A Systems Approach to Build a Learning Organization

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T he term learning organization probably first cropped up in the Philippine Management/HR vocabulary in 1990. To some, it sounded then like the latest management fad. To others it seemed like a new concept that could profoundly affect the way organizations of the future are to be measured.

Today, with about 150 books/articles written this far about the learning organization, it is no longer seen like a nice concept floating in the air. It appears that it can be operationalized. It can be made to work – admittedly, with considerable effort.

This paper is an attempt to construct a model that can be used as a framework by change agents and quality managers in packaging interventions geared towards achieving a certain degree of learning-organization status for client systems.

What is a Learning Organization?

There are as many definitions as there are writers on the subject.

Peter Senge (1990, p. 14) who is probably the leading proponent of learning organizations, defined the learning organization as one that is continually expanding its capability to create its future. He added: "Perhaps the most salient reason for building the learning organization is that we are only now starting to understand the capabilities such organizations must possess. For a long time, efforts to build learning organizations were like groping in the dark until the skills, areas of knowledge and paths for development of such organizations become known. What fundamentally will distinguish learning organizations from traditional authoritarian controlling organizations will be the mastery of certain basic disciplines." The basic disciplines are personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, team learning and systems thinking, which is considered the cornerstone of the learning organization.

Michael Marquardt (1996, p. 2) defined learning organizations as companies that are continually transforming themselves to better manage knowledge, utilize technology, empower people and expand learning to better adapt and succeed in the changing environment. Marquardt explained how organizational learning takes place using his Systems-Linked Organizational Model composed of five subsystems: the learning subsystem, organization subsystem, people subsystem, knowledge subsystem and technology subsystem.

While Peter Senge (1990) focused more on how organizational learning takes place, which is very important in the study of learning organizations, Michael Marquardt (1996) on the other hand provided the conceptual framework for operationalizing knowledge management in a learning organization.

What Gets Learned and How?

To appreciate any model in building or creating a learning organization, it is very important to have a clear idea of what the organization gets to learn (not everything that is learned is useful) and how the learning takes place. According to Barbara Braham (1995) most organizations begin by focusing on one of several areas for learning: products, work processes, customers, teamwork, systems thinking and mental models. One other area, distinct and apart

from work processes, are technologies. Clearly there are more. Product specifications, customer preferences, systems and procedures, organizational behavior and the dynamics of group functioning in a team are understandably areas for learning. Systems thinking and mental models come in a different category as areas for learning. Both areas require a reframing of perspectives. Peter Senge (1990, pp. 8, 68-69) defined mental models as deeply ingrained assumptions or generalizations that influence the way people perceive their environment or surroundings and systems thinking as the discipline for seeing wholes, for seeing structures that underlie complex situations, for seeing interrelationships rather than linear cause-effect chains of relationships.

Many organizations are to some extent learning organizations in the sense that some learning takes place and cannot be avoided (Mayo, 1994). Most managers and supervisors are familiar with systematic problem solving, some organizations encourage experimentation with new approaches to getting work done, although only a few may be quite tolerant of mistakes committed. Many companies are now into benchmarking or learning from the experiences and best practices of others. All of these are situations where learning takes place. What is often lacking is a system whereby knowledge acquired is transferred quickly and efficiently throughout the organization and knowledge desired is kept, shared and updated by integrating them into the mainstream of daily operations (Garvin as cited by De Vito, 1996, p. 80).
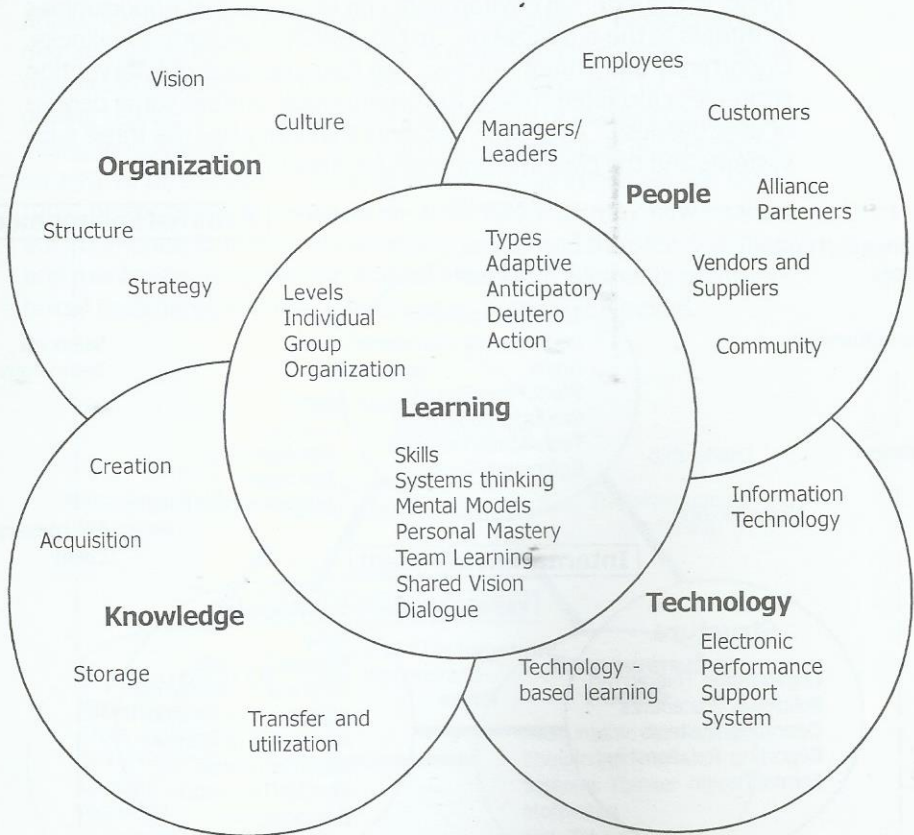
From acquisition to deployment of knowledge however is a long process and several steps must be institutionalized to facilitate knowledge transfer and integration into daily operations. Specifically, systems and processes must support a continuum of activities like knowledge acquisition, retention/storage/codification, retrieval (when needed), deployment and actual usage, sharing and updating, then back to storage of updated knowledge to complete the cycle.

