

Strategies for building a learning organization: managing multi-level learning dynamics

Introduction

Assume that you are trying to nurture your organization as a “learning organization” and encourage your members to learn. Where should you start? Tasks to be addressed are spread across many different levels. Furthermore, can they be performed separately or do they require an integrated approach? In relation to these questions, the lineup of papers in this issue implies the diversity of tasks associated with cultivating learning organizations and the importance of addressing the tasks in an integrated and consistent manner.

Indeed, this issue of *The Learning Organization* contains papers covering various aspects of learning. They examine the impact of various elements on learning. These elements are diverse and span the organizational, intra- and interteam, manager/leader and individual member levels. This fact indicates that in promoting learning, management should not forget the dynamic interactions that exist within and between these levels (Lawrence, Mauws, Dyck, & Kleysen, 2005).

In understanding the learning dynamics and promoting learning, it is beneficial to refer to the assertions of these papers. Hence, in the following sections, implications derived from the claims of the papers are provided to help build a learning organization. Finally, in the concluding section, integrated implications are presented.

Visualize and enjoy your achievement

If we know how well our efforts are working and where we are on the path to the goal, we will be more motivated to go further. Even if we are struggling, if we feel that we are making progress, we can move forward. Thus, feedback on one’s own achievement leads to increased motivation for learning. In training, such feedback can be given by *gamification* elements (Mohanty & Christopher, 2023). Gamification refers to applying game design principles to nongame environments such as production, marketing and learning. Gamification uses the same kind of elements that computer games use to draw players in, to motivate customers to buy and to motivate staff to work.

Among others, Mohanty and Christopher (2023) examined the effect of two gamification elements: *experience point* and *progress bar*. Experience point refers to “point” earned upon completing tasks, achieving goals and so on as a reward, like in a computer game. Progress bar is a visual indication of progress toward completing a task, like “growing bar graph.” A typical example of progress bar is the sales department’s graphic indication of sales gained relative to the goal.

Mohanty and Christopher (2023) analyzed how these elements increase motivation and improve training outcomes. The results revealed that these elements increase both *intrinsic* and *extrinsic motivation*. Interestingly, however, whereas intrinsic motivation further leads to improved *training outcomes*, extrinsic motivation brought by the gamification elements



does not lead to training outcomes. That is, intrinsic motivation is more effective in learning than extrinsic motivation (Deci, 1971).

The usefulness of feedback such as experience point and progress bar is not limited to training but can be applied to various situations in work practices. What is important here is not only to visualize the feedback but also to provide a sense of fun and enjoyment. And the ultimate state of such enjoyment is “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As in a flow state, immersing oneself in something while having fun promotes learning and growth. Management should create an environment that gives members a sense of flow in training and daily work practices.

Nevertheless, depending on the status of goal attainment, experience point or progress bar may indicate that expected results have not been achieved. In such cases, it is necessary to have a mechanism to prevent the loss of motivation. Furthermore, we need to give learners a positive feeling that “if we do it, we will be able to make progress.” For this purpose, for example, the progress steps should be designed in such a way as to provide a sense that “we can progress, even little by little,” without causing long periods of stagnation. In other words, in addition to Mohanty and Christopher’s (2023) emphasis on self-determination, we need a mechanism that ensure learners’ self-efficacy; it is important to make them think, “I can do it.” Learned helplessness (Seligman, 1972) must be avoided; management must avoid the members becoming convinced that “there is nothing we can do.”

Maximize absorptive capacity through interfunctional coordination

Asiedu, Anyigba, and Doe (2023) examined the role of *interfunctional coordination* (collaborative mechanisms among units such as interunit meetings, integrated activities and information sharing) on acquiring new knowledge. Asiedu *et al.* (2023) analyzed how such interfunctional coordination in universities links their *absorptive capacity* (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990) to knowledge acquisition. As absorptive capability, they addressed *absorptive knowledge search*, *absorptive knowledge accumulation* and *absorptive process transformation*. Here, absorptive knowledge search refers to universities’ activities such as exchanges with other universities and meetings with stakeholders to gain new knowledge. Absorptive knowledge accumulation refers to recording, storing and sharing acquired knowledge for future use. Absorptive process transformation refers to promotion of knowledge dissemination within an organization, mechanisms and routines for knowledge transfer, and information infrastructure.

