

# Develop and support leaders who promote organizational learning

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## Introduction

This issue contains papers on leadership that facilitates organizational learning. Based on these papers' findings, this paper presents implications to support organizational learning, primarily from a leadership perspective.

## Leaders should have a bird's-eye view of the entire organizational learning process

Hekneby and Olsen (2024) examined the role of leaders in organizational learning. To this end, they longitudinally analyzed the organizational learning process in a multinational company (MNC) and clarified how the MNC solved various problems and achieved sustainable growth. In their analysis, the *4I* (intention, interpretation, integration and institutionalization) framework of organizational learning (Crossan et al., 1999) was referred to.

Hekneby and Olsen (2024) argued that the organizational learning process is composed of the following three subprocesses, each of which has roles for leaders to play. The first subprocess is *experimenting*. This corresponds to the *intuiting* and *interpreting* phases in the *4I* framework (Crossan et al., 1999). According to Hekneby and Olsen (2024), the leader's role in this process is like that of an orchestra conductor. In addition, actions such as empowerment, building participatory organizations and reducing the distance between operations and staff are taken. In the second subprocess, *transferring*, the outcomes of experimenting are diffused to individual offices. This corresponds to the *integrating* phase in the *4I* framework. In this subprocess, a unit specializing in knowledge transfer is established, and knowledge transfer programs are evaluated. The leader's role here is *sponsoring*, i.e. resource allocation and financial support. The third subprocess is *institutionalizing*, which corresponds to *integrating* in the *4I* framework. In this subprocess, it is necessary to construct a mechanism to internalize learning outcomes and encourage future experimentation. Here, leaders must have persistence to promote institutionalizing.

Further important findings of this study are as follows: Leadership not only encourages and facilitates each of the abovementioned subprocesses, but also supports the transition of organizational learning from one subprocess to the next. Thus, leaders are not only passively fulfilling their roles in each subprocess, but they must proactively drive the organizational learning process.

Let us compare leaders' roles in an organizational learning process, as found by Hekneby and Olsen (2024), with those in traditional leadership theory. Leadership theory often contrasts two types of leadership: transformational and transactional. *Transformational*



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*leaders* are charismatic leaders who lead their organizations and teams to change with passion and vision. *Transactional leaders*, on the contrary, seek to elicit individual contributions by rewarding or punishing members according to their successes or failures.

According to [Hekneby and Olsen \(2024\)](#), the roles of the leader are not limited to those of transformational and transactional leaders. They must make formal decisions, such as for staffing, empowerment and building organizational structure. As such, [Hekneby and Olsen \(2024\)](#) emphasized the importance of managers' decisions to standardize, formalize and organize organizational learning processes. [Hekneby and Olsen \(2024\)](#) also emphasized that the leaders' roles differ among subprocesses. In other words, leaders need to recognize the phase in which their organizations are and correctly identify the role they should play.

Thus, while [Hekneby and Olsen \(2024\)](#) illustrate the leaders' roles in respective subprocesses of organizational learning, there is another important leadership role. Namely, leaders must be the drivers of the transition between learning phases, rather than waiting for the transition to occur. To lead the transition, leaders need to have a "bird's-eye view" that can see the big picture and the future of his or her organization.

### **Recognize the value of a leader's humility in promoting organizational learning**

[Remy and Sané \(2024\)](#) examined project managers' leadership in international development projects, focusing on *humble leadership*. Characteristics of humble leadership, or a leader's *humility*, are characterized by the following three features: willingness to see oneself correctly, recognition of one's abilities and openness to innovative ideas and opinions. [Remy and Sané's \(2024\)](#) analysis revealed that humble leadership contributes to the success of development projects. It was also revealed that organizational learning mediates the relationship between humble leadership and project success.

Notably, humility does not mean being reserved with respect to others. What is important is to look at oneself objectively without overestimating oneself. Respecting others while objectively evaluating oneself and listening to others' ideas and opinions for innovation and improvement will promote organizational learning.

