INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF PROGRESSIVE RESEARCH IN ENGINEERING MANAGEMENT AND SCIENCE (IJPREMS)

www.ijprems.com
editor@ijprems.com

Vol. 03, Issue 12, December 2023, pp : 356-362

e-ISSN : 2583-1062

Impact Factor : 5.725

AN INSIGHT INTO LEARNING ORGANIZATION & ITS DIMENSIONS

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DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.58257/IJPREMS32402

ABSTRACT

Corporate culture, productivity through people, customer service and vision were found to be the means which helped in achieving excellence in the organizations. This augmented the stress on issues related to behaviours rather than industry analysis. Organization structure is said to be the core theme in management thinking during the 1980s and 1990s. This scenario led to the birth of a new concept called learning organization. The concept of learning organization is defined as an organization that facilitates learning for all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context. The research study offers an insight into the need and dimensions of learning organization. The dimensions of learning organization suggested by various researchers are identified and discussed in the study.

Keywords: Learning Organization; Need; Dimensions; Organizational Learning; Sustained learning culture

1. INTRODUCTION

To improve the dignity of labour and to enhance human welfare, knowledge is needed. Initially, from the 1960s to early 1990s, the most important field of management was information management. Then came the time when the need for combining information management with technology arose. The organizations started looking for ways to enhance, coordinate and disseminate the information they had possessed and collected over the years. The era of bringing change through quality initiatives, self-managed work teams emerged (Jamalzadeh, 2013). This change provided systematic thinking, teamwork and continuous learning but the capacity to get and process the information was limited (Watkins and Marsick, 1996). Efforts to upgrade the processing speed of information led to the concept of knowledge management and learning organization (Pedler *et al*., 1991; Senge, 1990).

1.1 Need for learning organization

Corporate culture, productivity through people, customer service and vision were found to be the means which helped in achieving excellence in the organizations (Peters and Waterman, 1982). This augmented the stress on issues related to behaviours rather than industry analysis. Organization structure is said to be the core theme in management thinking during the 1980s and 1990s. This scenario led to the birth of a new concept called learning organization. Most learning is said to take place in the day to day life of an individual as well as in workplace and social situations, that is, most of our learning is informal which takes place in social scenarios. The social systems, communities, families and organizations in which people are said to live and work, provides a scenario for building their resourcefulness and potential, which aids in the process of accomplishing lifelong learning goal. From a social, human and economic point of view learning is said to embed in the fabric of all organizations. The European Commission's (2001) communication states that 'it is essential to promote actively the development of learning at the workplace and for enterprises and other organizations to become learning organizations.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Concept of learning organization

An earlier view of organizational learning (OL) was the capacity of organizations to encode inferences from past into practice to guide behaviour (Levitt and March, 1988). OL has to embed what has already been learned into the organizational framework. In today's contemporary society, the concept of learning organization is found to be a widespread philosophy. It is found to have a strong orientation of humanity, as it is said to be a place where individuals involve in the process of continuous expansion of their capacity in order to produce truly desired results, where expansive and novel patterns of thoughts are nurtured and where individuals are continuously involved in the process of learning how to learn collectively. Learning organization is one which helps its employees to involve in continuous learning; it also emphasizes sharing of information, empowerment, participation and teamwork. Most of the learning organizations concept is said to follow the assumption that 'learning is valuable, continuous and most effective when shared and that every experience is an opportunity to learn' (Kerka, 1995). The major challenge for an organization is lack of learning and not having proper systems to enhance learning which aids in survival in a dynamic environment. In order to survive, the organization must improve its performance and this can be done by learning from experiences (Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Definition of learning organization by various authors

Author	Learning organization
Pedler et al. (1991)	An organization that facilitates learning for all its members and consciously transforms itself and its context
Garvin (1993)	An organization skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights
Watkins and Marsick (1999)	A living, breathing organization that creates the space that enables people and system to learn, to grow and to endure
Armstrong (2003)	A learning organization has appropriate cultural facets (visions, values, assumptions and behaviours) that support a learning environment; processes that foster people's learning and development by identifying their learning needs and facilitating learning; and structural facets that enable learning activities to be supported and implemented in the workplace
Moilanen (2005)	A learning organization is a consciously managed organization with learning as a vital component in its values, visions and goals as well as in its everyday operations and their assessment
Aggarwal V, Srinivas P. T., (2006)	A learning organization is one in which learning is encouraged through participative and flexible systems, strategies and structures with free flow of information and a climate which fosters learning, thereby enhancing the individual and organization competency
Kools & Stoll (2016)	A learning organization is a place where the beliefs, values and norms of employees are brought to bear in support of sustained learning; where a 'learning atmosphere,' 'learning culture' or 'learning climate' is nurtured; and where 'learning to learn' is essential for everyone involved

The above definitions imply that 'A learning organization is one where a sustained learning culture is supported by fostering employees learning based on their needs through participative, informative and flexible systems, strategies and structures at individual, team and organizational level.'

