

Building Learning Organization in Malaysian Organizations Context

Abdul Rahman Ahmad

Faculty of Management & Economics, Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, Malaysia

Abstract

There is no simple way to build a learning organization. Each organization must develop a structure and style that is best suited for its own people, history, skill base, technology, mission and culture. Besides that, there is a need for leader's image in building a learning organization. The objective of this paper is to highlight the study of the building of a learning organization that has been conducted in selected Malaysian organizations. Three organizations were selected for this study. The nature of the organizations are varies based on their own functions. Organization A is a service oriented, organization B is an economic development and organization C is a research and development organization. The study was conducted by means of qualitative research methodology. This means that the focus was to understand an event and its interaction within the natural context in order to determine what and how to build a learning organization. The study found that the building of learning organization are varies and indicates some evolving elements. It was observed that the elements of supporting the building of a learning organization were interpreted based on the organization's own identity. As a conclusion, it can be said that the study had shed some light on suggesting the elements of supporting the building of a learning organization. It also contributes to the upgrading and promoting the understanding and to enable the organizations concerned to develop into full-pledge learning organization.

Keywords *Learning organization, learning process, collective learning, human attitude, changing environment*

INTRODUCTION

Learning in organization is not new (Ross, 1992; Bennet & O'Brien, 1994) and has different terms such as organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978 and Dixon 1994), learning organization (Senge, 1990; Swiernga and Wierdsman, 1992), learning company (Pedler, et al., 1991), knowledge factory (Roth, et al., 1994) and knowledge creating company (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1991). These emerging terms indicates that learning is not a destination but a journey that is always in a continuous development. Besides that, Garrat (1990) describe learning organization as; (1) encourage people at all levels of the organization to learn regularly and rigorously, (2) have systems for capturing the learning and moving it where it is needed, and (3) value learning and are able to continuously transform themselves. On the other hand, Ulrich, et al. (1993) identifies the concept of learning organization is grounded in diverse streams of management history. They have trace three phases in the understanding of the concept. First, the work of Frederick Taylor with the development of scientific management in the early 1900s and followed by the work of Herbert Simon and his colleagues on models of decision making at Carnegie Mellon in the late of 1950s and 1960s. Second, the work of Chris Agris and Donald Schon with the work on "first and second-order learning" or mostly known as "single and double-loop learning at Harvard University. Third, the most recent, and perhaps the most popular work of Peter Senge and his colloquies at Massachusetts Institute of Technology known as The Fifth Dicipines.

Meanwhile, leader's role is very important in building learning organization. Senge, (1990) urge that, learning organizations require a new view of leadership. The traditional view of leaders is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and

inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders. Besides that, he also coin that, there are three important aspects of leaders in a learning organization such as leaders are designers, stewards and teachers where they are responsible for building organizations were people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is, they are responsible for learning. As time going or moving, a learning organization have some particular patterns of possibilities which will move it to certain stages, yet there will always be a challenge in improving and maintaining the results achieved. Therefore, a learning organization is an organization that is continuously moving towards improvement in their performance. Tobin (1993) also describes three important elements that relate to the continuous process of learning that was open to new ideas, a culture that encourages and provides opportunity for learning and innovation and a widespread knowledge of the organization goals and objectives and an understanding of how each person's work contributes to these goals and objective.

In building learning organization, Garvin (1993) argued the questions such as will managers know when their companies have become learning organization? What policies and program must be in place? He further stated that, learning organization must be skilled at five main activities; systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from their own experience and past history, learning from experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization. Viewing on the importance of environmental changes, Hitt (1995), stress that, learning organization means striving for excellence through continual organization renewal, which is always proactive and responsive to environment changes. The organizations had therefore undergone a very long learning and transformation process, continuously responding to the changes that took place around them, and were always aware of the public perceptions and opinions. Whereas, Marquardt (1996), insist that, there is no single guaranteed way in becoming learning organization. Each organization must develop a structure and style that is best suited for its own people, history, skill base, technology, mission, and culture. Furthermore, Sirajudin (1997) suggested four elements in transforming a non-learning organization to learning organization as follow; (1) individual attitude, knowledge and ability, (2) organizational vision, strategy and structure, (3) organizational culture and practices and (4) workplace environment.