The Systems-Linked Organization Model of Marquardt

The idea for this paper came from the Systems-Linked Organization Model of Marquardt (1996) shown in Figure 1 with its five subsystems: learning, organization, people, knowledge and technology. The components of subsystems organization, people, knowledge and technology are largely self-explanatory as they are the same terms used in Human Resource Development and Organiza-

tion Development literature. It is noticeable that the components used in the subsystem learning, e.g. systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, shared vision and team learning are the five disciplines of the learning organization as presented by Peter Senge (1990). The types of learning are described as adaptive, anticipatory, deutero and action (Marquardt, 1996, pp. 38-39). Adaptive learning is said to occur when an individual or an organization learns from experience and reflection. Anticipatory and deutero learnings are often described as generative or creative types of learning. It is said that anticipatory learning takes place when an organization reflects about the future and deutero learning occurs when an organization reflects on some of its long taken-for-granted assumptions about doing things. Action learning on the other hand, involves working on actual problems, implementing their solutions and then focusing on the learning that took place.

Organization
Vision
Culture
Structure
Strategy

People
Employees
Customers
Managers/Leaders
Alliance Parteners
Vendors and Suppliers
Community

Learning
Levels
Individual
Group
Organization
Types
Adaptive
Anticipatory
Deutero
Action
Skills
Systems thinking
Mental Models
Personal Mastery
Team Learning
Shared Vision
Dialogue

Knowledge
Creation
Acquisition
Storage
Transfer and utilization

Technology
Information Technology
Electronic Performance Support System
Technology - based learning

Figure 1. The Systems-Linked Organization Model

The STEP Model – Structure, Task, Environment and People
A Framework for Analyzing Organization Effectiveness

