

Learning Organisation: Rhetoric and Reality – A Study with reference to selected industrial units in Dakshina Kannada District of Karnataka State

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning organisation emerged around 1990, influenced by writers such as Pedler *et al.*, (1991) in the UK and Senge (1990) in the USA). The core idea behind 'learning organisation' is that organisations of all kinds will not survive, let alone thrive, if they do not acquire an ability to adapt continuously to an increasingly unpredictable future. Indeed, in a fast-paced, competitive and unpredictable world, organisations need not only to be highly adaptable and continue to improve but also may be even more to strive to take the lead and constantly stay ahead if they want to prosper in such 'permanent white water', a metaphor first used by Vaill (1989) to express the idea of continuous environmental turbulence. Therefore, one of the major recommendations concerns 'organisational learning' and 'learning organisation'. Through learning, organisations may be better equipped to meet the challenges caused by such 'permanent white water'.

The notion of the learning organisation is becoming "a very big conceptual catchall to help us make sense of a set of values and ideas we have been wrestling with, everything from customer service to corporate responsiveness and speed". Inspired by the success of Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* (1990), many management consultants and researchers have jumped on the bandwagon. A number of books on how to develop a learning organisation have come out during the past few years. These books adopt a prescriptive stance and teach managers the way that a company should learn.

Objectives

The central purpose of this study is to analyse the emergence of learning organisation in India especially in Dakshina Kannada District of Karnataka State. The specific objectives are:

- (1) To highlight the learning profile and contextual setting of organisations;
- (2) To measure the inhibiting and facilitating factors faced in the change process.
- (3) To measure the facilitating factors that supported development of learning organisation.
- (4) To identify the coping strategies to deal with inhibiting factors and capitalise upon conducive factors, and
- (5) To raise major organisational and managerial implications for enhancing continuous learning and development at the individual and organisational levels based on the findings of this study.

Research Methodology

The researcher consulted secondary sources of data such as books and periodicals to understand the key concepts, learning theories and previous research studies pertaining to the current field of investigation. In addition, the researcher also collected the internal documents of the respondent case study organisations for becoming familiar with the organisational context.

Since there is no comprehensive, published database of industrial organisations in Dakshina Kannada District of Karnataka, the researcher had to construct a database of industrial units in Dakshina Kannada District. This database served as the sampling frame for choosing the potential case study research organisations. Accordingly 24 industrial units were short-listed based on the criteria such as: only medium and large-sized industrial units, aged more than ten years, fairly and adequately representing private and public engaged in manufacturing and service operations.

The researcher wrote official letters initially, and later, by telephonic request to all the short-listed potential case study organisations seeking their permission to carry out investigations in their respective organisations.

The researcher visited each case study organisation and held discussions with the HR/HRD manager to become familiar with the organisational context and learning profile.

A questionnaire was developed to measure the extent of learning organisation characteristics depicted in the case study organisations based on the model developed by Senge (1990).

FINDINGS, SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Findings

- It is clear that highest number of male employees feel that rather low value is given for factor 1.
- Half of the male employees agree that too low value is given for factor 2 whereas another half employees rate for rather low value.
- Majority of the male employees feels that not too much of value is given for factor 3.
- Large number of graduate employees agrees that rather low value is considered for factor 1.
- Majority of the graduate employees' rate for fairly high and very low value is given for factor 2.
- It is studied that many of the graduate employees rate for fairly high value for factor 3.
- The study shows that all the qualified employees i.e graduates, post graduates and professionals felt that rather low is given for factor 4.
- Maximum number of male employees felt that rather low value is considered and majority of female employees rate very low value for factor 1.
- Most of the unmarried employees are of the opinion that rather low value is considered for factor 2.
- Highest number of single status employees felt that rather low value is considered and majority of married employees rate as fairly high value for factor 3.
- All 24 respondents i.e single and married are of the opinion that rather low value is considered for factor 4.
- From the analysis it is found that most of the managers feel that not too much value is considered for factor 1.
- Highest number of professionals rate as rather low value for the factor 2.
- It is observed that majority of the professionals agree that rather low value is given for factor 3.
- All the categories of employment do accept that rather low value is considered for factor 4.