The results revealed that interfunctional coordination links the effectiveness of absorptive capacity to knowledge acquisition. This indicates that we should use interfunctional coordination described above to make the best of our absorptive capacity in acquiring new knowledge. In contrast, even if an organization has absorptive capacity, new knowledge cannot be acquired without the interfunctional coordination. According to Senge (1990), organizations learn through individual learning. And much of the acquired tacit and explicit knowledge reside within the individuals (Grant, 1996). Therefore, for an organization to learn, it is necessary to share the knowledge possessed by individuals among its members. One mechanism to realize this is the interfunctional coordination; knowledge sharing can be facilitated by cooperation and coordination of members from different functions.

For maximizing learning through interfunctional coordination, such coordination mechanism should be cultivated as a *community of practice* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Communities of practice refer to “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this

area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger *et al.*, 2002, p. 4). Among them, cross-functional and cross-organizational communities of practice not only promote information sharing, but also provide a forum for the emergence of new ideas (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Thus, communities of practice are beneficial to knowledge management.

To effectively use interfunctional coordination and communities of practice, it is important to take a multilevel approach as follows. First, at the organizational level, it is necessary to create a formal framework for interfunctional coordination. Second, at the team level, managers or leaders must take actions to promote cooperative teamwork. At the individual level, voluntary commitment is required.

Although Asiedu *et al.* (2023) addressed universities, the effects of interfunctional coordination and communities of practice are not limited to them; communities of practice are used in various organizations, including for-profit companies (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Further use of interfunctional coordination and communities of practice is encouraged for learning.

Support team learning by managing conflict

Rustad Bjerke (2023) examined the factors that influence team learning in professional service firms such as consulting firms, where teams are cross-functional, and their activities are similar to those of *interfunctional coordination* in the study of Asiedu *et al.* (2023). For their analysis, Rustad Bjerke (2023) focused on *market orientation* (awareness of market changes and mechanisms to encourage this) and *leader support* (leaders’ cognition and behavior regarding collaboration with other units as a learning opportunity). The results revealed that market orientation and leader support promote *team learning*. It means that the more members and organizations become sensitive to the market environment, and the more leaders use interunit collaboration for learning, the more the team will learn. It was also found that market orientation prompts leader support for learning. That is, the more market-oriented an organization is, the more leaders focus on learning through collaboration.

Tips for encouraging learning through communities of practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) can be applied here. For example, differentiated expertise in cross-functional communities of practice promotes knowledge creation (Anand, Gardner, & Morris, 2007). Anand *et al.* (2007) also emphasize the importance of organizational support for communities of practice, which is common to the importance of leader support emphasized by Asiedu *et al.* (2023). Management should therefore provide the necessary resources for learning.

Asiedu *et al.* (2023) do not explain why leader support is important. However, the following explanation may be possible. According to Asiedu *et al.* (2023), market orientation promotes awareness of changes in key customers and triggers learning. In doing so, market information is interpreted by members (Daft & Weick, 1984). However, the interpretations differ among members, and the differences in interpretation can create conflicts. Of course, constructive conflict plays an important role in learning (Li, Liu, & Liu, 2011). Constructive conflict strengthens relationships among members and creates positive change through recognizing differences to find better solutions (Li *et al.*, 2011). However, conflict must be carefully managed, as emphasized by Garavan, Carbery, and Murphy (2007). For this purpose, leaders should set rules for collaboration, manage boundaries between different functions, play a role model, facilitate meetings and build close relationships among members (Garavan *et al.*, 2007). Such conflict management is perhaps the primary *raison d’être* of leader support.

