

UNDERSTANDING WORK BEHAVIOUR THROUGH THE LENSE OF THE COMPONENT TECHNOLOGIES OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The important role of organizational learning in the development of work behaviours has been well researched and reported in organizational behaviour literature. Organizational learning, has been shown to be a veritable vehicle for bringing about the commitment, satisfaction, embeddedness, innovative behaviour, etc. that organizations require to stay competitive. This review paper, therefore seeks to explicate the concept of organizational learning in a bid to demonstrate how the 'component technologies' of organizational learning can be engaged by organizations to help them use their knowledge stock to create business value and competitive advantage in the competitive business world.

Keywords: Organizational Learning, Learning Organization, Mental Models, Personal Mastery, Shared Vision, Team Learning, Systems Thinking

INTRODUCTION

Organizational studies literature is replete with studies that confirm the effect of organizational learning on work behaviours. For instance, Rose, Kumar and Pak (2009), found a positive relationship between organizational learning, organizational commitment, job satisfaction and work performance. Similarly, Anwar and Niode (2017) and Lin and Lee (2017) in their separate studies, found a positive association between learning organization and work engagement and subsequently employees' innovative behaviour. Thus, as organizations continually search for ways to unleash the creative potential of employees in their bid to respond to environmental changes, metamorphosing into a learning

organization has become an imperative strategic choice. Richardson (1995) argues that organizational learning is now a strategic issue that reinforces productivity improvements and innovatory activities. As a result, organizations with the standard organization structures are challenged to rethink and improve their internal capacity to aid learning. This is important because knowledge of all forms, according to Holbeche (2001) exists in different parts of an organization and organizations need to have a 'map' of the available knowledge. This creates an advantage in the ever increasing competitive global market as organizations with records of their knowledge stock strategically position themselves to take full advantage of the vast potentials of their members as well as create new knowledge stock. For, competitive success according to Pemberton and Stonehouse (2000) is governed by an organization's ability to develop new knowledge assets that create core competences.

Gore and Gore (1999) share this view and consequently argued that knowledge is both the resource that leads to organizational uniqueness as well as the source of rapid growth for economies which makes it the new power base for the modern corporation. Instructively, Lopez et al. (2004: 94) argue that “learning processes define the quality of knowledge distributed across the organization as well as the effectiveness with which knowledge is put to use”. Organizational learning has therefore gain increased attention because according to Wang and Ahmed (2002) it involves knowledge acquisition, dissemination, refinement, creation and implementation. This review paper thus examines the component technologies of organizational learning with a view to better understanding how work behaviours are formed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundation

Organizational Learning draws substantially from the theory of Learning in psychology. Learning, according to Wang and Ahmed (2002) starts from individuals and as such a learning organization is founded on the learning process of individuals in the organization. Understanding how learning has been conceptualized over the years would be a good beginning in the attempt to understand the concept of Organizational Learning. For, Dixton (1994), according to Franklin *et al.* (1998) posits that learning and learning organizations are part of the same discourse because learning is invariably a part of work in the same measure that work involves learning.

Though the study of how people learn has fascinated mankind from the ancient Greeks to the present, the difficulty of a universally acceptable definition of learning persists (Cole, 2002). This is because the concept of learning is understood from various perspectives and has a long evolutionary history (Wang and Ahmed 2002). Over the years, several scholars (Maier *et al.* 2001, Wang and Ahmed 2002, Mullins 1996, Rollinson *et al.* 1998) have made contributions and subscribed to the view that theories of learning have their roots in the history of psychology and have become an important issue in understanding human behaviour.

In the view of Thompson and McHugh's (1995) learning is normally defined as a relatively persistent change in an individual's possible behaviour and this according to them is due to experience. Experience in this context as Maier *et al.* (2001) point out is not the same as maturity. They argue that maturation involves genetically determined growth of the nervous system and this happens beyond the individual's cognitive frame. But, Thompson and McHugh (1990) argue that cognitive models are usually given as the main explanation of the learning process because one's perceptual organization leads to the comprehension of one's experience.

When learning occurs it is evident in a relatively permanent change in behaviour (Rollinson *et al.*, 1998 and Jones *et al.*, 2000). Thompson and McHugh (1995) corroborate this view in qualifying the change associated with learning as persistent. Consequently, Maier *et al.* (2001) succinctly point out that not every kind of behavioral change can be regarded as learning. Ivancevich *et al.* (1997) therefore define learning as the act by which individuals acquire skills, knowledge, and abilities that result in a relatively permanent change in their behaviour. Thus learning could only have occurred where the change in behaviour experienced is of an enduring and persistent nature (Mullins 1996). The key issue according to Rollinson *et al.* (1998) is whether behaviour has changed in a relatively permanent way and this informs the submission of Maier *et al.* (2001) that all forms of temporary behavioral change are excluded from the definition of a learned behaviour.