Factor 1 consists of following questions:

1. New ideas are highly valued at my company.
2. All employees in my work group have the opportunity to attend some type of training.
3. The training programmes run by my company are of high quality (up-to-date, relevant, run by professionals etc).
4. In my work group supervisors and co-workers help reschedule work so that employees can attend training.
5. My supervisor helps us set goals based on the training we have attended.
6. People in my work group are open to new ideas and suggestions.
7. I understand how my job relates to others in the organisation.
8. When it comes to my job I am quite knowledgeable.
9. I am satisfied with what I have learned since joining the company.
10. I am satisfied with my personal development since joining the company.

Factor 2 consists of following questions:

1. Team work and team spirit.
2. Seniors encouraging their subordinates to think about their development and take action in that direction.
3. Encouraging employees to take a fresh look at how things are done.
4. My organisation typically: Tolerates mistakes as part of learning.
5. My organisation typically: Assigns to avoid errors.

Factor 3 consists of following questions:

1. Going deeper rather than doing surface- level analysis of interpersonal problems.
2. Making genuine attempts to change behaviour on the basis of feedback.
3. My organisation typically: assigns people to provide opportunity to learn

Factor 4 consists of following questions:

1. Free interaction among employees, each respecting others' feelings, competence and sense of judgment.
2. Prevention action on most matters.
3. Confiding in seniors without fear that they will misuse the trust.

Suggestions

The notion of the learning organisation remains persuasive because of its 'rationality, human attractiveness and presumed potential to aid organisational effectiveness and advancement'. However, Scarborough *et al.*, (1999) argue that 'the dominant perspective (of the learning organisation concept) is that of organization systems and design'. Little attention seems to be paid to what individuals want to learn or how they learn. The idea that individuals should be enabled to invest in their own development (a fundamental theme of human capital theory) seems to have escaped learning organisation theorists, who are more inclined to focus on the imposition of learning by the organisation, rather than creating a climate conducive to collaborative and self-managed learning.

Viewing organisations as learning systems is a limited notion. Argyris and Schon (1996) contend that organisations are products of visions, ideas, norms and beliefs so that their shape is much more fragile than the organisation's material structure. People act as learning agents for the organisation in ways that cannot easily be systematised. They are not only individual learners but also have the capacity to learn collaboratively (Hoyle, 1995).

Burgoyne (1999), one of the earlier publicists for the idea of a learning organisation, has admitted that there has been some confusion about the concept and that there have been substantial naiveties in most of the early thinking: 'The learning organisation has not delivered its full potential or lived up to all our aspirations'. He also mentioned that after a decade of working with the notion of the learning organisation there are distressingly few, if any, case studies of success with the idea on a large scale. He believes that the concept should be integrated with knowledge management initiatives so that different forms of knowledge can be linked, fed by organisational learning and used in adding value to goods and services.

Conclusion

Employees and customers consider learning to be an investment in the future credibility of the organization, the future integrity of the organization, and future satisfaction in the stability of the organization. Both work and learning share the same objectives and all employees are encouraged to achieve those objectives. Learning organisation invite employees to enhance their knowledge in whatever their preferred learning styles. Some employees enjoy traditional classroom learning while others enjoy the autonomy of individual learning. Learning organisations enable people to choose their learning styles and the speed at which they learn.

If a learning organisation has to live up to the expectations of its key stakeholders, the organisation will have to undertake all efforts to establish, nurture, and strengthen the meaningful connectivities among individual learning, team learning, and organisational learning. It could be reiterated that organisational learning need not necessarily lead to the emergence of the 'learning organisation'. But all learning organisation are essentially characterised by a positive learning culture, a sound learning environment, continuous improvement in learning and development, and ultimately strategic learning outcomes. All said and done, much of the research literature pertaining to the 'learning organisation' has been revolving around conceptual, prescriptive, practioner-oriented anecdotal studies without the expected research vigour and output.

The mataphor of learning organisation is more of a rhetoric than a reality in the Indian corporate sector, especially in Dakshina Kannada district.

At least, however, the learning organisation movement has helped to emphasize the importance of knowledge management as a practical proposition for promoting organisational learning. In added-value terms, this is likely to provide more benefit to organisations than pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of the learning organisation as originally conceived.