As a practical implication, [Remy and Sané \(2024\)](#) stated that it is important to assign humble leaders to development projects. This argument can be extended as follows: organizations should establish a formal system that selects humble leaders. More specifically, they should have recruitment strategies and personnel performance evaluation systems that emphasize humility. In assessing humility in personnel evaluation, for example, the nine-item humility measure developed by [Owens et al. \(2013\)](#) is applicable, which is referred to by [Remy and Sané \(2024\)](#). To measure a person's humility, [Owens et al. \(2013\)](#), for example, used the questions "This person actively seeks feedback, even if it is critical," and "This person is open to the advice of others". Evaluating and selecting leaders based on such measures will contribute to project success. Hence, organization should establish a system to strategically select and develop such leaders.

Importantly, humility is a quality needed by all, not just by leaders. To be humble is also to admit that we are not perfect. We must acknowledge the fact that our decisions are not always perfect. If we regard ourselves as perfect, we cannot improve our practices or routines any more. Hence, humility is the fundamental source of learning.

### **Develop and protect transformational leaders who foster organizations' ambidexterity**

[Cardona-Cano et al. \(2024\)](#) examined the effects of leadership style and collaborative behavior on group ambidexterity (integration of *exploration* and *exploitation* in learning) in university research groups.

For organizations to learn, both *exploring* future possibilities and *exploiting* existing knowledge are important. However, the balance tends to be biased toward exploitation (Levinthal & March, 1993), with less emphasis on exploration. To this problem, Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) argued that *ambidexterity*, which strikes a balance between exploration and exploitation, is important. Then, they propose prescriptions for organizations to achieve ambidexterity (O'Reilly & Tushman, 2016).

Cardona-Cano et al. (2024) examined what leadership styles foster ambidexterity. They found that the research coordinators' transformational leadership positively influenced the research groups' ambidexterity. On the contrary, the effects of transactional and *laissez-faire* leadership styles on group ambidexterity were not significant.

Based on these findings, Cardona-Cano et al. (2024) suggested introducing training that will help leaders (including candidates) acquire transformational leadership styles. They also stress that organizational education policies should be such that they encourage transformational leadership.

Cardona-Cano et al. (2024) did not identify a mechanism by which transformational leadership leads to ambidexterity. One possible explanation is as follows. Between exploration and exploitation, a focus generally tends to be biased toward exploitation (Levinthal & March, 1993). However, this bias toward exploitation may be mitigated by transformational leadership behavior that leads organizations and teams to changes. Notably, transformation and exploration are considered to have high affinity.

However, excessive reliance on leadership should be avoided. It is necessary to institutionalize systems for recruiting, developing and promoting transformational leaders. In addition, to promote the transformational behavior of middle managers, such as the leader of research groups, it would also be important to assign a "sponsor" who protects the leader and guarantees the leader's autonomy in his or her transformational behavior. Furthermore, for sustainable transformation, an organizational culture that emphasizes transformational values should be fostered.

### **Do not be afraid of failure: iterate microlevel trial and error**

The modern era is characterized by *VUCA* (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity). In this situation, an organization cannot stick to predefined strategies as assumptions on which the strategies were formulated based change rapidly and unexpectedly.

What is needed here is *agility*. The application of the philosophy of agility (*agile philosophy*) to project management is called *agile project management*. Agile project management refers to "tools and techniques in which a project is efficiently managed in situations of both complexity and uncertainty" (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024). In particular, information technology (IT) project management is one of the domains in which the agile philosophy was applied early on. Agile philosophy is also applicable to knowledge management (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024). Thus, the agile philosophy is being applied in various domains in the VUCA environment. In particular, agile project management and agile knowledge management promote organizational learning (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024).

The agile philosophy has a high affinity with the aforementioned *humility*, as explained below. As noted above, humility promotes organizational learning (Remy & Sané, 2024). Objectively looking down on oneself promotes awareness of room for learning. Notably, if an organization believes itself to be perfect, improvement-based learning is impossible. Meanwhile, iterating minor modifications based on the agile philosophy means acknowledging the possibility that the initial approach may not be perfect. In this respect,

the agile philosophy (AlSaied & Alkhoraif, 2024) and humble leadership (Remy & Sané, 2024) both have in common an objective view of oneself.

