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Context related learning opportunities for individual and organizational improvement in learning organizations

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Introduction

In this issue, we take the contingency approach and examine learning opportunities that are context related. The fact that it is not entirely clear which circumstances prompt an organization to engage in a specific way of learning is still provoking interest from academics and expert practitioners (Gnyawali and Stewart, 2003). It is, however, clear that learning is contingency dependent and influenced by the environment. The rate of change in the environment today affects equally profit and not for profit organizations in the attempts to balance between their internal needs and environmental circumstances. It is important to take the contingency approach and identify situational variables necessary for good management of learning. Several research has previously pointed to contingency related learning behavior. For example, Wijnhoven (2001) identified four learning needs levels defined by organizational environmental complexity and dynamics.

In this issue, we examine learning opportunities that lead to individual and organizational learning and development in the context of military education (Antonacopoulou *et al.*, 2020), risk and wrongdoing management (Schmidt, 2020), introduction of lean production principles through the lens of intergenerational differences (Tortorella *et al.*, 2020), project-based work (Rose *et al.*, 2020) and in the socio-cultural context of Latin America and the Caribbean (Santos *et al.*, 2020).

Perspective of learning opportunities within learning organizations

Learning opportunities are best harvested within learning organizations. For the sake of better understanding learning opportunities within learning organizations, the concept of learning organization should be defined or at least conceptualized first. One of the best ways to do that is to explore conceptualizations of learning organizations by the most prominent thought leaders in this field. Reese and Sidani (2020) provided such an overview by summarizing the interviews they had with Victoria Marsick and Karin Watkins (Sidani and Reese, 2018a), Bob Garratt (Sidani and Reese, 2018b), Michael Marquardt (Reese and Sidani, 2018) and Peter Senge (Reese, 2020). For instance, Marquardt focused on the levels of

learning and the expected outcome in the definition of a learning organization as an organization in which there is learning "at all levels to adapt and succeed with the environment that continually changes" (Reese and Sidani, 2018).

Garratt was more specific about learning and identified action learning as "the essential and intuitive way to learn," pointing to two skills that a learning organization should master: learning continuously and providing direction for learning and development (Sidani and Reese, 2018b). Action learning is an activity that happens at the individual level. However, mere learning while doing would not lead to much learning or at least would not lead to significant improvements unless it is followed and supported by reflection based on critical thinking. It is important to note that reflection and critical thinking in learning organizations happen on the individual level but they are also a group and collective responsibility. This opinion was also provided by Garratt who stated that learning requires "joint ownership and joint responsibility" (Sidani and Reese, 2018b). Group reflection in an atmosphere of trust and respect is key in providing change through critical thinking.

Based on the previous statement, another key learning organization constituent should be identified: learning culture. This aspect was apostrophized by Marsick and Watkins who put more emphasis on the importance of a learning culture than on "specific behaviors or 'action imperatives'" (Sidani and Reese, 2018a). This is quite expected as learning behavior cannot be prescribed. Every learning opportunity is different and could be approached by a different behavior. However, any behavior would result in a learning outcome if it is supported by a learning culture that stimulates dialogue, reflection, critical thinking, failure tolerance, openness, trust and respect. The result of learning is knowledge which in the learning organization is applied with the purpose to ensure organization's viability and development.

Finally, a learning organization could be defined as an organization in which individuals as organizational agents learn while their knowledge is coded in the organizational memory and specific organizational behavior reflected in specific routines or systems, processes, procedures, rules and business practice. A learning organization is *not* an organization in which there are random opportunities for individual learning in terms of individual training programs without a systematic effort to codify that knowledge and embed it in organizational routines. On the other hand, workplace learning is very important and key in learning organizations. From that perspective, it should be stated that a learning organization is an organization in which individual learning is a continuous process, strategically determined, integrated in work tasks but also parallel with them, systemically led and integrated in the systems of organizational memory.

