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LEARNING: WHO CARES? A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Prominent business thinkers and researchers, including Toffler, Porter and Senge, argue that learning is the basic ingredient of business success in the third millennium. The nature of technological advancement and development also leaves little doubt that people and their knowledge is the cornerstone of global competition. Consequently, numerous books and articles have written about the knowledge economy and learning organisation over the last twenty years. Organisations have also joined in and they now talk about the advantages of becoming a learning organisation. But do they really believe in and act on what they hear and read about learning in organisations? How important is learning to business people, particularly business managers? This paper reviews the literature on learning and what business writers have said about learning and its role in business and management performance. A survey of managers is conducted to investigate their perception of managerial competencies, including learning competency and its dimensions, in effective performance. The same respondents are also invited to rank a number of managerial competencies to determine their order of importance in decision-making. The result of the two surveys are compared and contrasted to highlight the difference in what Argyris and Schon (1974) refer to as individual's 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. The research findings are highlighted and discussed in the context of education and training of managers. The paper recommends several teaching strategies for fostering active and reflective learning.

Keywords: Learning, Learning Organization, Competency, Performance, Manager

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This paper reviews the literature on learning and what business writers have said about learning and its role in business and management performance. A survey of managers is conducted to investigate their perception of managerial competencies, including learning competency and its dimensions, in effective performance. The same respondents are also invited to rank a number of managerial competencies to determine their order of importance in decision-making. The result of the two surveys are compared and contrasted to highlight the difference in what Argyris and Schon (1974) refer to as individual's 'espoused theory' and 'theory-in-use'. The research findings are highlighted and discussed in the context of education and training of managers. The paper recommends several teaching strategies for fostering active and reflective learning.

Introduction

The world has been undergoing significant changes in the last quarter of century. Today, the world is highly integrated, interdependent and competitive. The forces driving these changes are many and diverse, including unprecedented speed in the technological advancement, economic development, and socio-economic liberalisation. These factors have enabled humanity to move the frontiers of knowledge into cyberspace and genetics which may prove to have the most far-reaching effects in shaping our lives and value systems in the third millennium. In the business world, these changes have culminated in a fiercely competitive environment where competitive advantages are derived from superior products, efficient processes, fast delivery and superior customer service.

Alvin and Heidi Toffler (1997) suggest that we have now entered mankind's third revolution: The Technological Revolution, where the driver of change is the knowledge worker. Similarly, prominent thinkers and writers argue that the key factors of sustainable competitive advantage in the future are people and their knowledge (Handy, 1997; Kotler, 1997; Drucker, 1992; Pettigrew and Whipp, 1991). Drucker (1993) describes the post-capitalist era as one in which knowledge is power and knowledgeable is powerful.

He emphasises that work is increasingly being organised around sources of knowledge and relationships. From this point of view, the ability to learn faster than one's competitors is seen to be essential for business success. Kanter (1992) and Peters (1991), on the other hand, highlight the constancy of change and conclude that continuous learning seems to be a logical response to minimise uncertainty and risk. Similarly, Korthagen (2005) highlights the role that learning concepts such as reflection and intuition play in helping people to adjust to constantly changing circumstances.

Learning in organizations

As the result of perceived pivotal role of learning in an increasingly complex and uncertain business environment, academics and some well known business leaders have enthusiastically promoted learning concepts, such as leaning organisation and organisational learning, to achieve competitive advantages. Perhaps, the defining contribution here was made by Donald Schön. He provided a theoretical framework linking the experience of living in a situation of an increasing change with the need for learning (Schön, 1973). He later joined Chris Argyris and they authored a highly influential book titled 'Organisational learning: A theory of action perspective'. Peter Senge, on the other hand, as one of the new breed of management scholars, gained prominence in 1990 by publication of his well-known book 'The fifth discipline'. The primary aim of all these scholars was to utilise organizational knowledge, information and know-how in the most efficient and effective way to improve individual, team and organisation performance.

