will be skewed. To reach this type of vision, performance must become function of learning. During this process of change, attitudinal learning must be given importance.
- Intangible rewards need to be enriched by adding new forms such as certificates, exploratory field trips, learning based picnics etc. Plus, the current system of intangible rewards must be made meaningful to employees. At present, it is inequitable and not judicious. A team based reward system making all team members accountable and recognized is needed.

There is a positive correlation between reward and learning. At SEF, for one group, open system, recognition and appreciation are fair enough reward for them to learn. For other group, due to inequity in intangible reward and absence of system to recognize achievements is causing decreasing motivation to meet learning objectives. There is certainly effort required from management to relate rewards with learning as people do not think they get paid for learning which is crucial to build a Learning Organization.

Hypothesis Result: Research findings and analysis validates research design with numbers and qualitative responses. At SEF, there is a definite motivation and enthusiasm present in people to learn and there is a culture of openness to share learning. Research reveals people understand their personal and organizational learning needs but expect management to address imbalances in structure and reward systems.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SEF

- Management of SEF is keen to make foundation a LO. For organization to meet this goal there is need to make a deliberate defined attempt to pursue structural clarity. Key areas to target are inter-departmental coordination, bridging communication gap by strengthening management interaction and creating learning opportunities within the system.
- Management needs to devise system of documenting learning and knowing who is learning what in order to analyze learning needs in the categories of KSA. This task should be taken by newly formed training unit.

- In the transition of change and making SEF an academically charged LO, internal network leaders (change management team) should work on confidence building measures amongst local line leaders and relate the change with learning experiments. While the executive leadership should do manageable work and maintain the process of change rather than getting locked in too many workshops, training sessions and how to meetings.

6. ACADEMIC CONCLUSIONS

- Structures and Rewards have strong impact on personal and organizational learning. Clarity in structures enabling members to meet learning objectives and rewards closed associated with learning makes people to work beyond assigned responsibility.
- Multiple structures are source of confusion to learning. It is not even necessary that lean structure would always make a LO or tall structure would always result in learning difficulties. This is however true that certain flexibility and closeness in structural linkages is required for acceptable rate of learning, which cannot be achieved by a typical bureaucratic structure.
- Every organization requires its own suitable structure based on competencies, background and future learning needs of organization.

- Unless people do not find themselves rewarded for learning, the organization cannot be categorized under purest form of LO.

7. AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

- How to target weakest link of attitudinal learning for SEF or LO in general and the role of rewards in changing the attitudes?
- With the given structure on paper versus operational structure in practice, what are its repercussions on personal and organizational learning? Whether it helps or hinders learning and under what situations it can help learning.
- How should organizations embark on a system where employees get motivated in a way that they attach their rewards in return of learning, especially when historically the focus of organizations has been performance?

- How to develop organizational specific learning structures when competencies and profiles of employees vary across the organization? Can organizations work out which type of structure would suit a particular target market (work force and customers)?

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