2.2 Dimensions of learning organization

The dimensions of learning organization were always considered to be a topic of debate among research practitioners. Most researchers concur that learning is a process that consolidates knowledge development, more profound understanding and enhanced execution, at the same time they differ on matters identified with learning (Garvin, 2000).

The studies on learning organizations demonstrated that there are diverse methods for conceptualizing the construction that has produced distinctive models and different dimensions of learning organizations (Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Dimensions of learning organization

Authors	Dimensions
Senge (1990)	Team learning, shared visions, mental models, personal mastery and the fifth discipline – systems thinking
Garvin (1993)	Systematic problem solving, experimentation with novel approaches, learning from their past history and own experiences, learning from others best practices and experiences and knowledge transfer
Wick and Leon (1993)	Leader with vision, plan/metrics, information, inventiveness and implementation
Pedler (1997)	A learning approach to strategy, participative policymaking, informating, formative accounting and control, internal exchange, reward flexibility, enabling structures, boundary workers as environmental scanners, inter-company learning, a learning climate and self-development opportunities for all

Marsick and Watkins (1999)	Creating continuous learning opportunities, promoting dialogue and enquiry, promoting collaboration and team learning, empowering people towards a collective vision, establishing systems to capture and share learning, connecting the organization to its environment and provide strategic leadership for learning
Britton (2002)	Creating a learning culture, Gathering internal experience, Accessing external learning, Communication systems, Mechanisms for drawing conclusions, Developing an organizational memory and Integrating learning into strategy and policy and application of learning
O' Keeffe (2002)	Learning process, learning antecedents, environment of innovation, perceived need and learning mechanisms, executive challenge and learning processes, cultural issues with resourcing learning, organizational wide learning and learning organization
Karash (1995)	Thrive on change, encourage experimentation, communicate success and failure, facilitate learning from the surrounding environment, facilitate learning from employees, reward learning, a proper selfishness and a sense of caring
Kerka (1995)	Learning culture, free exchange of information, commitment to learning, valuing people, climate of trust and openness and experiential learning

Senge (1990) stated the five characteristics of learning organization as

- Team learning – focuses on the group's learning ability which is greater than individuals learning ability, as individual learning is more when the feedback from team members is there in terms of individuals reflection on the way of addressing problems
- Shared visions – the vision of the organization must be understood, shared and contributed by everyone in the organization as shared vision makes the people do things because they want to, not because they have to
- Mental models – world's internal image with deeply ingrained assumption in the minds of an individual, the mental models should be perceived and changed based on constructive challenge by team members, thus creating a shared mental model. Mental model is very important as it controls what the individual thinks is possible
- Personal mastery – the process of continuously clarifying and deepening an individual's personal vision. It involves objectively assessing the gap between the current and desired proficiencies continuously and working to reduce that gap
- The fifth discipline-systems thinking – ability to see the whole picture and to understand the interrelationship and interaction of the different parts of the system. The essential properties of a system are determined by the process of interactions between its parts and not by the sum of its parts. 'The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization' published by Peter Senge in 1990 addresses this concept, which introduced the learning organization theory. This book acts as both a theoretical trip for the learning organization idea and in addition, a manual for managers who might wish to step into the learning organization field.
- Senge's work acted as an eye opener to the theory that explains the learning organization. He established the framework for research through his publication and later the concept continued to develop in the business scenario. However, the work of Senge (1990) has been criticized (Garvin, 1993) for leaving an excessive number of unanswered questions. He has additionally been criticized for making proposals that are excessively abstract but he did not give direction or a structure to activity. In addition, his book is not upheld by formal research on the learning organization.
- According to Garvin (1993) the five major components of learning are.
- Systematic problem solving – follow scientific methods for identifying problems, insist on data for making decisions and use simple statistical packages to analyze and interpret data
- Experimentation with novel approaches – incorporates systematic searching and testing of new knowledge. Motivated by expanding horizons and opportunities and not by the current difficulties
- Learning from their past history and own experiences – in order to not let the precious knowledge available in the organization to escape, the organization must review its successes and failures, systematically assess them and record the knowledge generated in a form which employees find it easy to access and could reuse it efficiently