Agility, however, is not only a matter of leader mentality. Formal systems that support agile and flexible management are also necessary. Typically, agile management is not possible in an organization that negatively evaluates revising past decisions or policies. A company with such characteristics, for example, would be stuck with a business model that was deemed ineffective, being unable to *unlearn* (Mehrizi & Lashkarbolouki, 2016).

This warning also applies to government organizations. Government organizations tend to be bound by accountability for their own decisions. In terms of accountability, changing past policies is subject to outsiders' negative evaluation. Thus, it becomes difficult to change past government policies. However, we should admit that government organizations cannot be perfect. They must be humble and flexible to improve their policies. It is in government policymaking that the agile philosophy is really needed.

### Leaders should talk about the future

Accommodating newcomers into the organization is important for the smooth operation of the organization. For this reason, organizations use *organizational socialization tactics* (OST) such as *training*, *co-worker support*, *understanding* (facilitating understandings of one's job, organization and its people and culture) and *future prospects* (providing visions of future career prospects within the organization) (Taormina, 1997). OST facilitates newcomers' adaptation to their jobs, workgroups, work environment, corporate culture and acceptable behavior in a company (Torlak et al., 2024).

Torlak et al. (2024) examined the impact of OST on the employees' innovative behavior through improving their commitment. In particular, they focused on *affective commitment* – positive emotional attachment to the organization (Torlak et al., 2024) – among the elements of organizational commitment. They found that among the OST elements, training, understanding, and future prospects particularly foster affective commitment and promote innovative behavior.

Among these OST elements, this paper focuses on *future prospects* in relation to leadership. Providing future prospects can be regarded as a transactional behavior in that it guarantees future rewards. Interestingly, however, Torlak et al. (2024) showed that future prospects lead to affective commitment. Thus, future prospects not only increase employees' motivation for rewards but also increase their attachment to the organization.

In this sense, providing future prospects is one of the roles of a transformational leader rather than a transactional leader. The results of Torlak et al. (2024) also indicated that affective commitment stimulated by future prospects leads to employees' innovative behavior. Then, this innovative behavior will become a driver of organizational change.

Thus, an implication is drawn as follows: organizations should develop transformational leaders who talk about the future. Such leaders' behavior will improve employees' affective commitment, leading to innovation and organizational transformation.

### Recognize the background behind silence

In recent years, employees' voice and silence within organizations have attracted researchers' interest (Morrison, 2014). One of the research topics in this research domain is the antecedents of silence. Kızrak and Yeloğlu (2024) examined the effects of organizations' learning commitment and perceived organizational support on prosocial silence.

Here, the mechanism by which commitment to learning leads to silence should need attention. This is because it is generally believed that active communication, not silence, promotes organizational learning (e.g. Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Notably and importantly, there are different types of employee silence; Van Dyne et al. (2003) asserted that there are

three types of silence. In *acquiescent silence*, employees withhold relevant ideas, information or opinions based on resignation. *Defensive silence* aims for self-protection based on fear. *Prosocial silence* refers to “withholding work-related ideas, information, or opinions with the goal of benefiting other people or the organization – based on altruism or cooperative motives” (Van Dyne et al., 2003, p. 1368). Of these, prosocial silence is an other-oriented, organizational citizenship behavior (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024; Van Dyne et al., 2003).

Kızrak and Yeloğlu (2024) found that learning commitment positively influences prosocial silence. Learning commitment generally encourages communication with voice. However, depending on the circumstances, it becomes inappropriate to say everything. In the domain of education, for example, in addition to transferring knowledge (*teaching*), it is also important to facilitate learners’ own search for answers (*coaching*). Therefore, a teacher may dare to be silent for the sake of the learner (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024). In an organization with a high learning commitment, employees tend to focus on coaching each other to facilitate others’ spontaneous learning. As a result, prosocial silence that promotes learning increases (Kızrak & Yeloğlu, 2024). Kızrak and Yeloğlu (2024) also found that the more employees perceive that they are supported by their organizations, the more they increase their prosocial silence. Hence, the more they feel supported, the more they reciprocally feel the need to protect others, to avoid harming them, and therefore to maintain silence when necessary.