Maier *et al.* (2001) argue that individuals can learn behaviour patterns in different ways. Thus over the years, several theories of learning have emerged to give understanding to the subject. These theories explain the different forms of

learning and describe how people learn in general. These theories have largely been developed from the experimentation of early psychologists, which were geared toward the development of laws of learning (Mullins 1996). These theories include (1) behaviorism (notably classical and operant conditioning) that focuses on behaviour acquisition and retention (Wang and Ahmed 2002) as well as measurable and controllable behaviour rather than ideas and thoughts (Mullins, 1996), and predicts an individual's behavioural outcomes by analyzing environmental influences which includes both antecedents and consequences (Haleblan and Finkelstien 1999); (2) cognitive theory, which emphasizes internal mental activity (Rollinson *et al.* 1998) and presents learning as a complex process that is based on reasoning that draws on experience, experimentation, activity and analysis (Pemberton and Stonehouse 2000); (3) social learning theory, which is based on the individual learning principle that is enhanced by observation (Bandura, 1977) and focuses on the importance of social interaction or interpersonal skills in learning (Rollinson *et al.*, 1998); and (4) gestalt theory, which holds that humans do not perceive things in isolation (Wang and Ahmend, 2002) and thus argue that learning is a matter of assembling one's world into meaningful patterns (Cole, 2002). It has been argued (Fry and Matherly, 2006; Chamiec-Case and Sherr, 2005; Singhal and Chatterjee, 2005; Howard, 2002; Konz and Ryan, 1999; Milliman *et al.*, 1999) that the place of learning in organizational life is in recent times receiving increased attention in organizational studies. Since organizations are invariably made up of individuals, these individual learning theories underpin organizational learning.

Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization

The concept of the learning organization is not easy to define or describe (Stewart 1996) and the field of organizational learning is vague even as literature and research are under-specified and fragmented to the effect that there is no widely accepted model or theory (Fisher 2000). The origin of organizational learning can be traced back to the 1920's although it was not till the 1980's that serious consideration was given to it (Lee 1999; Hughes 2000; Wang and Ahmed 2002). The variegated nature of the concept has made its understanding difficult and Griggs and Hyland (2002) say this is evident in the light of the work of Argyris and Schon (1978) that identified six different ways of understanding the concept, each based on a different field of study. This view is corroborated by Magalhaes (1996) who stated that there are many different ways of approaching the concept of learning organization depending on the particular academic or intellectual leaning of the reviewer. According to Antal *et al.* (2001), it is

symptomatic of the dynamics of the development of the field that there is no agreement of the definition of organizational learning. In large part, convergence in organizational learning frameworks has therefore not occurred because of the different applications of the concept in different domains (Crossan 1999).

Another conceptual difficulty identified in literature is the difference between organizational learning and learning organization. Though McHugh *et al.* (1998) acknowledge that Jones and Hendry (1994) made a distinction in which they postulated that organizational learning emphasized Human Resource Management (HRM), training and skills acquisition, while the learning organization is linked to the expansion and development of organizational capability, it has become commonplace that such a distinction is deficient in its articulation. Consequently, McHugh *et al.* (1998) posit that this hypothesized distinction is lacking in accuracy and cannot be operationally verified. The reason for the synonymous application of the two terms may be found in the views of Armstrong (2000) that the process of organizational learning is the basis for the concept of a learning organization and (Snell 2002) that a learning organization expresses normative commitment to organizational learning. Several author (Othman and Hashim 2003; Wang and Ahmed 2002; Fisher 2000) have in their definitions captured organizational learning as a process and learning organization as a state (i.e. an organization). To however make any conceptual distinctions between the two terms may not be necessary for this current study in line with the views of Gherardi (1999: 5) that,

it would be naïve to create and represent a distinction between a heuristic organizational learning and a realistic learning organization, when both converge in the same social practice which legitimizes the managerial techniques based on their claims of scientific knowledge. They share the same bias and both contribute to the institutionalization of the field as a disciplinary discourse and to its overcoming through that process of constant reinterpretation of previous interpretation that is called institutional reflexivity.