- Learning from others best practices and experiences – it is believed that learning does not occur only through self-analysis and reflection. Powerful learning happens from knowing and interpreting others experiences. Learning organizations are found to cultivate attentive listening and openness. Managers must also be ready to bear criticism
- Knowledge transfer – rapid and efficient dissemination of knowledge throughout the organization promotes learning. This model with the help of the cognitive perspective gave the detailed explanation of the three types of OL: collecting information, facilitating experimentation and learning from past experiences.
- Wick and Leon (1993) in his book 'the Learning Edge' stated the importance of five essentials as the characteristics of a learning organization:
- Leader with vision – an organization will never succeed if the leader is not committed to learning
- Plan/metrics – an organization must possess the capacity to pen down a plan of action with detailed metrics
- Information – information not received makes the organization vulnerable to threats lurking outside as well as missed opportunities inside the organization
- Inventiveness – keep their eyes open to fresh theories and ideas. They regard problem-solving as an opportunity to learn
- Implementation – it is time to act. All the creativity and learning in the world is considered to be worthless if it is not put into action at the right time.
- To make the concept of learning organization (LO) practical Pedler et al. (1991) conceptualized 11-dimensions model. In the model, the front-line workers are being involved in the process of learning within the organization by the notion of boundary workers (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). The '11 piece jigsaw puzzle' is used to illustrate the visual image of its process and practises.
- Pedler (1997) enumerates following eleven dimensions for organizations to learn.
- A learning approach strategy – the process of strategy framing, and of implementation, evaluation and improvement are consciously structured to enhance learning
- Participative policymaking – all stakeholders of the company are involved in the strategy or policymaking process
- Informating – information management and information technology (IT) assists the free flow of information in order to inform and empower the members of the company
- Formative accounting and control – the essential control systems of accounting, budgeting and reporting are structured in order to generate learning form managerial decisions
- Internal exchange – departments and internal units see themselves as suppliers and customers to each other in a partially regulated market economy. Negotiation and mutual adjustment act as a controlling mechanism rather than the traditional vertical control
- Reward flexibility – learning organization discovers alternative approaches to financial rewards and attempts to create flexible packages for individuals
- Enabling structures – promote flexibility and adaptability and create opportunities for individual and business development
- Boundary workers as environmental scanners – learning organization incorporates its entire employees, especially those in direct contact with the supplier, regular customer and outside contacts to scan the environment for collecting important data
- Inter-company learning – joint training, joint ventures, job exchanges and sharing investment in research and development are some of the ways in which companies work together with a specific learning purpose
- A learning climate – learning organization has a particular climate and culture which facilitates learning
- Self-development opportunities for all – learning organization encourages its employees to practice self-control and self-management over their own career development and learning.
- Britton (2002) suggested that for a non-governmental organizations (NGO) to learn effectively they should follow eight characteristics of learning organization which is as follows:
- Creating a learning culture – a culture which facilitates learning among its members
- Gathering internal experience – collaborating the success and failures of the members of the organization
- Accessing external learning – getting to know the current practices in the outside environment
- Communication systems – systems facilitating sharing of information

- Mechanisms for drawing conclusions – collection of resources for making decisions
- Developing an organizational memory – documenting the intrinsic knowledge and experiences
- Integrating learning into strategy and policy and application of learning – the process of strategy and policymaking should be designed in such a way to aid and apply learning. These functions are said to be interconnected to each other. The other seven dimensions are found to be embraced by the first dimension 'creating a learning culture'. Applying whatever learned is significant and central to learning organization. This model is based on the fact that 'learning occurs only when it results in action'. The basic purpose of the model is to create 'learning NGO's'.

O'Keeffe and Harington (2001) enumerated eight characteristics. They are:

- Learning process – deliberate, conscious part of the strategy
- Learning antecedents – building blocks of OL. Flexible, efficient structure which supports learning systems
- Environment of innovation – knowledge creation is viewed as central to the organization
- Perceived need and learning processes – scenario planning, benchmarking and related techniques are used in scanning the environment
- Executive challenge and learning processes – managers difficulty in changing current assumptions or envisaging future possibilities
- Cultural issues with resourcing learning – difficulty in networking among different teams working in different cultures
- Organizational wide learning – learning at all levels
- Learning organization – needs to store memories of past events, belief systems, frames of values and references.
- Karash (1995) gave the following characteristics of learning organization:
- Thrive on change – in a continually shifting and rapidly moving environment adaptability to change is considered to be of great importance as it helps in distinguishing success from failure
- Encourage experimentation – guided experience participation, exploring new things and experiencing failures which might occur aids learning
- Communicate success and failure – communicate others good points for improving self-respect among individuals and bad points for preventing them to avoid the same mistake
- Facilitate learning from the surrounding environment – learning from others experience rather than blindly following successful people
- Facilitate learning from employees – current employees are considered as the most effective and efficient consultants for the organization
- Reward learning – a culture where initiative and any new breakthrough is rewarded
- A proper selfishness – the role, the goal, the future and the way to reach them should be properly defined for a learning organization
- A sense of caring – learning organizations necessitates learning among everyone.
- Kerka (1995) enumerated the following characteristics of learning organization.
- Learning culture – organizational climate facilitates learning. A culture which promotes learning is found to imply external and future orientation
- Free exchange of information – systems aid by ensuring expertise through crossing the boundaries of the organization and individual network in order to build on their expertise and knowledge
- Commitment to learning – top management encourages people at all levels to learn in the organization
- Valuing people – creativity, 'imaginative abilities' and ideas are stimulated, by making and bringing diversities which are viewed as strengths
- Climate of trust and openness – individuals are persuaded to explore and experiment new ideas in order to challenge actions
- Experiential learning – learning is said to be powerful when learned through mistakes rather than through success.

