Creating Organizational Learning and Learning Organization: Management Experience in an Iranian University Library

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to explore the role of Organizational Learning (OL) and the Learning Organization (LO) approach in changing the insights, values and organizational behaviors. In this respect, the need for change is clarified. The definition of OL and LO and their role in change management is discussed. The application of these approaches in changing the scene of library organization is demonstrated by describing the management strategies applied in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad libraries. It shows how organizational learning and learning organization, which complement one another, can help develop relevant knowledge, better insights and attitudes of the people in an institution. Experience proves that this approach to management is capable of shaping the philosophies and values, changing the insights, ensuring support and improving the attitudes of librarians and university leading authorities.

INTRODUCTION

In the world of constant change, any organization has to be more dynamic. Learning is a key to ensure that the organization remains active and can manage change. If an organization acquires information about its successes, it does not bring about learning. Learning, which ends up changing behavior, is two fold, i.e., learning about success factors as well as failures, mistakes and errors. Argyris (1977 quoted in Malhotra

Keywords: e-learning; organizational learning; learning organizations
1996) pointed to this learning as a process of “detection and correction of errors.” This kind of learning takes actions, outcomes and feedbacks into consideration.

WHY DO ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO BE DYNAMIC?

Conventional organizations normally suffer from bureaucratic management. The employees have to work properly, because they are watched and they are told to work and they are directed how to work. Such a bureaucratic organization does not experience change because change will happen when there is creativity, problem solving and enthusiasm to work. But, in a dynamic organization each member is responsible to grow and help the development of its organization. According to Addleson (Addleson, 2001, 3), “employees and their knowledge, give the organization its capabilities”. Change is an obvious characteristic of the information age. Organizations need to be dynamic because they live in a competitive environment. Innovation, creativity and knowledge have been key capabilities in this competition. Individuals, therefore, and their knowledge and skills are considered value and capital for organizations and society at large.

WHAT IS A LEARNING ORGANIZATION (LO)?

A learning organization is an organization in which all its members value learning and are permanent learners. Senge, the author of “The Fifth Principle”, a well-known book in LO, has provided a comprehensive definition for LO:

“A learning organization is an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. For such an organization, it is not enough merely to survive. “Survival learning” [adaptive learning] is necessary. But for a learning organization, ‘adaptive learning’ must be joined by ‘generative learning,’ learning that enhances our capacity to create”. (Senge 1990, 14)

According to Watkins & Marsick, a learning organization is characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards values or principles (Watkins and Marsick 1992, quoted in Smith 2004).

Senge (1990) specifies the following principles for LO:

- Personal mastery
- Mental models
- Shared vision
- Team learning
- Systems thinking

The picture that Malhotra (1996, 2) provides for LO can reveal the above mentioned outcomes for an organization. He remarks that such organization has “ingrained philosophy for anticipating, reacting and responding to change, complexity and uncertainty”.

**WHAT IS ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING (OL)?**

OL emphasizes learning by doing. This logic can be inferred from the following quotation by McGill et al. (quoted in Malhotra 1996, 2). They define OL as the “ability of an organization to gain insight and understanding from experience through experimentation, observation, analysis, and a willingness to examine both successes and failures”. OL depends on the commitment of the manager to strategic management which is based on information and knowledge and provides the needed platform for OL. This relationship between strategic management and OL can be distinguished from four constructs that Huber (1991 quoted in Malhotra 1996) considers for OL. They are knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation, and organizational memory. The relationship between these constructs can be seen in the following figure. These constructs imply that OL is also a process. However, it provides infrastructure information for LO. Since change has a continuous nature, OL process has a dynamic nature.

![Fig.1: A mode of the constructs for Organizational Learning](image-url)
Learning Organization and Organizational Learning

OL provides the information infrastructure for LO. OL deals with why an organization needs changes and reform. LO shows how this change can happen. They are, therefore, two related components for change. Since libraries deal with information, they are the sort of organizations in which OL and OL can be employed effectively.

With respect to the significance of LO and OL in management and since strategic management was the approach used for the management of FUM (Ferdowsi University of Mashhad) Libraries, these two processes were employed in managing the FUM libraries. In this presentation a description in regard to how LO and OL were applied in management practice will be described. Five principles of Senge (1990) and four constructs of Hunter (quoted Malhotra 1996) are the underlying concepts in our discussion.

