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Leadership that promotes organizational learning: both sides of the coin

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how leadership has the capacity to both positively influence learning processes and negatively inhibit organizational learning.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper that brings together an analysis of leadership and organizational learning literature. The argument is centered on transformational leadership and the responsibility for creating an organizational learning culture.

Findings – There is a conventional belief that leaders have solitary control and influence when it comes to setting up organizational learning processes. However, a top-down approach to facilitate and implement learning in organizations is not always an effective method because learning should be a collaborative practice. Thus, to rely fully on leaders to initiate and sustain the learning processes can be counter-productive.

Practical implications – Good and effective leadership is the key to organizational learning. Learning is the only sustainable method of achieving competitive advantage for contemporary organizations because of rapidly changing environmental forces. Corporations with aspirations for long-term survival must facilitate, through their leadership, “the impulse to learn” amongst their members.

Originality/value – Knowledge is lacking in the area where leadership is linked to learning. Such knowledge is important because leaders play a central role in the learning framework and leaders also offer the required guidance for organizations to integrate and sustain learning processes through policy and practice.

Keyword(s):

Leadership; Workplace training; Transformational leadership.
Introduction

Organizational learning is a process that facilitates individual change and gives corporations a sustainable competitive advantage (Simon, 1991; Weick, 1991). Early studies in organizational learning were silent about the role of individuals who facilitate the learning processes in organizations (Cyert, 1963). The focus of early studies was mainly in differentiating the types of learning that take place as opposed to explaining and clarifying the role of individuals behind such initiatives, or the skills managers and leaders would require for successfully facilitating such efforts. Unfortunately, this phenomenon persists. To date, we lack knowledge in the area where leadership is linked to learning (Berson et al., 2006). This knowledge is important because leaders play a central role in the learning framework, and leaders also offer the required guidance for organizations to integrate and sustain the learning processes through policy and practice. Thus, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate how leadership has the capacity to both positively influence learning processes and negatively inhibit organizational learning.

Leadership and organizational learning

The study of leadership is a mature body of work that has established its boundaries theoretically and conceptually over decades. The definitions of leadership usually include the influencing role played by individuals to facilitate organizational performance. Here, the leadership process is associated with an ability to build shared vision, foster systematic thinking and encourage people to expand their skills to fit the surroundings. It is leadership that is responsible for learning because leaders help shape the future for their followers (Senge, 1990). Likewise, organizational learning has the capacity to increase adaptability in a rapidly changing environment. The “impulse to learn” is a desire to be “generative” in order to enhance organizational potential and competitive advantage (Senge, 1990). Therefore, the role of leaders is crucial as they support the collective development of organizational learning when they construct teams and make decisions on resources to respond to demands in the external environment. In line with this argument, this paper will emphasize leadership as an important predictor for organizational learning.

In order to understand the key variables within leadership approaches that promote organizational learning, research is necessary on the multi-level theories. With the study of leadership gaining prominence in all walks of life, it is imperative to understand the precise roles leaders play in promoting organizational learning and also in assisting subordinates realize what they have learned. Learning culture is a collective social construction that is strongly influenced by leadership behaviors (Bass, 1985). Thus, in this paper,
organizational learning and collective learning are referred to synonymously. Similarly, leadership style is one of the most influential aspects of organizational learning culture because a crucial role of leaders is to decide and implement change that encourages collective learning (Garcia-Morales et al., 2008). Our traditional view that leaders are people who set directions and make decisions is still entrenched in our society. As long as this philosophy is deeply rooted in our culture, leadership will continue to be the key that will facilitate organizational learning.

A plethora of studies have proposed that collective and inclusive leadership styles which inspire and motivate employees will better prepare teams to participate in learning tasks (Bass, 1985; Carroll and Edmondson, 2002) that ultimately improve organizational performance levels. Building on this realization, the focus of this paper is to understand the role of leadership and its influence on organizational learning. In doing so, the arguments are centered on a transformational leadership style because this leadership approach is contemporary and the most effective way of leading a diverse workforce in the current environment (Eagly et al., 2003). Furthermore, transformational leaders operate with inspirational values and work from a nurturing framework. Further, such leaders exhibit caring and display consideration towards their followers. Their leadership approach is systematic, and consists of a purposeful and organized search for changes, all of which are important for organizational learning to occur.