Recognize the difficulty of feedback

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have addressed *job crafting* (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Job crafting refers to “the physical and cognitive changes individuals make in the task or relational boundaries of their work” (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001, p. 179). Costa and Fisher (2023) analyzed how *positive error orientation* (Rybowiak, Garst, Frese, & Batinic, 1999) leads to job crafting. Positive error orientation is an attitude of predicting and dealing with possible errors in advance, and learning through reflection from actual errors. Meanwhile, among types of job crafting, Costa and Fisher (2023) focused on those oriented to individuals’ learning and growth, such as increasing social job resources (e.g. asking for coaching by a supervisor), increasing structural job resources (e.g. improving member’s own capabilities) and increasing challenging job demands (e.g. increasing job difficulty).

The results show that positive error orientation improves *personal growth initiative* (active engagement in the process of growth) and ultimately leads to job crafting. That is, those who see errors positively and try to make use of related experiences in the future will choose actions that will lead to growth and job crafting.

On the other hand, interestingly, feedback from leaders weakens the impact of positive error orientation on personal growth initiative and job crafting. Namely, when feedback is intense, positive error orientation does not lead to growth or job crafting. This is contrary to Costa and Fisher (2023) prediction. They explain this result as follows. First, when leader behavior is focused on the team as a whole, there may be less attention to preventing errors caused by individual behavior. Second, the benefits of feedback may be offset by “compensation” effect (Senge, 1990); various organizational structures and practices, as well as individual behaviors, change unintentionally to weaken feedback effect.

In addition, depending on the situation, feedback may inhibit members from “thinking for themselves.” Reflection is essential for learning (Schön, 1984). However, if feedback is given before reflection on the consequences of one’s own actions, including errors, opportunities for reflection may be lost. For this reason, feedback should be given after the individual’s own reflection. Lack of opportunity for reflection hinders learning (Kolb, 1984).

Thus, in some cases, inappropriate feedback may hamper learning. Furthermore, similar phenomena associated with feedback can occur in other situations. Therefore, leaders must ensure that their feedback does not hinder their members’ learning. Moreover, such negative effects can occur outside of learning. In Yasuda’s (2003) survey on personal networks, a number of respondents cited their supervisors as “persons who reduce work efficiency.” To avoid such tragedies, leaders should make sure that their own actions, including feedback, are not preventing members from carrying out their tasks.

To general staff members, we would like to suggest the following. Supervisor feedback is not always correct. Takahashi (2002) claims that competent person selectively ignore some of their supervisors’ instructions; they decide which to follow according to relevance and priority. Note that not all feedback is valid.

Share leadership and improve intellectual capital

Shoukat, Shah, and Muneeb (2023) examined the effects of *shared leadership* on the performance of interprofessional sales teams in healthcare companies. Shared leadership aims to achieve team goals through a collaborative and cooperative mechanism among members. Summarizing the results, they found that shared leadership increases teams’ *intellectual capital* and improves *team performance*.

According to Shoukat *et al.* (2023), intellectual capital consists of knowledge (expertise of team members: human capital), behavior (communication, collaboration, and problem finding and solving within the team: structural capital) and cognition (trust among teams:

relational capital). Therefore, shared leadership influences various aspects of a sales team, such as members' knowledge, behavior and cognition; the effect of shared leadership is not limited to motivating members through empowerment. Management should recognize the benefits of sharing leadership and delegating authority.

Turning this argument around, we would like to suggest the following. While centralized leadership facilitates team control, it can also have side effects. In other words, in addition to decreasing the motivation of members, centralized leadership can have negative effects such as impeding the accumulation of expertise, inhibiting communication and collaboration and decreasing trust among team members. We should pay attention to these unintended effects when designing organizational structure.

Strategically build a learning organization through human resource management

In the past, human resource management (HRM) was considered a reactive activity that dealt with tasks such as labor-management dispute resolution and working hour management. In recent years, however, HRM has been regarded as a more proactive and strategic activity. In this trend, *strategic human resource management* (strategic HRM) aims to align HRM strategies with the overall organizational strategy.

