

A MODEL OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN SAUDI PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES: LEADERSHIP ROLE

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Abstract

This paper tries to present a model of learning organization for Saudi public universities in term of activating the role of their leaders in building the dimensions of such form of organization. The suggested model is based on the findings of some previous studies (Abu-Khdeer, 2007; Osami, 2008), and the research conducted by the author of this paper in (2014). The general idea of the suggested model is to unfreeze the mindset of leadership of Saudi public universities regarding the concept of learning organization and its dimensions, and creating a vision and organizational culture and process based on learning and staff development. In the light of this model, six building blocks are need by Saudi public universities to activate the role of their leaders in building learning universities, these blocks are: transformational leadership style, knowledge workers, flat structures, supportive learning climate, learning-based reward systems, lean methodology based on empowerment.

Introduction

In today's organizations, learning and its application have become the basic components and pillars of growth, survival and success. The dynamic changes of the surrounding environment, organizational learning has become an urgent need, and not an option for many contemporary organizations of all types and sizes. The relationship between organizational learning and organizational performance which focused previously on the prevalent argument that "organizational performance is a product of organizational learning in yesterday" began to take a new trend that requires aware of how to achieve high levels of integration and collaboration between the past and the present in the light of future visions, which consolidates the spirit of organizational learning and reflected positively on the performance. In this context, many contemporary organizations began to work tirelessly to prepare leaders with insight into working on the consolidation of the dimensions and the main pillars of learning, and constantly seek to consolidate a culture of learning, and work towards the entrenchment of practices and applications that support organizational learning. As these organizations become aware of the importance of shifting towards the concept of learning organizations, which requires the expansion and deepening of knowledge continuously, as a means for behavior modification and development, they give more attention and concern to the basic dimension of learning organization that is related basically to the "leadership". In this context, leadership development represents the basic pillar for organizations to achieve a flexible transition toward learning organization and without any substantial impediments. Accordingly, leadership can play a pivotal role in strengthening the dimensions of learning organization and its practices.

Recently, the higher education sector in the Arab world in general, and Saudi Arabia in particular, has witnessed many changes such as: the rapid expansion of universities, a growing number of students and the emergence of new patterns of learning, in addition to the requirements of academic accreditation and improve educational services. These changes have created an urgent need for higher education institutions in Saudi Arabia toward the adoption of the concepts and practices that demonstrate the concept of learning organization and its dimensions, through the provision of leadership that believes in this concept and seeks to continuously consolidate its dimensions. Accordingly, this paper comes to shed light on the role of leaders in Saudi public universities in building learning organization, based on the results of previous studies, and tries to suggest a model that may enhance this role.

Conceptual Framework

Learning Organization

In a complicated and variable environment of today world, the learning organization concept is one of the most modern concepts in the context of organizational development and human resource development (Song et al., 2009). According to Peter Senge (2006), two kinds of organizations will be in future; those who have failed and will be vanished gradually and the second group are learning organizations. There is no consensus among researchers and scholars on the definition of learning organization, there are varied definitions of this concept among them, according to their differences in philosophical orientation and the nature of experience and expertise and disciplines to which they belong. In light of Senge's belief, learning can be enhanced with the knowledge, experience and new skills, in the light of this belief, he defines the learning organizations as "those organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together" (Senge, 2006: 3). Watkins and Marsick (2003) believe that learning organization seeks continuously to learn and move toward all that is new, through the adoption of an integrated strategy to work through participatory learning in order to improve the organization's ability to innovate and grow. Gardiner and Whiting (1997) believe that most successful organizations are the learning organizations so that centrality of new paradigm is "learning ". According to Garvin and Others (2008), the organization, which has its place of excellence in knowledge creation, acquisition and transfer is a learning one, and can be achieved through the provision of three fundamental building blocks, namely: the internal environment supporting learning processes, and the processes and practices of concrete function of learning, in addition to the behavior of a leadership supported and enhanced these processes and practices. Therefore, a learning organization is able to exploit the personal skill impeded in employees' intellectual and mental energies, and able to create shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking to achieve organizational goals (Jacobs, 2012).

Through the above definitions, we can say that the learning organization is the organization that is able to develop future vision, regulatory contexts, strategies, and work activities that promoting and strengthening of organizational learning. This can be done through the process of knowledge creation, acquisition, and transfer in collective and participatory manner, as well as by enhancing the capabilities of self-development, in the light of the data and deliberate shifts to rapid changes in the environment and the challenges related to this.

Organizational Learning Perspectives

Numerous management perspectives try to determine the dimensions of the learning organization, and the following are the most prominent of these perspectives:

System Perspective: this perspective based on idea of a holistic view of the organization and its interaction and response with the internal and external environment. Among the most prominent pioneers of this perspective, the researcher and thinker Peter Senge, who believes that the organization must possess an adaptive capacity with its environment, and develop a set of alternatives for the future in order to survive and grow, as well as the creation of shared visions and perceptions between members of the organization to achieve high degrees of harmony and coordination of efforts are basic requirements (Senge, 2006). Senge has identified five dimensions of learning organization, these dimension are: personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking (Senge, 2006).