Although theorists of learning organisations have often drawn on ideas from organisational learning, there has been little traffic in the reverse direction. Moreover, since the central concerns have been somewhat different, the two literatures have developed along divergent tracks. The literature on organisational learning has concentrated on the detached collection and analysis of the processes involved in individual and collective learning inside organisations; whereas the learning organisations literature has an action orientation, and is geared toward using specific diagnostic and evaluative methodological tools which can help to identify, promote and evaluate the quality of learning processes inside organisations. (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999; Tsang, 1997). Hence, we could argue that organisational learning is the 'activity and the process by which organisations eventually reach the ideal of a learning organisation' (Finger and Brand 1999).

Over the last decade, other concepts associated with or derived from organisational learning have been developed and in some case put in practice. One of the most well known and written about of these concepts is knowledge management. Knowledge management is seen primarily as a problem of capturing, organizing, and retrieving information, evoking notions of databases, documents, query languages, and data mining. Knowledge is seen as passive, analytic, and atomistic: it is composed of facts that can be stored, retrieved, and disseminated, with little concern for the context in which the facts were originally embedded, and little concern for the new and often quite different contexts in which they will be used. In this view, knowledge management is nothing

more than getting the right information to the right people at the right time (Thomas, et al., 2001).

Work-related learning

Kolb (1984) defines learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience'. Piaget (1973), on the other hand, defines it as the organisation of reality. Similarly, Seibert and Daudelin (1999) define managerial learning as learning that managers naturally acquire on the job. Dodgson (1993), however, characterises learning in terms of what learning is and how its outcomes are achieved. Such a characterisation describes the ways in which organisations create, supplement and organise knowledge and routines around their activities and within their cultures, and how they develop organisational efficiency by adequately utilising the skills of their workforce. From this point of view, organisational learning is mediated through individuals. There are three possible types of such learning. The first one refers to the site of learning in which the organisation intentionally creates structures and strategies to facilitate the learning of all its members and continually transforms them (Garvin, 1993; Pedler et al., 1991; Senge, 1990). The second type, as discussed by Argyris and Schon (1978), considers organisation learning as a metaphor since organisations do not literally think and learn. Instead, they learn only through the experience and actions of individuals. The third kind of organisational learning, as argued by Gioia and Sims (1986), has a social context and is actually individual learning.

HRM and learning

A knowledge-based society is essentially driven by human ingenuity and intellectual prowess. Organisations in such a society sustain their competitive edge by capitalising on their human resources. In recent years, many writers have questioned the suitability of industrial organisation-based theories to explain sustainable competitive advantage (Lado et al., 1994; Lado et al., 1992; Conner, 1991). They argue that the resource-based view which incorporates Schumpeterian economic and strategic choice perspectives (Schumpeter, 1934, 1950) with its emphasis on human resource systems can contribute to sustained competitive advantage by facilitating the development of competencies that are organisation-specific, produce complex social relationships, are embedded in a organisation's history and culture, and generate tacit organisational knowledge. The effectiveness of such systems is often measured by their capacity to change and improve. This capacity is increasingly associated with organisational learning (Argyris, 1991; Senge, 1990). It also appears that continuous learning is related to organisational effectiveness (Tannenbaum, 1997). Thus, managers' perception of learning and their actions in promoting learning plays a key role in realising learning objectives.

Learning competencies

Research undertaken by theorists and writers in learning organisation and adult learning stress the role of experience, on-the-job training and action learning in effective learning (Senge, 1990; Levitt and March, 1988; Knowles, 1985; Argyris and Schon, 1978). Argyris (1998) argues for relevance of learning and actionability. His research has

discovered that the more intelligent and highly trained a professional—for example, a Harvard MBA—the greater his skill at defensive routines to prevent action and open dialogue. From this perspective, learning in organisations should be more in the form of on-the-job training which involves learning skills rather than education which involves learning concepts and information. Therefore, the managers who want to encourage and promote learning in workplace need to possess the competencies that help improve actual job performance of their subordinates. Competency is defined as an underlying characteristic of a person that results in effective and/or superior performance in a job (Klemp, 1980).