This review therefore explicates the concept of organizational learning drawing from the literature on the learning organization.

Pedler *et al.* (1988, 1989, 1991) defines a learning organization as “one which facilitates the learning of all its members, and which continuously transforms itself” (Stewart 1996: 78; Armstrong 2000: 225; Hughes 2000: 4; Othman and Hashim 2003: 3). Similarly, Senge (1990: 14) posits that it is one that is “continuously expanding its capacity to create its future”. The relevance of individual learning to organizational learning is made explicit in this definition. In this instance however it is the organization that champions the learning process by creating avenues for organizational members to improve their knowledge base which helps them accelerate organizational growth. The broad premise of this movement according to Buchanan (2000) is that an organization which lacks the capabilities for acquiring and utilizing existing knowledge, and for sourcing fresh insights, is likely to face extinction in the competitive economy. Consequently, the learning organization creates a clear vision about the future and through a coherent action plan of steady transformation, moves towards the envisioned business position. In this regard, organizational learning is conceived of as a principal means of achieving the strategic renewal of the organization (Crossan 1999). This is confirmed by Wheelen and Hunger's (2004) argument that strategic flexibility demands a long-term commitment to the development and nurturing of critical resources and consequently, a learning organization.

Senge (1990: 3) gave a more comprehensive definition of the learning organization in which he stated that it is one:

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 continually learn to learn together.

Stewart (1996) is of the view that there are similarities between the definition of Pedler *et al.* (1991) and Senge (1990) as both emphasize continuous individual learning as well as the importance of collective goals. At the heart of the learning organization, according to Cole (2002) is the need for greater collaboration in problem/opportunity perception and its solution/exploitation. The resultant effect of such collaborative effort is usually greater than it would have if events were unconnected. Consequently, every individual member of the organization is required to engage in healthy exchanges that create new and alternative ways of undertaking their jobs committing themselves to work together to achieve

results more effectively. This orientation to work is encapsulated in the philosophy of the learning organization which Cole (2002: 326) iterates, “is to enhance the achievement of collective goals by harnessing the reservoir of knowledge, skills and insights of all members of the organization.” In this regard, Friedman *et al.* (2001) define organizational learning as a process of inquiry that enables organizational members to develop shared values and knowledge.

A classic definition of a learning organization is given by Garvin (1993) as one that is “skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Stewart 1996: 79; Armstrong 2000: 225). This definition is in consonance with our earlier submission that knowledge acquisition and utilization is a very important aspect of organizational learning. For, organizational learning is a process that provides organizational knowledge (Farr, 2000). Fisher (2000) argues that Learning organizations engage in knowledge accumulation by gathering information from both internal and external sources. This forms the major knowledge stock of the organization which facilitates the development of what Armstrong (2000) refers to as 'innovative climate'. The focus is not exclusively on acquiring new knowledge but rather on arriving at more fundamental shifts in organizational paradigms that encourage the evolution of learning capacity (Davies and Nutley, 2000).

The learning organization has often been viewed as one that is in a continuous process of improvement (Wang and Ahmed 2002). This is the emphasis of those who view the learning organization as an ideal state that is never attained. For instance, Franklin *et al.* (1998) believe that at its very best, the learning organization provides images and ideals about processes and behaviours, attitudes and aspirations. In this regard they argue that the learning organization is a metaphor that binds collectively held aspirations. Similarly, Reynolds and Ablett (1998) hold the position that what is available in the learning organization literature is prescription that provides an ideal to strive for. The learning organization is invariably a guiding vision for reaching out to, rather than an attainable state (Snell 2002). Based on this premise, Eskildsen *et al.* (1999) argue that building a learning organization is a prerequisite for the achievement of continuous improvement. This is because continuous improvement emphasizes learning which guarantees the continuous development of new skills and capabilities. This view notwithstanding, Wheelen and Hunger (2004) opines that organizational learning is a critical component of competitiveness in a

dynamic environment because it enables organizations avoid stagnation through a continuous self-examination, and is important for solving problems systematically, experimenting, learning from experience and transferring knowledge throughout the organization. Thus, organizational learning achieves for the organization the acquisition and useful deployment of information needed for effective performance and as posited by Phillips (2003: 98), “learning organization principles underlie improved performance and sustainable competitive advantage”.