Learning Perspective: in light of this perspective, learning organization can be viewed as an organization that facilitates the learning process for all its members, and strives continuously to achieve its strategic objectives through creating intended processes of change and transformation. Pedler and Others (1991) identified an eleven cornerstones that must be available in learning organizations, these cornerstones are: learning through building strategies, participatory decision-making processes, shared information system, control systems, transparent accountability, internal information exchange system, flexible rewards systems, organizational structures that support learning, environmental scans through specialized groups, organizational learning, organizational climate that support learning, and entrench the principles of self-development for all.

Strategic Perspective: this perspective has been emphasized the importance of strategic factors in building the organization's learning capacity. Garvin and Others (1993) stress on the importance of knowledge creation, acquisition, and transfer that is obtained organizationally, and the process of behavior modification in accordance with this knowledge. On the other hand, Gho (1998) believes that leader's skills and capabilities play a vital role in building efficient and effective learning organization (Gho, 1998).

Integrative Perspective: this perspective was developed by the work of Watkins and Marsick. They identified seven dimensions for the learning organization, these dimension are (Watkins and Marsick, 1996): create continuous learning opportunities, promote inquiry and dialogue, encourage collaboration and team learning, establish systems to capture and share learning, empower people toward a collective vision, connect the organization to its environment, use leaders who model and support learning at the individual, team, and organizational levels. In light of these dimensions, Watkins and Marsick developed "The Dimension Of Learning Organization Questionnaire", which is a tool to measure the dimensions of learning in the context of learning organizations.

This questionnaire is universally accepted and widely used among researchers. It contains (43) statements to measure the dimensions of the learning organization. This measure has achieved a high reliability in studies conducted in the Western and Arab contexts (Fry and Griswold, 2003; Song et al., 2009).

The Role of Leader in Building Learning Organization

In the absence of participatory leadership style with the appropriate skills and abilities, the transition toward learning organization becomes elusive (Marquardt, 2002; Nafei et al., 2012). All dimensions of learning organization identified by Watkins and Marsick is based heavily on the leadership. Leadership plays a significant role in drawing the right mechanisms to facilitate the process of continuous learning for individuals and teams, and managing the process of change and development as the basic requirements of learning organization establishment (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006).

Senge (2006) has pointed out that leaders are the real tool for organizations to shift from traditional form into learning form. In a learning organization, leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. 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... Learning organizations will remain a 'good idea'... until people take a stand for building such organizations. Taking this stand is the first leadership act, the start of inspiring (literally 'to breathe life into') the vision of the learning organization (Senge 2006: 340). Marquardt (2002) expanded these roles to become seven one, and should have been represented by the leaders in the twentieth century, these roles are (Marquardt, 2002): system thinkers, change agent, innovator and risk taker, servant, polychromic coordinator, teacher, mentor, coach and learner, and visionary and vision-builder.

We can note from the aforementioned roles, that all dimensions for building a learning organization are closely linked to leadership roles and practices. As can be seen through these roles, the major challenge faced by the leadership in learning organizations is related to their ability to meet the needs and requirements of learning. And the fact that the learning process is characterized by dynamism and continuity; it creates a pressure upon leaders to be more committed to provide permanent supportive organization climates that support the learning processes. Thus, the true role of leadership in learning organization lies in its ability to develop and create mechanisms and methodologies for: strategic thinking, formation of shared visions and organizational values, and finding the motives that stimulate everyone to learn.

The primary significance of the role of leadership in learning organizations based on increasing the organization's ability to interact and benefit from the accumulated expertise through the construction of effective learning methodologies. In light of environmental changes and competitiveness, it is not enough and no longer for organization to adopt solutions and innovations from a limited number of individuals occupied the higher level positions. According to this fact, transformational leadership becomes a crucial requirement for building learning organizations. In addressing this new style of leadership, every individual in the organization should have the opportunity of participation and interaction with leadership roles, and to develop their skills to become a leader. In the framework of this concept, leaders work to build common interests with individuals to gain access to a shared collective vision through the development of symbiotic relationships (Barbutto and Burbach, 2006).

In sum, the basic requirement to start building a learning organization is linked with the leaders' conviction of the dimensions, concepts and values that underlie learning organizations, and how are ready to exert the efforts to achieve the requirements of building this form of organization.

Suggested Model

Based on the results of previous studies conducted in the Saudi public universities in the subject of learning organization (See Abu-Khdeer, 2007; Osami, 2008), and the research conducted by the author of this paper in (2014) titled by “the role of leaders in Saudi public universities in building learning organizations from employees’ point of views”, a model is suggested to overcome the main obstacles that face the role of leaders in these universities in building learning organization. The most salient findings of the author’s study (2014) was that leaders in Saudi public universities play a moderate role in building their universities according to the seven dimensions of learning organization developed by Watkins and Marsick , and all of these dimensions were below the international standards. According to the results of this study, the researcher recommends to build a model for activating the roles of leaders in these universities in the field of building the dimensions of learning organization. So, this paper comes to respond to this recommendation by suggesting a model for achieving this purpose.