Organization Development (OD) practitioners use diagnostic models to assess organizational effectiveness. One of the models currently favored is the STEP model. It consists of three subsystems: task (what will be done?), people (who will do it?), and structure (how will it be done?). The vision/mission answers the question why it has to be done. The purpose of leadership is to achieve the vision/mission by seeing to it that the three subsystems - task, people and structure - are properly aligned using the various managerial processes of planning, budgeting, organizing, controlling, motivating and others. Values and culture in the internal environment can be a source of strength or weakness, in either case it can facilitate or inhibit the achievement of organization objectives. The many elements in the external environment can be sources of opportunities or threats to the organization. In OD, SWOT (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat) analysis can form the basis of intervention strategies calculated to help the organization achieve some degree of effectiveness. The many elements that comprise the three subsystems and the two environments are shown in Figure 2.
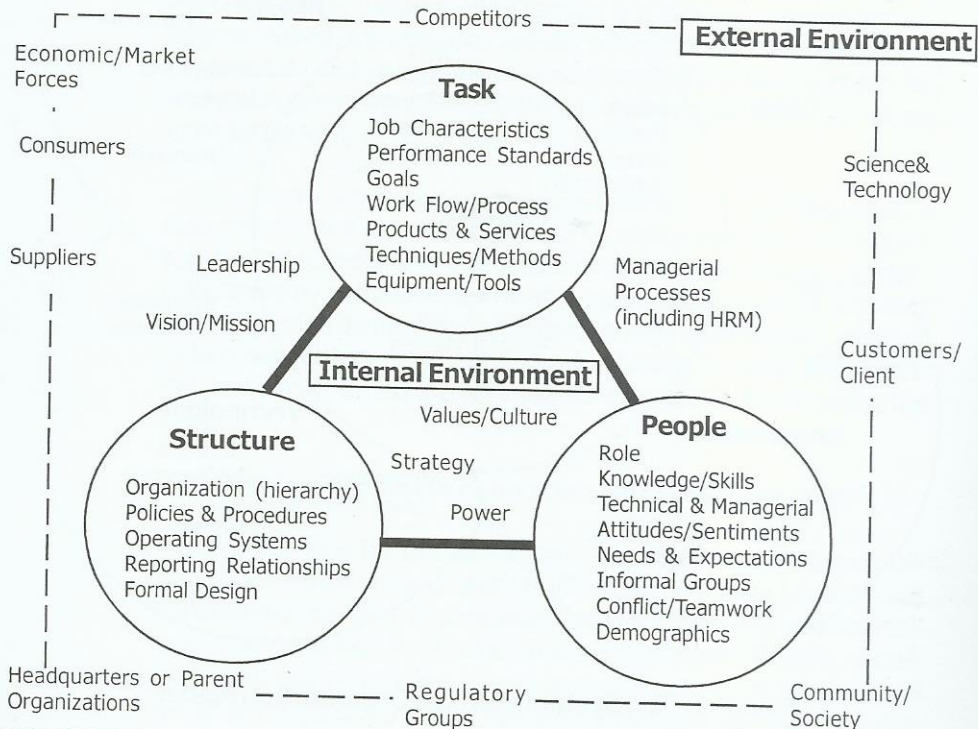

Figure 2. The Step Model

The Capacity Building Model – A Conceptual Framework for Creating a Learning Organization

The capacity building model adopts the step model as the structural framework to "house" current thinking from various sources regarding specific elements that can contribute towards the operationalization of the learning organization. The model can be used for building capability (hence, the name) but the harnessing of experience and the cascading of learning throughout the organization can only follow from the dynamics of the new set of elements, i.e. having the capability will not necessarily lead to learning.

Figure 3 shows quality as the shared vision in place of the generic vision/mission of the STEP model. The prevalent thinking in organization development now is that intervention activities should focus on work or work-related activities if they are to contribute to attainment of organizational or corporate objectives. Being customer driven it is said as a great incentive to learning. Leadership, called in the model transformational leadership is responsible for achieving quality (earlier it could have been productivity or excellence) by providing empowered people with learning opportunities in appropriate structures or settings. A culture of continuous improvement facilitates performance of managerial processes that may now include environmental scanning, knowledge creation and transfer, coaching and mentoring, empowering and collaborating. Elements of the external environment remain the same as in the STEP model.

Learning Opportunities
Expanded Job Responsibilities
Multi-Skills
Core Competencies
Scheduled Learning Sessions

Management Processes

Transformational Leadership

Shared Vision Quality

Culture of Continuous Improvement

Appropriate Structures
Cross Functional
Self-Directed Work Teams
Clusters
Networks
Learning Centers
Federal Organizations

Empowered People
Accountable for Results
Knowledge Workers
Systems Thinker
Motivated
Risk Takers

Figure 3. Capacity Building Model

Conclusion

Creating models or paradigms may be interesting but the more challenging task is operationalizing it. While it is not within the scope of this paper, some concerns in this area may be worth noting at this point. Learning invariably leads to change and change involves risks. There are risks when we distribute decision-making, there are risks when we allow access to information and there are risks when we trust and assume that people are competent. We take risks that mistakes will be committed and some resources will be expended when we experiment to learn new behaviors in the work place. Many organizations are not ready for these. Many organizations are not learning organizations but telling or controlling organizations. In fact most organizations are non-learning or anti-learning organizations. Organizations prefer people who do not rock the boat, the exact opposite of empowered people. Management is traditionally unitary and elitist – there are those who do the thinking and those that do the working. Learning organizations call for distributing power, bringing decision-making as close as possible to where work is done and sharing accountability. Even our long-time cherished human resource management subsystems and practices like the job description, performance appraisal, reward structures and career management will have to be re-evaluated. The job description is not conducive to learning beyond fixed boundaries and present reward systems are still geared towards individual achievement and not team performance.

These are issues and concerns that will have to be addressed in the operationalization of a learning organization and admittedly they are not easy ones, a functional model will certainly help in focusing interventions in subsystems where they are most needed. If a total learning organization is not possible, may be "pockets of excellence" are temporarily acceptable. Models serve as roadmaps or guidelines. Every now and then they are updated. In due time they may have to be discarded or replaced.

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