Although the concept of the learning organization could now be technically clear, one key aspect is still missing. Individuals in learning organizations are gathered around a certain organizational mission which resonates with their own aspirations regarding personal mastery and growth. That is why the conceptualization by Senge as a founder of the learning organization movement should be mentioned again. He stated that learning organizations are 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 how to learn together (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

A learning organization is therefore an organization in which collective aspirations strongly resonate on the individual level making work and learning challenging but enjoyable contributing to organizational but also personal growth and transformation.

Learning in military education

In this issue, Antonacopoulou *et al.* (2020) continued to examine the possibilities of developing an education institution as a learning organization. The examined organization was the Royal Norwegian Air Force Academy whose mission is to educate military learning leaders across the faculty, officers and cadets. These efforts contribute to the development of organizational leadership in the defense sector in Norway and in other NATO members according to the VUCA requirements (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity). In that way education, as the catalyst for transformation (Haugrud *et al.*, 2001), can contribute to ensuring readiness, resilience and ability of defense actions.

Antonacopoulou *et al.* (2020) focused on the importance of reflexivity and reflection on the individual level, which contributes to the growth of military leaders, as well as on the organizational level, pointing to the need of collective reflection or institutional reflexivity by which the awareness of the self and the situational contingencies become the precondition for responsible action. On the individual level, this approach contributes to the development and nourishment of individual virtues or character qualities, whereas on the organizational level the outcome could be a highly agile organization.

Antonacopoulou *et al.* (2020) especially emphasized the importance of learning leadership, which promotes diversity and heterogeneity. Learning leadership especially promotes mutual respect, collaboration and reflexive practice in which organizational members critique each other for the sake of individual and collective learning. Learning leadership can also enhance attentiveness as the state of mind to proactively look for problems and suggest solutions. This process can be useful in detecting tensions and transforming them into creative power of creating new solutions. In addition, this process could enable timely anticipation of negative processes and their impact on organizational members and the organization as a whole. In this way, the focus is turned to learning, growth and development and not on continuous evaluation and control. What is key in this approach is the necessity to achieve the state of appreciation in which every member of the learning group feels that they are welcome to contribute but also to seek response from others in terms of gaining new understanding and learning.

Risk and wrongdoing management as learning opportunities

Risk management and wrongdoing prevention serve as fruitful learning opportunities for both the organization in question and for all involved stakeholders. It is important to establish a culture of prevention and early detection of any wrongdoings, which is also an opportunity for early detection of learning opportunities that could enable transformation of organizational routines and behaviors toward a more beneficial outcome. These problems have been addressed by Schmidt (2020). Schmidt (2020) used the Committee of Sponsoring Organizations framework of the Treadway Commission as a standard for approaches in risk management. This framework consists of multiple dimensions and is based on 17 principles in total.

However, Schmidt (2020) identified that learning and knowledge management are missing from the framework, which means that knowledge gained in the process of control is not transferred to the stakeholders to help prevent, identify and manage wrongdoings. That means a more comprehensive approach to risk management and wrongdoing prevention is needed. Information and knowledge regarding the effectiveness of response to wrongdoing and its prevention could serve as a valuable input for all stakeholders to modify and adapt their behavior. Knowledge transfer regarding detrimental consequences of wrongdoing is also necessary to enhance individual and organizational adjustments and development. Storytelling could be one example of effective knowledge transfer regarding

wrongdoing practices and its prevention and management. However, for the wrongdoing resolution and prevention to be effective, the processes of learning and knowledge transfer should encompass all relevant stakeholders of a particular situation.

Learning in the conditions of introducing lean production principles

Lean production is a process which rests upon experimentation and learning of engaged employees and management (Spear, 2009). Since lean production assumes intensive problem-detection and problem-solving activities regarding the value adding process, learning and knowledge sharing lie at its core. However, in the process of experimentation, learning and learning based problem-solving conflicts could emerge which could be based, among other things, on intergenerational differences. This problem has been addressed by Tortorella *et al.* (2020).