Ferdowsi University Libraries; Old Scenario

In 1997, when the author was appointed the University Librarian and the joint author the consultant to the Central Library of FUM, there were 10 faculty libraries and a Central Library. The number of libraries gradually increased to 14 in 4 years. There was only one professional librarian1 at the library of the faculty of Engineering. Before 1997 the director of the Central Library and the directors of other ten faculty libraries had no librarianship background. Most of the libraries’ activities focused on acquisitions, cataloging and lending. Nearly all faculty libraries had closed-stack systems in which there were limited services. Therefore, change did not seem to be critical to them. There were about 130 librarians in these libraries. Only 33% of them had high school degree and 41% had academic degrees many of whom did not have any librarianship background. They had attended short training courses in librarianship. About half of the total number of librarians worked at the Central Library. Cataloging and acquisition of library materials in Latin languages purchased by all these libraries were performed by the Central Library. In terms of management and library services, faculty libraries were independent and they worked under the control and supervision of the faculties. Cooperation, collaboration and team working, therefore, were not taken into consideration in most activities. Interlibrary loan, document delivery, extensive reference services were not the main concern of the libraries. User services in each library mostly relied on their own collection. Except for the Central Library, all faculty libraries had closed-stack systems.

1The professional librarian is a librarian who holds Masters of Library Science degree.
In order to change the scenario and promote the existing conditions, the following activities were performed. Although in all activities faculty libraries were also taken into consideration, since they were not under the supervision of the Central Library, most changes happened in this library.

Organizational Learning: A tool to create the new scenario

Since the strategic management was the approach used for managing FUM Libraries, a study of the libraries status, the university’s missions, vision and expectations was carried out in 1988. The following information was the result of this study:

- Several academics, many of whom graduated from Western universities or had spent their sabbatical leave in those universities, started their teaching activities in FUM. They expected FUM libraries to be more information service centers rather than closed-stack libraries.

- Since a huge amount of information sources were published in electronic format, users, expected to have access to those information. Therefore, libraries needed to be equipped with the necessary facilities to fulfill such expectations.

- Faculty members need to have access to information from remote places and to remote systems. The libraries, therefore, must turn into electronic libraries.

- For increasing access to information, closed-stack systems in libraries needed to turn to open stack, and extensive reference services in libraries should be provided.

- Because of the inflation and budget cuts, libraries were not able to purchase the same amount of information sources as they did in previous years. But, demand for more information and better services grew.

- The results from the above-mentioned study taught us the steps which must be taken.

ACQUISITION OF INFORMATION ABOUT FUM LIBRARIES

Based on the logic shown in figure (1), knowledge acquisition is the first layer of OL. OL deals with the knowledge about the organization’s missions, vision, objectives, shortcomings, facilities and opportunities. It also depends on knowledge acquired about environment. The study, therefore, needed to gather some information about these concepts. Findings proved that there are some opportunities in FUM:
the University authorities in general and the Chancellor and the Vice Chancellor for Research in particular were supportive in this respect. Most library staff, as mentioned earlier, were not library graduates. Team working and collaboration, even in some activities at the Central Library were not common. However, there was good will and enthusiasm among some librarians to learn and to be innovative.

The knowledge gained was analyzed and compared with professional principles, university missions, vision and academics’ expectations. What became clear was the need for reengineering of libraries. The results of the survey, submitted to the university provided a theoretical framework for the development of the libraries at FUM. A summary of the report was also distributed among the libraries. There was also a presentation by the authors about the results at the University Council.

**HOW THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION APPROACH WAS ACCEPTED AND BECAME A PART OF THE FABRIC OF THE PROFESSIONAL JOB**

In this part we try to wrap the discussion into five disciplines of LO proposed by Senge (1990). In each discipline, the endeavors which can support the logic of the discipline are described.

**Personal Mastery**

The first discipline is Personal Mastery. In the old scenario of FUM most library staff had limited knowledge and skills. Intrinsic motivation is a very important tool for continual self improvement, increasing capacity and motivation. To increase motivation in library staff, first of all we tried to convince them about the values for the organization. Several meetings and the Librarians’ annual meeting were arranged to discuss about the value of information, the value of library services and the critical role of librarians in the country’s development. In the First Annual Conference of FUM Librarians in 1998 which focused on “libraries’ role in enhancing teaching and research”, the University Chancellor and two academics talked about the importance of libraries and librarians in promoting the university life. In her speech the author also emphasized the librarians’ role in running the libraries. It was very hard to convince librarians that their ideas are important in making decisions about planning the libraries. The author, therefore, tried to show it in practice. We arrange regular meetings and discussed problems, and took various actions to raise motivation.

In two years a lot of technological events happened in the library. The university’s network took shape; the library network protocol changed; the software of the libraries was upgraded and developed a lot. Most purchasing an
communication between libraries and dealers and/or publishers were done electronically. Users expected librarians to provide electronic resources as well as printed ones. The librarians, therefore, realized that had to improve their skills and knowledge. Therefore, some training programs were performed, such as on the job training, regular summer workshops and preparing the journal of the Central Library entitled: "Journal of Information Services and Information Seeking Skills".