P., Dey, Santhanam, and Bin Ahmad (2023) examined the effects of various strategic HRM practices on learning. The results revealed that strategic HRM practices facilitate learning. Specifically, strategic HRM enhance members' *learning orientation* (basic personal attitude toward learning) and improve their *learning competence* (ability to identify learning needs, set learning goals, select effective learning strategies and evaluate learning progress). Thus, strategic HRM has a positive effect on learning, although some of the effects differ among practices used.

Essentially, strategic HRM is designed to support the improvement of organizational outcomes through executing organizational strategy; strategic HRM was not invented with the primary goal of improving members' learning outcomes (learning orientation and learning competence). In other words, the improved learning outcomes are an unexpected positive by-product of strategic HRM. Management should recognize and take advantage of the by-product.

These strategic HRM perspectives should be integrated with the discussions in the previous sections concerning the ways to support team and individual learning. We have discussed the use of gamification in training (Mohanty & Christopher, 2023), interfunctional coordination (Asiedu *et al.*, 2023) and communities of practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002), leader support (Rustad Bjerke, 2023) and their feedback (Costa & Fisher, 2023) and shared leadership (Shoukat *et al.*, 2023) in promoting learning. Here, if we integrate these elements with strategic HRM (P. *et al.*, 2023), we can imply as follows. That is, management should incorporate training design, use of interfunctional coordination and communities of practice, promotion of leader support, appropriate use of feedback and organizational design that encourages shared leadership into HRM strategies and associated practices. The HRM strategy should then be aligned with the overall organizational strategy. Such an integrated approach will improve the consistency of the various initiatives and allow them to function in a complementary and interactive manner.

Integrated implications and conclusions

The previous sections have presented practical implications based on the arguments of each paper. They can be synthesized as follows:

- Ensure the members' sense of self-determination and self-efficacy. For this purpose, focus on facilitating their voluntary actions.

Feeling a sense of self-determination and self-efficacy is the strongest source of motivation (Deci, 1971). The feeling of "being forced to do something" should be avoided. This point is also emphasized by scholars examining communities of practice (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). For members' sense of self-determination and self-efficacy, we should let them make decisions for themselves through shared leadership.

- Do not interfere with your subordinates' or team's learning. Facilitate them casually.

We should make sure not to give too much feedback or wrong feedback at the wrong time. When you were younger, did you ever experience being interrupted by your supervisor? Or, did you ever pass over your supervisor's instructions so that you would not be interfered with? If you can think of such an experience, remember how you felt at the time, and make sure that your subordinates do not have the same experience.

- Facilitate interactions within and between teams.

Interaction among members, such as in communities of practice, promotes creating new ideas (Wenger *et al.*, 2002). Without interaction, tacit knowledge within individuals cannot be expressed or shared (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This principle is valid both within and between teams. Interaction among diverse individuals is the greatest source of innovation.

- Integrate various measures to support learning into formal HRM strategies and practices.

Measures to support learning should be designed and implemented in such a way that they have a synergistic effect. In other words, ensure that individual measures do not cancel each other out (Senge, 1990).

Of course, these might not be easy to implement. As Lawrence *et al.* (2005) state, organizational learning is a political process, where various actors exercise their power for their own interest. If management wants learning to proceed as it wishes, it needs to manage this political process. In doing so, management may unconsciously use its power to impede the learning desired for an entire organization (Field, 2011). We must always ask ourselves whether we are inhibiting learning.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the papers in this issue cover various aspects of learning dynamics in multiple levels. In addition, they cover a variety of organizations (universities, pharmaceutical companies and consultants) in a variety of countries (including Asia, Africa and Europe). This fact demonstrates the broad scope of application of implications. Furthermore, the "breadth" indicates not only the wide range of theoretical application but also the wide range of practical application.

Be a facilitator who supports and harmonizes the learning process.

Yoshinobu Nakanishi

Faculty of Business Administration, Toyo Daigaku, Bunkyo-ku, Japan

References

- Anand, N., Gardner, H. K., & Morris, T. (2007). Knowledge-based innovation: Emergence and embedding of new practice areas in management consulting firms. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(2), 406-428.