Tortorella *et al.* (2020) have collected data from 135 leaders belonging to various age groups and serving in manufacturing companies that have implemented the principles of lean management for a minimum of five years. This approach was motivated by the consensus in the literature that there are specific types of generations of people which differ regarding their behavior and inclination toward motivational mechanism and approach to learning (Burch and Smith, 2019). Intergenerational conflicts can hamper not only learning but also knowledge exchange and transfer, which could pose a threat to organizational survival and progress. As modern business and organizational life in general predominantly relies on intensive interactions, intergenerational clashes and misunderstandings could prevent the fruition of any development and change initiatives.

Lean production and management is especially affected by intergenerational relations because experimentation, reflection and learning regarding the design of the value adding process is based on the favorable learning context which stimulates good interpersonal and intergenerational relations that promote reflexive dialogue and critique. In other words, implementation of the lean production principles assumes the development of learning organization features, which could be understood and sustained differently by different generations of employees. In this regard, Tortorella *et al.* (2020) attempted to provide answers to the question how different generations provide to the development of a learning organization in companies implementing principles of lean production.

For starters, Tortorella *et al.* (2020) confirmed that the implementation of lean production principles entails the development of a learning organization according to the seven learning organization dimensions offered by Kim and Marsick (2013). For example, as the implementation of lean production progresses, the culture that fosters problem-solving is enhanced and systematic reflection increases. However, contrary to the initial assumption, the results were not significantly different for individuals belonging to different generations, except for the dimension regarding technological systems that enable capturing and sharing of knowledge and which are integrated with tasks.

Interestingly, Tortorella *et al.* (2020) found that members of the generations Y and Z working in companies that more intensively implemented lean production principles supported the learning organization characteristics more strongly compared to the individuals working in organizations with a lesser emphasis on lean production. It is even more striking that no differences were found for members of the generation X regardless of the intensity of implementing lean production principles in their organizations. For instance, all generations (X, Y and Z) showed a strong preference for the dimension regarding the necessity to connect the organization with its environment when their companies implemented lean production principles more intensively.

In this way, it could be determined that the joint mission-led activity governed by a certain set of principles has a stronger effect on individual behavior than generational characteristics. This conclusion points to the importance of leaders as designers and maintainers of a certain value system of an organization which has the power to transform individual behavior. By socializing and sharing the same goals, individuals feel the need to join forces toward their completion. This is especially the case in organizations which operations are based on continuous PDCA cycles that also call for tight individual cooperation, which is the case with lean production. In addition, values of learning organizations also call for tighter collaboration in learning, knowledge sharing and implementing knowledge in the value-creation process. That is why in organizations operating in dynamic environments to which they respond with networked and flexible organizations based on empowerment, individuals' value systems stemming from certain generational backgrounds tend to be overridden. Considering the fact that people acting as employees are dependent on organizations for their survival, this finding should not come as a surprise.

Project-related individual and organizational learning

Project-related individual and organizational learning deserves special attention because of challenges in retaining and implementing knowledge after the project has been completed. Project work is gaining in momentum in the world characterized by rapid changes. However, project work is highly unpredictable, unstructured and abundant in experimentation and exploratory learning. While engaged in project work, practitioners are more focused on the task completion then on knowledge codification and documentation, preventing its usage on other occasions, which could contribute to organizational development. Despite high intensity learning, project work could actually contribute to organizational amnesia (Grabher, 2004) and knowledge loss, especially if key project members leave. For organization to gain maximum benefits from project work, it is necessary to implement mechanisms that foster knowledge transfer but also knowledge retention.

However, these processes are based on the assumption that knowledge can be shared and codified. That is true for explicit knowledge, while implicit knowledge requires more effort in the process of sharing. Knowledge codification and storage means that project members reflect on the essence of what they have learned and reach consensus about the meaning. When knowledge is subject to various interpretations, as is often the case with implicit knowledge, knowledge sharing is difficult and consensus is difficult to reach when it comes to its codification. However, when learning is understood as a social activity as suggested by the social learning framework (Hartmann and Dorée, 2015), knowledge is shared through forms of socializing such as storytelling. Storytelling includes personal interpretation of a situation but, besides its content, includes the description of the context of the situation, which enables critical thinking on the part of the recipients but also implementation of insights gained in that way in later similar occasions.