Levels of Organizational Learning

Organizational learning according to Lee (1999: 2) “builds on a firm's memory, which depends on such institutional mechanisms as policies and strategies” and as Griggs and Hyland (2002: 5) state, organizational learning “is the integration of learning into appropriate organizational systems, structures, routines and culture”. In a sense, the ability of the workforce to learn faster than those in competing organizations is the major cutting edge and constitutes the prime competitive advantage available to the organization (Wang and Ahmed 2002) and every learning organization is positioned to engender action in this direction. This can be best achieved with the understanding that organization learning happens at different levels.

Organizational learning is multilevel (Crossan 1999) with learning taking place at the individual and organization levels (Pemberton and Stonehouse 2000). Organizational learning does not take place at these levels in isolation. Rather, it happens as an ongoing process involving knowledge sharing (Hughes 2000). Wang and Ahmed (2002) are however of the opinion that distinction between the organization and individual levels of organizational learning be made explicit to avoid an organizational learning model that obscures the actual learning process by ignoring the role of the individual or become a simplistic extension of individual learning by glossing over organizational complexities. In this regard, Holmqvist (1993: 3) draws attention to Weick and Westley's (1996) assertion that,

learning is not an inherent property of an individual or of an organization, but rather resides in the quality and nature of the relationship between levels of consciousness within the individual, between individuals, and between the organization and the environment.

This idea links the individual world of the worker with the world of the organization (Smith 2001).

Component Technologies of Organizational Learning

Certain practices have been associated with building learning capabilities in organizations. These practices which are regarded as the main features of organizational learning (Stewart 1996) are the “component technologies” that contribute towards developing learning organizations (Jackson 2002: 136). Senge (1990) who is the chief proponent of these practices is known to have classified them as 'learning disciplines' (Allan, 1998). Hughes (2000) explains that the use of 'disciplines' simultaneously refers to ways of understanding (i.e. bodies of theory or conceptual developments) and way of doing (i.e. the accompanying practical tools). Each of these five disciplines which include personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking, represents a lifelong body of study and practice for individuals and teams in organizations (Senge *et al.* 1999). These five disciplines are shaping the thoughts of practitioners on the development of the learning organization and are examined in greater details.

Personal Mastery: Organizational members need to expand their knowledge, skills and abilities to create a competitive edge in the dynamic business arena. This is because, organizational learning cannot occur without individual learning. This is the view adduced by Senge (1990:139) that,

organizations learn through individuals who learn.
Individual learning does not guarantee
organizational learning. But without it no
organizational learning occurs.

This is the premise upon which personal mastery is advocated. Personal mastery refers to an ability to expand the personal skills and abilities of organizational members in creating an envisioned organization (Allan 1998). This idea according to Stewart (1996) is similar in intent to feature of self-developers who emphasize continuous improvement in learning skills and abilities, and continuous personal and professional development. Holbeche (2001) posits that personal mastery acknowledges that every organizational member is a significant part of the system and advocates a change in self-image through personal visioning. Iterating along the same line, Jackson (2002) state that this discipline involves a continuous clarification and deepening of personal vision,

to maintain a fixed gaze on energies and a manifest objectivity about reality, all of which promotes mastery. These views are summarized in Senge's (1990) submission that personal mastery is the term used for the discipline of personal growth and learning. He argues further that it goes beyond competence and skill even though these are necessary ingredients for achieving this creative life as against a reactive life. The processes involved in the development of personal mastery as pointed out by Senge *et al.* (1999) include, personal visioning, appreciating reality and balancing of the vision and reality. All these are ingredients of organizational repositioning and transformation.

Mental Models: Mental models consist of the underlying assumptions that shape individual and corporate decisions and actions (Stewart, 1996). It is a discipline of reflection and inquiry (Senge *et al.*, 1999) that involves the ability to understand, clarify and develop one's mental framework of the world (Allan 1998), and the changing of shared mental models which are pervasive within the organization and which prevent change (Jackson 2002, 2004). The importance of mental models is captured by Stewart (1996) who iterates that an essential characteristic of a learning organization is its ability to reformulate and re-characterize it business and its world of operation, and Holbeche (2001) adds that having the ability to develop and test new mental models will be the driving force for learning and development that captures the future. These views corroborate Senge's (1990) position that mental models so powerfully affect what people do because they affect what they see (i.e. the internal pictures of how the world works). In other words, the mental models held within, has the capability to either lock or unlock creativity that would propel the organization towards organizational re-birth. This is because old dysfunctional views held of the world of business can result in cognitive inertia that impedes organizational learning. In the same breadth, Senge (1990) argues that mental models also have the ability to accelerate learning, and this is an imperative for innovativeness.