According to our experience and as quoted in an online article by Sugarman (1997, 7) “Humans have an innate drive to learn, an innate curiosity, seen in the child”. In the professions which deal with the provision of some kind of services, this desire can easily be seen. When the services provided is satisfactory, it brings about joy, happiness and job satisfaction.

**Mental Models**

This concept deals with Whys and Hows of the activities. At the end of each year, each section of the Central Library had to evaluate its activities and talk about the results at the last general meetings of the year. The mental models of speaker helped his/her to have confidence in expressing the ideas about the result and in audience (other librarians) to understand and share ideas. It was more encouraging when they had to compare the findings of one year with those of the previous year. Some of the ideas that led to the development of mental models are as follows:

- The library’s goals and objectives need to be based on the University’s mission,
- The library must be a good support for education and research at the university,
- Providing information access had to be the main concern for the libraries,
- Shared purchase, shared access, shared use and shared services were appropriate solutions for helping the University to overcome budget problems,
- Making users independent in accessing and using information is a part of the educational role of libraries;
- Evaluation of activities and duties against philosophies and theories would increase the insights and values and would help librarians realize their mistakes, shortcomings and gains. It also provides appropriate measures for improvement,
- Although users are very eager to have access to electronic sources, printed materials are still valuable sources of information; and
- If they shape their mental framework, they are capable to do the duties of the library in the right way, to base their discussions on scientific basis and to convince others, especially the University authorities, about their logic.
Realization of the importance of mental models in performing the activities is a behavior which is useful throughout, personal as well as professional life. The successes gained by this approach made us realize what Riggs stated (quoted in Hoadley 1999, 4) "it is impossible to develop new styles of organization and management while continuing to think in old ways".

**Shared Vision**

Since library staff in FUM had no regular contacts with each other and with other librarians outside the University, most of them did not have shared vision. If all members of the library are aware of the philosophy of their services, they all will have the same vision. To increase the mutual vision for library staff at FUM, first of all we provided some recognition about academic libraries' aims and objectives. To do this some meetings and discussions with staff were arranged, and guidelines for action were developed and communicated to the staff. Unlike the old scenario fulfilling the information needs of users was the main concern of these committees. Based on the guidelines developed by the committees, this philosophy was translated into action in the different activities of the library (such as in acquisitions, collection management, cataloging and user services). Some of the examples of related strategies are as follows:

**In Acquisitions and Collection Management**

Since the library software did not support acquisitions, Excel and Access were chosen as two software for running the acquisitions functions. Although the database which were created in this section were not remotely accessible, they made the acquisitions section capable of answering any question with regard to their activities and exchanging information and records. Interlibrary loan, document delivery and outreach services were among the new activities which were planned and implemented in this section. In terms of collection management, a committee for collection management was formed. Their decisions were based on users’ needs. The library staff learned that they should tailor their policies towards the users' needs and also learned how to turn policies into practice in the acquisitions section.

**In Cataloging**

To become familiar with users' needs, each cataloger spent one to two hours in the searching unit of the library. She/he observed how users searched and what she/he did with zero hits. As a result of this observation catalogers agreed to increase access to the content of documents by spending more time on the analysis of the content...
assigning more subject headings for the documents, use subject headings as well as thesaurus terms for assigning subjects, and other measures to improve access.

In information services

The actions initiated included:

a) Publication of brochures, booklets to provide information about the library and its services;

b) Publication of “The Journal of Information Services and Information Seeking Skills” which provided information and instruction about accessing and using information available in the libraries or on the Internet.

c) Designing the Web site\(^2\) of the Central Library. It was and still is an appropriate platform for accessing the available information in the library and on the Internet quickly and easily;

d) Designing and establishing help desk and a virtual reference desk\(^3\) to assist users who use the shelves or search the OPAC;

e) Extending the opening hours of the library

Team Learning

When a group of people think with each other, their knowledge, believes, and values are enhanced, and the process leads to collective wisdom.

As mentioned earlier, in the old scenario of FUM Libraries, library staff preferred to decide, plan and turn their decisions into practice. As it was hard to be successful without changing this approach, several other approaches were taken:

a) An acting committee including the heads of different sections of the Central Library was organized. Another consulting committee was formed. Most critical decisions were made with the cooperation of one or both of the above mentioned committees at the Central Library.

b) Some problems were discussed in the general meetings, where all staff of the library had the chance to talk and express their ideas.

c) Some activities based on group endeavors were also institutionalized, such as the publication of the “Journal of Information Services and Information Seeking Skills”. Most of the papers of this journal were prepared by the library staff.

\(^2\)http://c-library.um.ac.ir

\(^3\)info@ferdowsi.um.ac.ir
The most beautiful picture of team working was seen at conferences, book fairs, workshops, demonstrations of information access facilities at the University and user education and/or information literacy programs.