Cobb and Gibbs (1990) found that task and competency mastery is acquired through: 1) challenging assignments, 2) good role models, and 3) timely and comprehensive coaching. To achieve top performance through on-the-job development, a working environment and culture which is conducive to learning should be created. Such a culture is characterised by open dialogue, trust and cooperation. Corporate culture (shared beliefs, value and norms) will affect which skills are valued and rewarded. Baldwin and Ford (1988), Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) and Rouillier and Zager (1993) found that even when people acquire new expertise through training, their work environment can determine whether it translates into changed behaviour on the job. McCall et al. (1988) suggest that not all experiences are conducive to learning. The key to whether an experience produces learning is the presence or absence of challenges and experiences that promote learning and development, and stretch people well beyond their current capabilities. Garvin (1993) points out that organisation learning involves competencies in problem-solving, experimentation, learning from experience and best practices of others, quick knowledge transfer and efficiency throughout organisation. Dechant (1990), on the other hand, found that effective managers in changing situations employ four competencies of influencing others, visioning, enhancing political acumen and relationship forging.

Learning at workplace

Despite the importance of learning in a changing environment and increasing popularity of the concepts of learning organisation and organisational learning in academic community, there is little empirical research in literature to support many claims made by various experts about its benefits. In other words, the papers suggesting theoretical frameworks or models of learning organisation are abound but very few have been tested for their validity. Where research has been conducted, often issues such as small sample size or case study have significantly reduced the validity of their findings (Deakins and Freel, 1998; Hidding and Catterall, 1998; Lorange, 1996).

One of the reasons for lack of research in the field is that it is a new concept as it became popular in the early 1990s following the publication of Peter Senge's book; The Fifth Discipline in which he provided an expansive discussion of paradigm shift issues related to building the learning organisation (Senge, 1990). Another reason, according to Albert (1998), is the confusing and inappropriate language systems used to describe and create learning organisation. The main problem with the implementation of learning models in workplace, however, is that no methodology exists for measuring organisational learning capability. This contributes to unclear connection between learning and performance

(Thomas and Allen, 2006). Ortenblad (2007) in a thorough review of learning organisation literature found that although most people agree why it makes sense to become a learning organisation, no consensus exists as what a learning organisation looks like and how organisations can go about becoming one. It is this lack of consensus, clarity and supporting evidence that has led many critics to include the concept of learning organisation in their list of management fads or fashion (Nyhan et al. 2004)

Research

The aim of this study is to determine how learning competencies are perceived and used in the repertoire of managerial competencies. Thus, we first asked the respondents to identify key managerial competencies that lead to effective performance. We then asked them to rank these competencies when they make decisions. The findings allow us to compare what managers say (espoused theory) and do (theory-in-use) in relation to learning and related competencies and what roles they actually play in managerial decision-making.

Research method and analysis

A survey questionnaire, consists of 63 competencies, was designed and tested. To design the questionnaire, 56 managers across industries were invited to discuss managerial competencies and performance. The transcripts of interviews and discussions were content analysed and formed the basis for identifying the key managerial competencies and items to be included in the instrument. The questionnaire was pre-tested and its internal consistency was confirmed (Cronbach's alpha = 0.75). It was subsequently mailed to members of several management associations across the country. Of a total of 625 mailed questionnaires, 322 were completed and returned. The final count of useable questionnaires was 301 or 48%. The information on personal data indicates that the average respondent is male, around 35-55 years old, with at least 5 years of work experience. He is likely to have a bachelor degree in engineering or business and is working in construction/property or communication/information technology industry in the private sector. Categories with less than thirty cases of useable questionnaires were excluded from the final analysis so that plausible inferences can be made about the research variables (Sekaran, 1992; Gay and Diehl, 1992).

Mean score of items or elements for each factor was used to rate the perception of their importance. Two types of tests were performed on these mean scores at 5% significance level. The test of significance of variance was performed to determine whether respondents were drawn from a homogenous population. The Spearman's correlation test (used for ordered variables such as age and experience) and One-Way ANOVA test (used for unordered variables such as industry and title) showed no significant differences between the respondents, enabling the study to proceed without the need for separate analysis of each category. The factor pattern, in factor analysis, provided a fairly strong support for the robust structure of the instrument. Furthermore, paired sample T-test was performed for each pair of factors to group to gather competencies of similar importance. Finally, competencies that managers perceived important when making decisions were

ranked and compared.