This model shows present situation of Saudi public universities in terms of learning organization dimensions, as well as the role of leaders in this context. The general idea is to unfreeze the mindset of leadership of Saudi public universities regarding the concept of learning organization and its dimensions, and creating a vision and organizational culture based on learning and staff development.

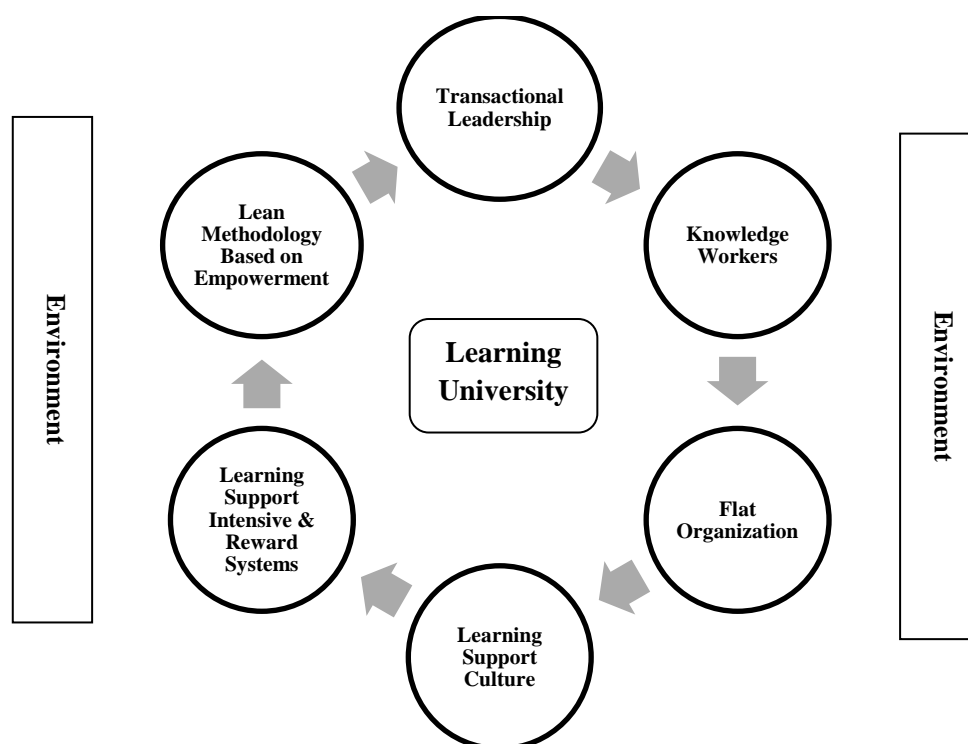


Figure 1. Model Of Activating The Role Of Leaders In Building Learning Organization At Saudi Public Universities

To implement this suggested model presented in Figure (1), Saudi public universities needs to shift their leadership style from the traditional style to transformational one. This shifting in leadership style will urge followers (employees) to access a high level of thinking by adhering the values and ideals impeded by the shared vision. This will induce the followers to develop new ways of thinking. To support this, knowledge worker practices should be promoted. Knowledge worker is one of the pillars of suggested model, because these workers will be able to share information, and always try to develop their knowledge and skills, and strive to acquire new way of doing things to mastery of their jobs. Those workers will be important and influential in the progress of learning in near future.

A traditional organizational structure in Saudi public universities will not be longer valid to support their shifting toward learning organization. In this regard, Saudi public universities should make efforts to shift toward flat organizational structure. This can be achieved through the establishment of semi-independent organizational units under the name of (knowledge centers). These centers can play a significant role in transmitting the reports, information and knowledge, policies and ideas from other units to senior management, which plays its role in determining the most appropriate one.

Therefore, these centers are considered as a linkage points between all the elements of the system, and as a source of information and knowledge to be shared, published, and distributed among employees and departments. In addition, organizational culture must be revised in term of its role in support learning. Incentives and rewards systems in Saudi public universities need to be re-examining to make them more closely related to organizational learning.

As can be seen from the suggested model, lean methodology is a requirement in activating the role of leaders in Saudi public universities in building learning universities. This methodology to be valid needs to be based on the principles of empowerment. This approach can enable employees to change or modified or delete operations and activities that have no value-added for all internal and external targeted groups, through the active participation of all staff. Finally, for the suggested model to be effective, environmental analysis needs to play a source of information and data for the leaders in Saudi public universities. The study of the impact of environment factors on the activities and operations of these universities need to be considered in decision making process, and provide feedback to employees about the relevant information they need.

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