Shared Vision: One characteristic feature of organizational learning which is increasingly evolving as a veritable element in the achievement of corporate success in the modern world of business is shared vision. Hughes (2000) asserts that the importance of shared vision has become a pervasive theme in ideas concerning leadership. Reiterating this position, Jackson (2002) argued that shared vision goes beyond publishing a mission statement. According to Allan (1998), it involves creating and sharing a vision among group members, of the future and the means to get there. Unlike top – down vision statements that foster

compliance, shared vision fosters commitment (Jackson 2004). For, as Hughes (2000) further argued, a genuine shared vision elicits willing and voluntary participation in corporate aspirations as against a mere adherence to imposed goals. A genuinely shared vision, which according to Holbeche (2001) provides clues as to the organization's deep purpose emanates from organizational members at all levels of the organization. Consequently, Stewart (1996) posits that the first requirement in building a shared vision is the creation of a participatory organizational climate where individuals envision and espouse their desired future. A second requirement for building shared vision can be deduced from the work of Senge (1990) that advocates the ability to learn new skills and implementing institutional innovations to regularizing the practice of the new skills. Senge (1990) is of the opinion that shared vision which connects people to an important organizational undertaking is vital for the learning organization because it provides the focus and energy for learning. The post oil economy success of business requires congruence between organizational and individual goals, which is the consequence of shared vision

Team Learning: An issue that has been of longstanding interest in organizational and management literature is the question of how groups of people work together (Procter and Mueller (2000). Through the results of empirical studies conducted in the US and UK, Procter and Mueller (2000) report that there has been a current wave of interest in team-working and as Akpeiyi (1996) add it is now a paramount vehicle for high business and governmental results. The reason is for its prominence in modern business is captured by Ivancevich *et al.* (1997) who argue that teamwork allows an employee to compensate with their strength for another employee's weakness. Whybrow and Parker (2000) thus believe that team-working has a positive impact on employees by promoting learning, better performance and strategic understanding. The idea of teamwork is no longer strange, but not so with team learning.

“Team learning is the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results it members truly desires” (Senge 1990). Jackson (2002) says this begins with the capacity of organizational members to suspend judgment and start to think together and in so doing, recognizing the patterns of interaction that obstructs learning within the organization. Thinking together is the hallmark of team learning, which requires the ability of teams to develop learning and knowledge generation skills greater than the sum of the individuals'

talents (Allan 1998). It is in this vein that Hughes (2000) argues that team learning involves the central gestalt principle which holds that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. This principle evokes collective aspiration, which according to Holbeche (2001) offers team members a compelling reason to start learning how to learn together. Employing the technique of dialogue, team learning enlivens the organizational climate (internal environment) as it enables teams transform their collective thinking and mobilize their energies to achieve common goals (Senge *et al.* 1999).

Systems Thinking: Systems thinking which is also called the fifth discipline (Stewart 1996; Eskildsen 1999) illuminates and cements the four previously discussed disciplines into a coherent body of thought. Systems thinking which is all pervasive cascades all aspects of organizational life and is described by Stewart (1996) as the cornerstone of a learning organization. Speaking in this wise, Holbeche (2001) and Allan (1998) posit that systems thinking considers the interrelatedness of forces that shape systems both within and beyond the organization and views them as part of a common process. Eskildsen *et al.* (1999: 525) puts it succinctly when he stated that a learning organization is one that has acquired 'systems thinking' by mastering the disciplines of 'shared values', 'personal mastery', 'mental models' and 'team learning'. This according Jackson (2002) is essentially an ability to see beyond the isolated parts of the system, and to consider their interconnectedness. This is how the knowledge economy operates and organizations that wish to survive beyond the oil economy in Nigeria have to develop systems thinking.

CONCLUSION

The important role of organizational learning in the development of work behaviours has been well researched and reported in organizational behaviour literature. With learning as a competence and knowledge a resource (Antal *et al.*, 2001), organizational learning, which ensures that individual learning leads to organizational knowledge (Pemberton and Stonehouse, 2000) appears to be a veritable vehicle for bringing about the commitment, satisfaction, embeddedness, innovative behaviour, etc. that organizations require to stay competitive. This review paper, which sought to explicate the concept of organizational learning, has demonstrated that the 'component technologies' of organizational learning can be engaged by organizations to help them use their knowledge stock to create business value and competitive advantage in the competitive business world.

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