Research findings

The factor analysis identified 13 competency clusters that managers perceive to be important in managerial performance. They are:

Communication: This factor includes competencies in communication, networking and learning clusters. It describes the manager's abilities to communicate effectively in order to build collaborative relationships with team members in and out of organisation.

Client-focused: The elements of this factor are highly correlated with managerial performance. It is argued that effective performance is measured, at least partly, by the quality of manager-customer relationships. The finding suggests that customers expect managers to consult, advise, listen and act on their specific needs and expectations.

Team-building: This factor emphasises the importance of team work to do a quality job. The competencies comprising this factor include the managers' abilities to motivate and build effective teams. However, they should also be seen as a team player and therefore part of the team. Such a perception requires the manager's proactive stance on resisting outside pressure on team members.

Managerial: This is a generic competency factor that correlates manager's effectiveness with their organisational and planning abilities. These skills, if performed effectively, can overcome many endemic organisational problems. Given that tasks are often performed sequentially, it is suggested that effective managers have an above-average ability to organise resources and plan ahead.

Learning-oriented: This finding implies that effective managers use learning curve to their advantage. They avoid past mistakes and reflect on their experience when making decisions. Argyris and Schon (1978) point out that to avoid repeating the same mistakes and improving organisational learning, the new information, theories or models should be embedded in organisational memory.

Coping with stress: This factor describes the personal characteristics of effective managers. Work is increasingly associated with complexity, paradoxes and conflicts and therefore, there are many stressful situations in which a manager is called upon to mediate and resolve disagreements. In these situations which sometimes lead to heated arguments and unprofessional behaviours, an effective manager should set an example by staying calm, composed and at the same time, decisive. This, however, does not imply that stress negatively affects performance. Tosi et al. (1994) suggests that moderate level of stress is likely to result in higher performance. Under low levels of stress, there is no challenge and boredom sets in because mental and/or physical skills are under-utilised.

Training and Development: This factor is related to the contribution that a manager makes in the personal and professional development of team members. Managers who spend time to coach team members to do their job and provide work challenges and opportunities to learn new skills, are highly regarded. This is the most effective way of learning and plays a critical role in creating a positive perception of managers among team members.

Self-confidence: A manager should possess strong leadership to achieve organisation and individual goals. Whether tasks faces a technical problem or interpersonal conflicts, the manager should use their technical, interpersonal or political skills to instil confidence in

members so that the tasks get done and work is moved forward. Leaders are often seen as being self-confident, assertive and decisive.

Persuasiveness: This is a key factor that also underlies leadership quality. It consists of persuasiveness, ability to influence and be politically-skilled. The core competency that these skills rest upon is effective communication which allows the manager to resolve interpersonal conflicts, to secure the commitment of organisation members, and to forge alliances with key team members.

Analytical: This factor lends support to the elements in the rational model of decision-making. The findings suggest that although managers are essentially people-oriented, they are required to make effective decisions to fulfil their control and integration functions. The ability to collect factual data, make informed decisions, and measure progress against milestones is a critical requirement for effective performance.

Control: Managers are not only goal-setters but should also ensure that tasks get done within organisation constraints and customer expectations. The findings emphasise that once goals and tasks are set or negotiated, managers should follow-up what has been agreed and promised. The evidence suggests that control, which is related to control and optimisation of resources, should also include human resources. Despite the negative connotation attached to the concept of 'controlling people', it is people who are responsible to carry out tasks (Skulmoski et al., 2000), and therefore any type of control is inherently about controlling people. However, control should not necessarily be a negative concept as it can be applied humanly and consensually.

