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Three debates in organizational learning: what every manager should know

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Organizational learning has been recognized as one of the most powerful enablers for gaining competitive advantage and achieving organizational success in the knowledge-based economy. (Argote, 2011) Despite a wide consensus about the positive relationship between organizational learning and improved performance, understanding organizational learning has remained elusive and there seems to be little agreement about an accepted theory of organizational learning (Crossan *et al.*, 2011). Part of this dichotomy can be attributed to the theoretical debates that have engulfed organizational learning literature since its evolution. A historical perspective to organizational learning would suggest that subsequent to the Second World War, the economic schools like Neo-Keynesian rose to prominence and dominated much of the discourses on policy matters meant to revive the bleeding economy. The behaviorist resisted this preponderance and purported the view that economic models were overly simplistic and contradicted empirical evidence. In their book “*A behavioral theory of the firm*” published in 1963, Cyert and March openly challenged the assumptions of profit maximization and perfect information that were the life and blood of neo-classical economists. They introduced the idea of “Organizational learning”, whereby they proposed that organizations can also learn from their experience in the same way individuals learn from their experience. Organizational learning was posited as the result of adaptive behavior over time, and learning was manifested when organizations shifted their goals and changed their processes matched with experience. Fiol and Lyles (1985, p. 811) defined adaptive learning as “the ability to make incremental adjustments as a result of environmental changes, goals, structures, or other changes”.

The voluminous and enriching growth of organizational learning studies over the past few decades can be traced to the core theoretical debates that have spurred a wide web of scholarly conversation among practitioners and researchers. The cognitive vs behavioral debate was the first of its kind that tried to answer whether organizational learning occurred when new insights were acquired or when an accompanying change in behavior was followed:

- The cognitive view considers learning as a combination of various mental processes. The first step toward organizational learning is information acquisition that involves gathering information from different sources. Information distribution is the second step, and it is most important because information that is acquired and not shared would be useful to the individual alone. The third step, information interpretation refers to the process through which individuals make sense of the information that they have

received from others. Dixon (1994) talked about how individuals build cognitive maps, and how they modify these maps over time. Organizational memory is the last step in organizational learning, and it refers to storing knowledge in repositories that display persistence over time.

- The supporters of behavioral approach believe that the purpose of learning is change in behavior or action in the desired direction. The constraint here is that learning and change are not always axiomatic. In other words, it becomes difficult to conclude that – if “y” learning has happened, it would result in “x” behavioral change or if “x” change has occurred, it is because of “y” organizational learning.

For managers, it is worth attending that organizational learning, overt or tacit, develops through various processes, and resulting experiences are manifested through a change in ways of knowing and doing.

Another debate that is a talking point among practitioners and scholars was how an organization, an inanimate thing, can learn:

- One view is that organizational learning is simply the sum of individual learning. For advocates of this view, learning takes place in two ways – either through the individuals who partake in the learning process or by bringing in highly experienced and knowledgeable people.
- Another view is that though individuals learn in the context of an organization, organizational learning is a social process and not simply an aggregation of individual learning. Proponents of this view argue that collective learning (reflection of collective ideas, processes, structures and strategies) should replace individual learning.
- There are also others who adopt an “organization” view of learning and see organizational learning occurring at different levels of the organization (Yeo, 2006). At the individual level, information gets stored in one’s mind as schema. At the group level, social interactions bring people together and allow them to acquire, combine and store knowledge. At the organizational level, learning gets stored in knowledge repositories such as processes, structures, systems or strategies.

We believe that this debate highlights for managers the need to attend to the nuances of manifestation of organizational learning process at all levels – individual, group and organizational (Swart and Harcup, 2013). Though the same individuals form parts of the collective, the relationships arising out of different structural arrangements also influence organizational learning.

The third debate is around on the best way to measure organizational learning, even though people from different paradigms stake claim that their respective approaches are more robust. The often used method is survey. In spite of its popularity, use of surveys as the mode of measuring organizational learning has drawn flak for various reasons:

- First, any survey can only include a few informants from multiple levels in the organization. This approach limits the depth to which it is possible to interpret and isolate the levels at which organizational learning may occur within a given organization.
- Second, the survey instruments are developed as a “first generation of attempts at measuring the organizational learning construct, which will be used as the foundation for subsequent advancements made by the multiple disciplines attempting to take the field toward the ‘normal science’ state” (Templeton *et al.*, 2002, pp. 208-209) and “should be considered a first iteration and need to undergo

further empirical testing in order to improve its efficacy in organizational studies". In practice, it remains the first and only iteration, as it is almost never followed up with more in-depth studies.

- Third, multiplicity of surveys on organizational learning (e.g. Flores *et al.*, 2012) measuring the same construct has resulted in confusion, complexity and chaos in choosing the right scale.

Studies have also used case methodology to capture organizational learning processes and thoughts about people. The advantage of case study is that it is rich in description, but given that the organizational data are complex and intertwined, not having the analytical tools to separate the rich complex data can lead to failure in discovering pointers to gain deep insights about organizational learning and means to improve action.

Both survey and case study methods are akin to temperature taking and do not provide any diagnostic help to a manager or the possibility of corrective action. Thus, managers need to be open to newer methods for measuring organizational learning. One such alternative is social network analysis, which assumes that organizations are fundamentally relational entities. Social network analysis provides analytical tools that can capture data from a large number of people within the organization, and it can produce insights about learning that is actionable.

Today's business environment has undergone a transition toward knowledge-based economy, and organizational learning is seen as a distinguishing characteristic for firms poised to establish competitive advantage:

- A manager who is cognizant of the debates discussed above would recognize the fact that organizational learning can be both cognitive and behavioral and would encourage his or her subordinates to engage in shared interpretations that can have behavioral consequences.
- Knowledge about different levels of organizational learning would help managers engage in conscious attempts to make members aware of each other's expertise and also, develop organizational memories that remain with the organizations even when its members leave.
- The inadequacy of current measures of organizational learning to systematically gauge the learning process gives managers enough prudence to think about alternative measures for organizational learning.

Keywords:

Organization development,
Organizational change and learning,
Learning,
Organizational learning,
Work-based learning

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