-
- Asiedu, M. A., Anyigba, H., & Doe, J. K. (2023). Absorptive capacity and innovation generation in higher education institutions: The mediating role of interfunctional coordination. *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). *Beyond boredom and anxiety: Experiencing flow in work and play*. Jossey-Bass.
- Cohen, W. M., & Levinthal, D. A. (1990). Absorptive capacity: A new perspective on learning and innovation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 35(1), 128–152.
- Costa, P., & Fisher, I. (2023). Job crafting after making mistakes: Can leadership be an obstacle? *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.
- Daft, R. L., & Weick, K. E. (1984). Toward a model of organizations as interpretation systems. *The Academy of Management Review*, 9(2), 284–295.
- Deci, E. L. (1971). Effects of externally mediated rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 18(1), 105–115.
- Field, L. (2011). Exploring the political underbelly of organizational learning: Learning during pay and performance management change. *The Learning Organization*, 18(4), 272–287.
- Grant, R. M. (1996). Toward a knowledge-based theory of the firm. *Strategic Management Journal*, 17(S2), 109–122.
- Garavan, T. N., Carbery, R., & Murphy, E. (2007). Managing intentionally created communities of practice for knowledge sourcing across organisational boundaries: Insights on the role of the CoP manager. *The Learning Organization*, 14(1), 34–49.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice Hall.
- Lawrence, T. B., Mauws, M. K., Dyck, B., & Kleysen, R. F. (2005). The politics of organizational learning: Integrating power into the 4I framework. *Academy of Management Review*, 30(1), 180–191.
- Li, Y. A., Liu, Y., & Liu, H. (2011). Co-opetition, distributor's entrepreneurial orientation and manufacturer's knowledge acquisition: Evidence from China. *Journal of Operations Management*, 29(1-2), 128–142.
- Mohanty, S., & Christopher, B. P. (2023). A study on role of gamification elements in training outcomes: Comparing the mediating effect of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.
- Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). *The knowledge-creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation*. Oxford University Press.
- P, A., Dey, C., Santhanam, N., & Bin Ahmad, K. Z. (2023). Strategic HRM practices, learning orientation and learning competence: Study from retail industry. *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.
- Rustad Bjerke, V. H. (2023). Contextual antecedents for team learning in professional service firms. *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.
- Rybowiak, V., Garst, H., Frese, M., & Batinic, B. (1999). Error orientation questionnaire (EOQ): Reliability, validity, and different language equivalence. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20(4), 527–547.
- Schön, D. A. (1984). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Basic Books.
- Seligman, M. E. (1972). Learned helplessness. *Annual Review of Medicine*, 23(1), 407–412.
- Senge, P. M. (1990). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. Century Business.
- Shoukat, M. H., Shah, S. A., & Muneeb, D. (2023). Shared leadership and team performance in health care: How intellectual capital and team learning intervene in this relationship. *The Learning Organization*, ahead-of-print.

- Takahashi, N. (2002). *Dekiru shain wa "yarisugosu" [Competent employees "get by"]*. Nikkei.
- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Wrzesniewski, A., & Dutton, J. E. (2001). Crafting a job: Revisioning employees as active crafters of their work. *The Academy of Management Review*, 26(2), 179–201.
- Yasuda, Y. (2003). Howaito-Kara no nettowaku-kochikujutu: "pasonaru nettowaku" no kochiku-ijikatsuyo senryaku (1): Igyoshu-koryukai no shippai o koete [white collar networking: Strategies for building, maintaining, and utilizing "personal networks" (1): Beyond the failure of cross-industrial networking meetings]. *Romu Fijo*, 40(1025), 68–71.

About the author

Yoshinobu Nakanishi (Ph.D.) is an Associate Professor of Business Administration at Toyo University. He got Ph.D. from Kobe University. His research interests focus on learning, legitimacy, stigma, and accountability of organizations.