Taking responsibility: This factor highlights the manager's primary organisational responsibility, which is the efficient and effective completion of tasks. Although managers' positional power may not match with what is expected of them, once they accept to do a job, they cannot pass on responsibility or blame others for failing to achieve job objectives. This attitude is often emphasised by managers when they use the adage 'the buck stops with me'. It reveals the managers' unique characteristic in believing in themselves and their abilities to meet expectations regardless of tough conditions or constraints.

Goal/Action: Managers' decisions and behaviours should always be seen in terms of their effects on achieving organisation goals. This is because tasks are initiated to fulfil specific needs and goals. In today's competitive world, managers' job is to ensure that tasks are accomplished in a manner that satisfies customer's needs. The action-orientation of managers underlies the propensity to achieve organisation goals.

Finally, respondents ranked the original management competency clusters to indicate the extent of their influence in actual managerial decision-making and organisation performance. Table 1 shows the mean score of each management cluster with 1 and 12 indicate the highest and lowest ranking respectively.

Table 1. Ranking of management competency clusters

Rank	Competency Cluster	Mean
1	Communication	3.23
2	Leadership	3.49

3	Client-focused	3.95
4	Goal/Action	5.17
5	Team-building	5.64
6	Interpersonal	5.97
7	Managerial	6.22
8	Negotiation	6.78
9	Technical	8.24
10	Networking	9.18
11	Training & Development	9.38
12	Learning	9.45

As the above table shows, the top ranking competency clusters, in order of importance, are communication, leadership and client-focused. Learning competencies appear to have little influence on managers' decisions. It is important to note here that more respondents ranked leadership as being the most important competency cluster, followed by communication, goal/action and client-focused clusters.

Discussion

Despite relatively low ranking of learning competencies compared to client-focused competencies, seeking the advice of experts and using past experience are perceived to be more important in effective performance than some of the more traditional managerial or interpersonal competencies. However, as noted previously, there are very few empirical studies which identify learning competencies, as performance competencies. In a rare study undertaken by Boyd and Robson (1996), it was found that poor record of performance is one of the key problems in construction industry. They argue that the industry needs the skills of reflection to form a learning base that can be used to promote innovation and change. It is evident that despite a greater awareness of importance of learning in competing more effectively, organisations continue to use traditional performance criterion, such as resource utility, rate of return on investment and market share to judge overall performance. Thus, what and how organisations learn seldom play a role in strategic decision-making or operational processes in most organisations. Gouthro (2004), CEO of a consulting firm, echoes many others in observing that 'you hear people talking about the virtues of the organisational learning at conferences, but when you go in and work with their organisation at different levels, you often find that the rhetoric and practice don't line up.'
There may be several reasons for an apparent discrepancy between the ideal of organisational learning and the actual efforts put in by managers to promote learning. First, organisational learning is currently facing a series of problems such as theoretical confusion and disorder (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999), probably because it's a natural part of the maturation process in a dynamic intellectual field. Similarly, management education is struggling to adjust to new intellectual and market demand (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Ellsworth, 1989). Second, as Jones (2001) argues, the temporary and stressful nature of most jobs makes it less amenable to learning. Third, since learning is a new competency construct, respondents might have been unfamiliar with the specific elements of the construct and their practical application. Fourth, findings may reflect market reality, which implies since most jobs are primarily driven by the

need to produce a product or system, managers see meeting customer's expectations and achieving organisation goals as the real yardsticks of effective performance. In this context, investment in learning which doesn't produce tangible results in short-term often attracts no or little support. In other word, organisational learning has no champion! Finally, our education system primarily uses positivist teaching strategies which are teacher – centred and textbook – based with the aim of imparting knowledge, not expanding learning. It provides very few opportunities for proactive and in-depth learning. It is therefore, a combination of performance pressure, vagueness of organisational learning models, absence of organisational culture inducive to learning, and underdevelopment of managerial soft skills that make learning workplace, at best, a distant reality. In conclusion, it may be suggested that as long as managers lack an understanding of the learning-based frame of mind and don't feel the need or sense the urgency of becoming a learning organisation, we shouldn't expect a significant positive effect on our organisation performance from the current learning debates and campaigns.

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