Despite the consensus, it is important and valuable to retain the knowledge gained in project work, which might not happen for several reasons. Besides differences in interpretation, project members might be eager to move on to new projects, which could mean that they might consider documenting lessons learned a waste of time (Newell and Edelman, 2008). They may also lack incentive in terms of time allowed for such work but also due to the lack of praise and benefits. They could also lack motivation to document their insights if management never showed appreciation for results, which could make insights gained less valuable for them. In addition, if during the work on the project members failed

on numerous occasions, they might be reluctant to document such mistakes for the fear of poor performance evaluations (Ajmal and Koskinen, 2008). However, that particular knowledge could be very important for future work so that other people do not make the same mistakes. Many times members may be reluctant to codify knowledge because they may not know which structure would be suitable for that purpose. The lack of procedural framework could therefore also hinder the codification process.

In this regard, Rose et al. (2020) analyzed the process of organizational learning based on project work for inclusive teaching training at a German University. They used 4I framework designed by Crossan et al. (1999) to examine organizational learning based on project work as it enables conceptualization of learning on individual, group and organizational levels. This framework presents four socio-psychological processes of intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing through which individual learning becomes embedded in group practices and eventually contributes to organizational learning. However, the model is circular so organizational learning contributes to further individual learning and the cycle continues on a new level.

Learning within that particular project also predominantly resulted in the tacit knowledge gained through interpersonal interactions. Participants gained insight, discussed and reflected on how these ideas could be implemented in teaching and research, which refers to collective interpreting and integrating knowledge. Rectorate and department heads further added legitimacy to project results, which enabled wider institutionalizing of insights and knowledge gained through the project work. Institutions procedures such as annual award for inclusion-oriented teaching as well as curriculum changes toward a stronger focus on inclusion further strengthened institutionalization of such knowledge. However, knowledge transfer and codification proved to be problematic as they generated pressure to follow rules and procedures, which moved focus from learning and social interactions. The problem was solved by introducing facilitatory leadership style, which further stimulated social interactions, reflection and learning.

Learning in different socio-cultural contexts

In their paper, Santos et al. (2020) identified main themes regarding organizational learning and learning organization in papers focusing on the socio-cultural context of Latin America and the Caribbean. In general, knowledge on organizational learning and learning organizations is predominantly based on research conducted by North American and European researchers. Every organization is embedded in a specific socio-cultural context and is being influenced by it while simultaneously influencing its further development. However, other geographical areas might have certain specific socio-cultural conditions that could shape organizational practice relative to forming learning organizations and organizational learning differently than in other regions.

Latin America and the Caribbean is a large geographical area with more than 600 million people. Santos et al. (2020) detected four main themes in publications concentrating on this area: learning; innovation and improvement; knowledge and knowledge management; culture and leadership; and entrepreneurship and sustainability. In general, in these papers organizational learning was considered to be a dynamic process occurring on individual, group and organizational levels.

Practitioners from this area could benefit from the paper by Santos and Steil (2015) who analyzed organizational learning in a Brazilian university and identified political and power aspects as key elements for understanding organizational learning in public organizations. However, similar to research on organizational learning and learning organizations in Western countries, these topics are mostly related to corporate sector and its performance

requirements. Corporate performance is often related to quality and innovation, which is also of central importance for learning organizations, so Araujo *et al.* (2015) dealt with total quality management and innovation. Molina and Callahan (2009) proposed a model that they called "intrapreneurship learning" in which they related individual and organizational learning with intrapreneurship, apostrophizing the role of individuals as organizational agents for learning and change. In this regard, Gomez and Ranft (2003), on the sample of manufacturing firms in Mexico, identified human resource management practices that contribute to the successful learning. Sanz-Valle *et al.* (2011) addressed organizational culture as a known factor that could contribute to learning and found that while organizational culture can support organizational learning, it could also be a barrier to learning and innovation. In the light of current environmental and climate concerns, Gavronski *et al.* (2012) addressed the relationship between organizational learning and environmental technologies in terms of pollution prevention and control.

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Further reading

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