At the policy stage, Government of Canada (2000), urge the important of six principles that should be followed in order to develop public sector organization into learning organization as follow; (1) a learning organization encourages learning by valuing knowledge, ideas and relations building as an integral part of its business, (2) a learning organization learns from experience, (3) a learning organization values people and diversity, (4) a learning organization integrates learning into management practices, (5) a learning organization learns for serving, and (6) a learning organization evaluates both the process and the outcomes of learning. Furthermore, West & Burnes (2000) identifies four important issues to build learning organization. The first issue is the need for barriers between the organization and the environment to be relaxed so that patterns of events can be detected, understood and appropriate responses developed and/or anticipated. The second issue concerns the need to recognise that the interpretation of external events, and the implementation of internal organizational responses, cannot be confined to leaders but has to be seen as the responsibility of the wider organization. Third, there is a need to develop organizational cultures which encourage established ways of working and thinking to be challenged by individuals and teams. In the case study companies, individuals and teams were given increased opportunities to question and debate work organization, and to contribute suggestions for improvement. The final issue relates to the development of individuals so that they can contribute effectively to the performance of the organization.

According to Smith (2001) organizational learning is just a means in order to achieve strategic objectives, but creating a learning organization is also a goal, since the ability permanently and collectively to learn is a necessary precondition for thriving in the new context. Johnson (2002) have made a study on four leaders who embarked on learning organization initiatives where he indicates that: (1) leaders must be in a position of power within the organization or must gain the full and complete support from those in positions of power, (2) the decision to develop a learning organization should be based on a clearly defined business need or business problem, (3) the learning organization notion must be analyzed and determined to be the rational solution to this business need or problem (4) although the term itself is not always used and no specific definition or framework is utilized, the learning organization concept needs to be shown as a solution to a clearly articulated problem, (5) leaders need to pay attention to this initiative, ensure that others in the organization are focused on it, and institute an appropriate reward system, (6) milestones are not widely utilized, but appropriate measurements of both learning and the resulting organizational performance need to be in place, (7) the major barrier to success is that the organization does not perceive the need for the initiative, and (8) leaders need to set up appropriate measurements to demonstrate progress.

As for Bharadwaj, et al. (2003), training is very important in developing a learning organization at public sector organization. The program required managers to attend a day-long seminar each month for a year, participate actively in class, complete out-of-class assignments, interact with colleagues (across functions and levels) on several team exercises, read two lengthy books, and then implement the concepts into their work lives. According to Frahm and Brown (2006) learning organization is fundamentally different from other approaches to management and leadership for at least two reasons. (1) Whereas the bureaucratic paradigm (like all modernist ones) manages by reductionism (reducing any phenomenon to its elements, addressing each one, and finally adding together the results of each), the learning organization has a holistic preference, never forgetting the whole system. (2) Whereas, the bureaucratic paradigm claims to be "value free", the learning organization stands openly on certain values - on respect for human beings, who are far more than "human resources" or "factors of production", on responsibilities between people, on collective commitments to communities of work and expression, on the struggle towards truth in improving processes of interaction and improving oneself. According to Serrat (2009), learning organization needs people who are intellectually curious about their work, who actively reflect on their experience, who develop experience-based theories of change and continuously test these in practice with colleagues, and who use their understanding and initiative to contribute to knowledge development. Van Winkelen (2010) identified, there was two main factors that influence learning organization, (1) individuals not translating the implications of the learning back to their organization, and 2) the organizations not having systems and processes to transfer and amplify the learning that was brought back.

In Malaysian organizations context, the term has gained a lot of attention but the implementation is still ambiguous and has no clear prescription. Rozi (1993) the first person known to start throwing the idea in Malaysia has urge Malaysian organizations to create a learning organization after assessing the current needs and trend. Creating a learning organization is not a result of accidental or fortuitous development, but it is deliberately designed, planned and maintained process and regarded as a new proposal to keep ahead in becoming a leading organization. As to Raja Maznah (1995), the concept and practices of learning organization in Malaysia is still new and has yet to get a clear picture, but the moves towards the implementation are being geared by several government and corporate organizations. Whereby, Tan (1996) the need for learning organization in Malaysia is due to the global corporate environment that requires new competencies to compete and often require

to produce their products or services faster, better and cheaper. As a new concept, learning organization has gained momentum in the discussions among academicians, journalist and managers in Malaysia (Abu Daud, 1995; Zainal, 1995; Muhammad Ali, 1996; Victor Tan 1996 and Sirajuddin, 1997).