The core of transformational leadership constructs are the four broadly-defined behavioral sub-scales known as intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, idealized influence and inspirational motivation (Bass and Avolio, 1989). The sub-scales within the transformational leadership paradigm explain the behavioral differences and decision-making variations in the managers and senior managers in organizations. Through idealized influence, leaders establish themselves as role models and lead by example to gain the trust of individual followers. In addition, the staff members are empowered with positive reinforcement and independence, which encourages greater levels of commitment in the workplace. In this process, the status quo is challenged by a powerful, future-oriented vision to motivate individuals to engage in extra effort (Bass, 1985) and supports their development for change, especially in an unstable economic environment. Such support and assurance motivates individuals to do something different, or to do more than initially planned, to align with organizational goals.

The capacity to intellectually stimulate individual employees is one of the unique skills attributed to the transformational leadership approach. This ability is important because individual learning does not always lead to organizational
learning (Ikehara, 1999) without leadership linking the two. Here, leaders encourage critical thinking, question people's assumptions, and endorse new strategies and techniques for problem-solving. By stimulating subordinates' views with group perspectives, a leader integrates individual learning into organizational learning.

Individualized consideration in transformational leaders focuses on considering and paying attention to individuals' personal career development. Leaders act as mentors to assist employees address their weaknesses and draw upon their strengths to develop each person individually. The essence of transformational leadership is believed to have a positive impact on learning in organizations because, as leaders stimulate ideas positively, the impact is shown in a form of learning process which escalates organizational success. Thus, many scholars propose that in a global world leadership should move towards transformational characteristics that entail an ability to inspire, develop and encourage employees to view organizational tasks beyond their own self-interest (Garcia-Morales et al., 2008).

Challenges to organizational learning

However, the other side of the debate is that transformational sub-dimensions attributed to charismatic behaviors and idealized influence enhance individual personal identification with the leader. While such characteristics are expected to result in a high level of association and personal identification between individual followers and the leader, this influence may not be used to develop the collective learning which is fundamental to enhancing long-term organizational success and survival. A leader who is commonly seen as exceptional and extraordinary can hinder the collective learning of individual followers because the followers anticipate that the leader will know what is best for an organization and have the extended self-knowledge to drive organizational success. Similarly, followers will be less inclined to face up to the leader's judgment with ideas and to pursue risky new initiatives. Thus, individual learning is not necessarily always positive.

Furthermore, there is a conventional belief that leaders have solitary control and influence when it comes to setting up organizational learning processes. Many say that leaders are responsible for leading the learning process and creating conditions that encourage peers' and subordinates' learning to take place. This view is also reflected in the transformational characteristic of idealized influence. The attributes of idealized influence are being able to rely and depend on leaders for direction and suggestions. An implication from such expectation is that employees may picture leaders as their role models and look forward to being told. However, a top-down approach to facilitate and implement learning
in organizations is not an effective method because learning should be a collaborative practice. In addition, leaders are too removed from the daily operations to recognize the opportunities and threats that come with learning new initiatives. Thus, to rely fully on leaders to initiate and sustain the learning processes can be counter-productive.

A third challenge to organizational learning, which is outside leadership influence, is the natural segregation within organizations of departments and sub-units by function, product or clients. The differentiation of units according to specialty may be beneficial to increase efficiency but, by the same token, the practice may create obstacles to learning. As individual departments differ in functions and priorities, the opportunities are limited for sharing information or communication. Furthermore, divisions and sub-units have competing objectives that necessitate competition for acquiring resources. In such circumstances, best practice and good ideas are not likely to be shared throughout the broader organizational context. Such an individualistic approach will make teams and organizational learning less necessary, and can become an internal impediment that hinders the collaboration that sustains learning processes.

**Implications for practice and conclusions**

Good and effective leadership is the key to organizational learning. The review above argues that transformational leadership can both influence and inhibit organizational learning, depending on how the leader decides to influence their employees. Leaders who create purpose, build trust and encourage new ways of solving problems enable a process of increasing knowledge to take place. As a result, the process enhances the capacity for effective actions to be carried out with knowledge and understanding. Organizations are assumed to want to capitalize on employees who can use a style of leadership which is most clearly aligned to enhancing capabilities for promoting organizational learning.

Therefore, corporations with aspirations for greater learning capacity may want to recruit and retain people with transformational skills. To generate a network of collective learning, leadership is essential. Being aware of the learning needs of all employees, and appropriately influencing them through a leadership process, is crucial for the future survival of organizations in contemporary situations.

Finally, this paper reveals how transformational leadership contributes to the process of learning in organizations and identifies some of the challenges that come with the task. There is no doubt that transformational behaviors facilitate the acculturation process, which, subsequently, promotes the values of a learning culture. As organizations progress and modernize to keep up with the
pace of advancement and the move to knowledge-based economies, the role of leadership is fundamental. Leadership in the future will mandate the ability to create a conducive climate for learning to take place naturally, and such an ability will be an invaluable leadership asset.

References


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