Importantly, prosocial silence and voice are not contradictory. The absence of voice is not the same as the presence of intentional silence (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Because prosocial silence is part of other-oriented cooperative behavior, it is possible to raise one’s voice to provide necessary information while maintaining prosocial silence to protect others.

The practical implications drawn from Kızrak and Yeloğlu’s (2024) discussion are as follows: leaders should not be afraid of silence. They should understand the members’ intentions behind their silence. Indeed, defensive silence as a defensive routine creates “the undiscussables,” or issues that cannot be addressed in organizations, inhibiting organizational learning (Argyris, 1990). Acquiescent silence based on resignation also has a negative impact on organizational learning. On the contrary, however, other-oriented prosocial silence increases members’ psychological safety, which in turn increases voice and promotes organizational learning (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

### **Leaders should be humble enough to seek feedback**

Obtaining feedback from others is a valuable learning opportunity. For this reason, researchers have examined the factors that promote feedback-seeking behavior and its effects. However, most studies addressed feedback-seeking behavior toward supervisors (upward) or subordinates (downward); studies on horizontal feedback-seeking behavior toward peers are still insufficient (Kurian et al., 2024). Kurian et al. (2004) therefore conducted a theoretical discussion on horizontal feedback-seeking behavior, where leaders can seek performance feedback and growth feedback from their peers.

Interestingly, horizontal feedback-seeking behavior has two benefits (Kurian et al., 2004). First, feedback-seeking behavior toward colleagues leads to acquiring trust from colleagues. This is because those who are asked for feedback see the feedback seeker as sincere and committed to improvement. Second, leaders’ feedback-seeking behavior encourages other members’ feedback-seeking. In other words, the leaders’ feedback-seeking behavior fosters organizational norms that lead to similar behavior.

This mechanism resonates with Remy and Sané’s (2024) claim regarding the importance of *humble leadership*. This is because leaders need to be humble to seek and accept feedback.

Hence, the implication presented in relation to Remy and Sané (2023) is reiterated here: organizations should establish mechanisms that allow them to select humble leaders.

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### Conclusion: create a leadership facilitation mechanism

This issue primarily contains papers on leadership that facilitates organizational learning. Based on the findings of these papers, this paper aimed to present implications for facilitating organizational learning through leadership. For respective implications, refer to the sections above.

As a concluding remark, however, the author would like to say one last thing, which may sound contradictory: do not rely too much on individual leaders. There are limits to what leaders can do. Leaders' actions are both constrained and facilitated by various institutions. Therefore, it is necessary to have formal systems that facilitate the exercise of leadership.

Establishing such systems is also essential to realize the implications of each paper. For example, Hekneby and Olsen (2024) identified the leaders' role, such as formal decision-making, including resource allocation regarding staffing, empowerment and building organizational structure. However, leaders cannot take these actions unless they have sufficient authority. We must ensure that rules and practices do not prevent leaders from making decisions. Remy and Sané (2024) stated that leader humility promotes organizational learning, but we cannot wait for such leaders to spontaneously emerge. We need to strategically recruit, develop and promote humble leaders. Cardona-Cano et al. (2024) found that transformational leadership leads to ambidexterity. However, it is necessary to establish systems for recruiting, developing, and promoting transformational leaders. Whereas AlSaied and Alkhoraif (2024) argued that agile project management encourages innovation, there is also a need for personnel performance evaluation and budgeting systems that enable agile and flexible management.

In summary, although leaders play important roles in organizational learning, it is necessary to build formal systems that enable leaders to take necessary actions and develop leaders who promote organizational learning.

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