Besides that, several studies also have been conducted in several organizations by undergraduate, post-graduate and individual researcher (Anita Dewi, 1997; Suhail, 1997; Amadu Daramy, 1998 and Marinah & Omar, 2004). The idea is to put forward the concept and the important of developing Malaysian organizations into learning organization in the effort to realign and meet future demands. With regard to the above statement, the central questions is how the Malaysian organizations taken steps to build their organization into a learning organization based on the qualitative approach.

OBJECTIVE

The general objective of this study was to gain an understanding of how the building of learning organization in Malaysian organizations context. Specifically, the objective is to gain insight and identify the steps taken in the building of learning organization in selected organizations.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative purposive sampling to select organizations, which would provide a variation that would enrich the findings. According to Bogdan and Bikken (1982) the qualitative researcher is interested in meaning – studying and understanding a particular phenomenon, the nature of events and the nuances of interaction. Patton (1987) the nature of a study warranted the use of qualitative research methodology when the information needed are systematically gathered and analyzed through the perceptions, feelings and knowledge of people.

Three organizations were selected to represent the three major sectors. The three major sectors that have been chosen were services and development label as organization A, research and development as organization B, and economy and development as organization C. These three organizations are still under government controlled and located at three different states. Organization A is controlled under Government Linked Company (GLC), organization B is under Ministry of Agriculture and Agri Industry, and organization C is under State of Johor Government. Basically, the sources of data in this research were interviews, observations and documents. This would permit the researcher to combine the strength of these methods using a triangulation strategy.

Data analysis is a going process that begins with data collection and ends with the writing up the study. The data collected in this study were first transcribed and analyzed according to each of the organization *i.e.*, organization A, B and C. The transcriptions and analysis were done independently following a specified time frame (three month) for each organization. The data were analyzed simultaneously during the data collection phase with the interview, observation or document. The researcher looked for key concepts, key issues, recurrent events, and so on that became tentative categories. Pre and initial analysis was started after one interview had been completed and transcribed in order to discover any relationships, patterns, constructs or themes within the information. This analysis was used to refine future interviews and document analysis. Gradually, once categories became more distinct and refined, properties that have descriptive elements of the categories might also emerge. After the data had been sorted into categories and properties, the researcher examined each category to ensure that it was conceptually congruent with the other categories. The process continues

until sources were exhausted and the categories were saturated. Data collection and analysis ended at this point.

FINDINGS

This study found that there were various understanding towards the understanding of the building of learning organization, but most viewed it as a continuous process of learning in organization. Organization A listed five important elements as follows: (1) providing training to the employees as well as the top management (2) encouraging learning process within the organization by providing information network (3) giving rewards and incentives to the employees (4) promoting teamwork in learning process, and (5) formulating Western approaches into the organization.

For organization B, four elements were listed in understanding the building of learning organization as follows: (1) emphasis on project management method (2) encourage more competitive research and scientific discoveries (3) providing comfortable work setting that enhance employees performance, and (4) implementing and encouraging the educational culture project. Whereas, to organization C, four elements also were listed as follows: (1) practicing an open concept in giving opportunity to all employees, (2) Engage project 2000, (3) getting consultation services, and (4) highlights on the importance of learning organization in the orientation session.

The building of learning organization by the three organizations can be categorized into three aspects. First, the commitment of top management or the aspect of leadership involvement in the building learning organization. The aspect of the commitment of top management or the role and the commitment of leadership was very important as Senge, (1990) urge that, learning organizations require a new view of leadership. The traditional view of leaders is based on assumptions of people's powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders. Besides that, he also coin that, there are three important aspects of leaders in a learning organization such as leaders are designers, stewards and teachers where they are responsible for building organizations were people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models – that is, they are responsible for learning. In addition, Johnson (2002) have list eight important elements that involve with the leadership in building the learning organization as follow: (1) leaders must be in a position of power within the organization or must gain the full and complete support from those in positions of power, (2) the decision to develop a learning organization should be based on a clearly defined business need or business problem, (3) the learning organization notion must be analyzed and determined to be the rational solution to this business need or problem (4) although the term itself is not always used and no specific definition or framework is utilized, the learning organization concept needs to be shown as a solution to a clearly articulated problem, (5) leaders need to pay attention to this initiative, ensure that others in the organization are focused on it, and institute an appropriate reward system, (6) milestones are not widely utilized, but appropriate measurements of both learning and the resulting organizational performance need to be in place, (7) the major barrier to success is that the organization does not perceive the need for the initiative, and (8) leaders need to set up appropriate measurements to demonstrate progress. Leaders need to be committed to empowering employees so that they feel free to communicate, receive and giving feedback in a supportive and creative manner for the benefits of the organization.