Through these activities, library staff learned that the wisdom of a group of people is much higher than the intelligence of one person (Heisenberg quoted in Senge 1991). They gradually learned team thinking and expressed their ideas in meetings.

**System Thinking**

This kind of thinking is the basis for team working. A system is “a set of components that work together for the overall objective of the whole” (quoted in Haines 2000: 33). System thinking provides a conceptual framework for employees to form the beliefs which form the basis for their activities. It “studies the organization as a whole in its interaction with its environment. Then, it works backwards to understand how each part of that whole works in relation to, and support of, the entire system objectives. Only then can the core strategies be formulated”. Learning achieved from this process is a good motivation for continuing this approach.

Despite the status of FUM Libraries in the old scenario, in which most librarians worked on their own, in the new scenario, interrelationship and interdependence should become the underling concern. As stated by McNamara (1999), the combination of several strategies can ensure organizational change and development including strategic management, staff development, performance management, user satisfaction, etc. These can effectively be performed if the manager and all the staff have a good understanding of the whole system of an organization. We tried to follow this method of thinking in FUM Libraries by taking the following approach:

a) The result of the survey of FUM Libraries showed that the integration of libraries can ensure their development. This was shown by a model in which all libraries were considered a system. However, this suggested model was not implemented because decentralization was the policy that the University decided to follow in all departments and sections. This policy was in contrast with the system thinking approach that libraries as an integrated whole must follow. In comparison to other parts of the University, it made more problems for libraries, because, as mentioned earlier, there was just one professional librarian in 10 faculty libraries. Without professional knowledge the semi-independent libraries could not work properly.
b) In order to encourage employees to work as a team or have the shared vision, system thinking should become a norm. To do this, first of all a picture of the environmental changes must be provided for them and the University's aims and objectives must be analyzed. Since, about fifty percent of librarians were non-professional librarians and had long job experience, it was very hard for them to believe that environmental changes and organizational interdependence to the environment is necessary. Therefore, they should hear about these concepts from the university authorities. At the First Annual Conference of FUM Librarians, as mentioned earlier, the University Chancellor and academics were invited to have their speech. In their presentations, they focused on these concepts and provided a picture of the University’s expectations from the librarians. Discussions of the panel at the end of this conference which was run by the academic staff of the Department of Library and Information Studies acknowledged librarians with how to answer those expectations.

c) Based on the logic that if librarians must assume their library and organization as a system, the manager must show them that he/she relies on system thinking, we tried to look at librarians as members of the system who had equal rights. We believed that if one library, i.e., the Central Library, changed, it did not mean that change happened at FUM Libraries, rather, change must happen in each librarian’s behavior and in all libraries. All librarians, therefore, were welcome and encouraged to participate in annual conferences, in presentations and in workshops, to attend book fairs, to write articles for the library journal and to prepare other publications necessary for the libraries. They all were taught to teach academics, to run the committee of each faculty library⁴, etc.

d) At the general meeting of the Central Library and at the meetings of special committees discussions circled around what policies, as parts of a general whole, should libraries formulate and what should librarians do. The guidelines prepared for each library activity provided an appropriate basis for these policies. Documenting criteria for outreach services and related costs and contracts for document delivery, etc. were other policies.

⁴ These committees aimed at being a consultation committee for each faculty library in collection management and user services. Their voice support libraries against the policies of a faculty. The member of these committees were the head of the faculty library and general manager of the library, a member of each discipline in a faculty and deputy manager of education of the faculty.
WHAT WAS LEARNED FROM OL AND LO

After five years, the situation of the FUM Libraries showed that the behavior of most librarians has changed a lot. They believed that they should improve their services and they tried to do that by organizing user education programs and information technology classes for users. In discussions about the libraries’ role in the University’s life, they used academic language based on theories of library science and they based their logic on university’s mission and with these approaches they became more powerful in asking about the budget for libraries or employing professional librarians. They learned and they used their learning. This is what we needed: the application of their knowledge in everyday life of libraries.

For us as director and consultant of the FUM Libraries, this approach provided a rewarding knowledge. Through OL, we empowered ourselves with needed knowledge about the aims, policies, expectations and future direction of the University, as well as opportunities, shortcomings and direction to which we should lead our libraries. Through LO, we learned that if we look strategically to our duties, respect staff and consider their needs for development, follow the direction and expectation of the University authorities and users, have an eager and enthusiasm for development and rely on philosophies, we can achieve success. However, we also learned that, according to system thinking, if the University does not have the same approach as we have in running the libraries, it would threaten the relations among the different parts of a system and the goals and objectives cannot be achieved properly.

REFERENCES