Watkins and Marsick (1993), by using seven components conceptualized a model. The specificity of their approach is laid in their work as adult educators who have the keen interest in change and learning. They postulated that learning occurs at the following interdependent levels namely individual, team, organization and society leading to organization

transformation. Initially, the six action imperatives for the formations of learning organization were laid out by the authors in such a way that they complement each other. Later on, the seventh action imperative (providing strategic leadership for learning) was included (Watkins and Marsick, 1996). The dimensions of model which explains the action strategies proposed by Watkins and Marsick (1993) are shown below:

Continuous learning

Watkins and Marsick (1993) note that 'yesterday's organizations can be described as machine-like, today's as systems-like, and the future's as brain-like'. Nowadays, in organizational workplace, a continuous learning opportunity means that learning is the integral part of everyday job and it is embedded into the regular routine; the employees are bound to learn not only the skills pertaining to their job but also the skills pertaining to other employees in their work unit and how the operation and objectives of their business is related by their work unit; employees are nowadays expected to teach as well as learn from their colleagues in the organization. In nutshell, the whole work environment backs and moves towards the learning of new skills. The continuous learning model based on the problem solving cycles was developed by them. The alternating cycles of judgment or reflection with taking action, which ultimately ends in the expanding of learning from work experience are featured in the model. On the basis of this model, they claim that there is no specific time for learning as each challenge possesses an opportunity to learn.

Inquiry and dialogue

In a learning organization, individuals gain dynamic reasoning skills in order to express their perspectives, and the ability to listen and inquire into others perspectives. Organizations' culture should facilitate questioning experimentation and feedback, and through inquiry, individuals explore ideas, potential actions and questions; inquiry depends on curiosity which is open-minded, that suspends judgements and presuppositions in the light of a legitimate concern for truth for a better result.

Team learning

Design of work is in such a way that utilizes groups to access various thinking methods and these groups must work and learn together. Thus, collaboration is enhanced and remunerated by the culture prevailing in organizations. However, it is also noted that when people learn, they neglect to share the outcomes. Regardless of this, Watkins and Marsick (1993) contend that teams are very significant for challenging the ideas and learning.

Embedded system

In order to disseminate learning both low and high technology systems are created and assimilated in the work; access is allowed and systems are maintained. Such systems and the way an organization does business enhances learning and such individual learning supports OL.

Empowerment

In a learning organization, individuals are included in setting, owning and executing a joint vision. Responsibility is disseminated close to making decisions to motivate individuals to realize what they are responsible for. This is referred to as 'empowerment'. Learning organizations rely on individuals' participation in a combined vision and the release of their potential to achieve the vision. The learning organization starts with a common vision and learning is driven towards that vision.

System connection

Learning organizations have a positive relationship with their social, cultural and physical environments. The learning organization recognizes its reliance on its environment. Individuals are provided with guidance to view the effect caused by their work on the organization. They examine the surroundings and utilize the data acquired to modify work practices. The organization, teams and individual are connected to the society through unceasing interaction.

Provide leadership

Leaders act as a model and facilitates learning, thus utilizing strategic learning for business outcomes. A leader from a learning organization is one who ensures that the employees of that particular organization have precise reality perceptions which are achieved by communicating the shared vision clearly. They are also involved in the process of creating an environment which proactively deals with change.

3. CONCLUSION

The search for 'learning organization' is found to be an idealistic pursuit. Initially, learning organization is considered to be a contested term as there is no particular definition. The publication of The Fifth Discipline paved the way for literature related to learning organization. This created an escalating array of elucidation of concepts that revolve around the concept of learning organization. No real attempt was made to test the relationship between the theory of learning

organization and its practice. Moreover, giving proof of causality in authoritative execution is full of trouble. There are such a large number of mediating factors that it is for all intents and purposes difficult to ascertain utilizing even the most refined time-based multivariate investigation apparatuses. The legacy of 'in search of excellence' showed us that achievement is fleeting.

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