Second, the finding indicates on how to focus on employee empowerment. In building the learning organization, each individual has to understand and play their role accordingly. They have to understand at what level they are and understand the task given to them. As

mentions by West & Burnes (2000) the building of learning organization relates to the development of individuals so that they can contribute effectively to the performance of the organization. These contended that empowering would contribute directly toward better decision making, greater organization effectiveness, greater accountability, transparency and higher staff motivation and productivity. The situations created can be concluded as a mutual understanding between the employees and management with the idea of sharing power with or giving power to the employees in the organization. Besides that, Frahm and Brown (2006), states, the learning organization stands openly on certain values -- on respect for human beings, who are far more than "human resources" or "factors of production", on responsibilities between people, on collective commitments to communities of work and expression, on the struggle towards truth in improving processes of interaction and improving oneself? The process of valuing the employee contributions is very important in terms of making a step towards building leaning organization. The similar ideas was also been stated at the policy stage by the Government of Canada (2000), as follows; (1) a learning organization encourages learning by valuing knowledge, ideas and relations building as an integral part of its business, (2) a learning organization learns from experience, (3) a learning organization values people and diversity, (4) a learning organization integrates learning into management practices, (5) a learning organization learns for serving, and (6) a learning organization evaluates both the process and the outcomes of learning. What was important, the participation of all employees and their contributions was very important in terms of making a step towards the building of learning organization.

Third, is the dissemination of information in an organization was very important in order to keep staff awareness and to move ahead with changes. Each organization has highlighted on the importance of data base and information network in organization in order to ensure that any latest information can be spread within the organization faster. The information should transferable easily among the individuals in the organization. These were part of openness in the organization to get the feedback and to give information in a two way medium from the staff. Therefore, the whole process will allow the whole organization can possibly share information and learn together. As describe by Garvin (1993), learning organization must be skilled at five main activities; systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from their own experience and past history, learning from experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization. It is also in line with what has been characterized by Garrat (1990) where learning organization are (1) encourage people at all levels of the organization to learn regularly and rigorously, (2) have systems for capturing the learning and moving it where it is needed, and (3) value leaning and are able to continuously transform themselves. Tobin (1993) also describes three important elements that relate to the continuous process of learning that was open to new ideas, a culture that encourages and provides opportunity for learning and innovation and a widespread knowledge of the organization goals and objectives and an understanding of how each person's work contributes to these goals and objective. Viewing on the importance of receiving and utilizing the information, Hitt (1995), stress that, learning organization means striving for excellence through continual organization renewal, which is always proactive and responsive to environment changes. The organizations had therefore undergone a very long learning and transformation process, continuously responding to the changes that took place around them, and were always aware of the public perceptions and opinions.

CONCLUSION

The three organizations that have been studied, viewed the steps taken in building their organization into a learning organization differently but the process as a continuous process that happens in an organization. Besides some differences in the steps taken or the implementation method, the data gathered clearly demonstrates that there is a consensus in the acceptance and recognition for the implementation of learning organization in the selected organization. All the three organizations insisted that the involvements of the top management or leadership and the employees were the most important elements to the organization. A part from that, communication and information network also play an important role in building learning organization.

In summary, there is no simple way to build a learning organization. Each organization must develop a structure and style that is best suited for its own people, history, skill base, technology, mission and culture. Besides that, there is a need for a leader's image in building a learning organization. The study implied that, in preparing the organizations towards the building as a learning organization, it is suggested that, more emphasis should be given to the understanding of the philosophy and theories that are applicable to the Malaysian organizations contexts. These reflect that, the study can be conducted by using the elements identified as an instrument to further clarify the building blocks of learning organization in Malaysian organization contexts.

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