ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT TOWARD LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to study the characteristics of a learning organization and then to determine the factors which would allow a private university to achieve such status. The study considers five aspects of the organization's subsystems based upon Michael J. Marquardt's theory: learning, organization, people, knowledge and technology. The research adopted a qualitative research procedure. A survey was administered to collect all faculty and staff's perspectives, and analyze them using the Learning Organization Profile. The results were used to formulate questions for interviews with four of the university's top executives. The university being studied was found to have a high degree of learning organization, in compliance with the five aspects framework. Thirteen influencing factors and six vulnerabilities were identified. The concept of organization development toward learning organization as defined in this study can be applied to other types of organizations. The methodology used in the study can be adapted to identify supporting factors and weaknesses, and then to initiate appropriate

projects which would lead to successful implementation.

Keywords: Learning Organization, Learning Dynamics, Dialogue

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, employers expects employees with creative ideas, academic excellence, and who are fully skilled for their work lives, eager to learn and adaptable to the constantly changing world. However, the learning institutions still have not sufficiently prepared the students for modern-day demand, resulting in an intense shortage of the skilled workforce required by business organizations.

In Thailand, organizations have had to quickly and continuously deploy learning systems for all staff. The learning process must be truly integrated into the organizations systems and work procedures. All organizations require development in order to be sustainable and competitive. Consequently, a learning organization is a very important especially for an organization whose core business is teaching and learning. Therefore, the educational institutions must have the characteristics of the learning organization to produce quality students as preferred by employers. Many scholars have shown their interest in developing universities to achieve the standard of learning organization (Ali, 2012; Abu-Tineh, 2011; Mousavi, Kashani, Kashani, Mortazavi, & Sabagh, 2012; Halai, 2013; Bak, 2012). In studying recent research, many academics have sought answers, and arrived at different results due to different theories used as well as the differences in university sizes and academic field taught. The factors influencing learning organization development in state-owned universities were different from those in private universities (Balay, 2012; Patnaik, Beriha, Mahapatra, & Singh, 2013). The researcher is interested in studying organization development toward learning organization in a private university because private universities need to stay competitive and sustainable.

THEORY AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Some authors define a learning organization from the perspective of knowledge. Liao, Chang and Wu (2010) have has defined it as a place where knowledge and ability are developed and enlarged behavior is reformed and gained. Garvin (1993) describes a learning organization as one which acquires and transfers knowledge, and then modifies its behavior based on that knowledge. According to Senge (1990), “learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they

truly desire, new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole collective, which is an individual perspective” (Senge, 1990). Other authors define it in terms of a living organism, which is continuously learning and transforming itself. Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1991) define it as a firm that assists all members to learn, in order to constantly transform itself. Marquardt (1996) defines a learning organization as one which works collectively to improve the collection, management, and knowledge use for corporate success. Marquardt describes a learning organization as a one that has established a company-wide learning process. The learning process can only be created and exist sustainably when the organization learning development is systematically dynamic, interrelated and complemented. It has five related subsystems - learning, organization, people, knowledge, and technology -- to enhance and augment learning.

The learning subsystem is comprised of three complementary dimensions: levels of learning (individual, group and organizational), types of learning (adaptive, anticipatory and action), and skills (systems thinking, mental models, personal mastery, self-directed learning and dialogue).

The organization subsystem consists of four key components: vision, culture, strategy and structure.

The people subsystem includes managers and leaders, employees, customers, business partners and alliances, suppliers, vendors and the surrounding community. Each group is valuable to the learning organization, and must be empowered and enabled to increase its knowledge and ability.

The knowledge subsystem of a learning organization manages the acquired and generated knowledge of the organization. It includes the acquisition, creation, storage, analysis and data mining, transfer and dissemination, and application and validation of knowledge.

The technology subsystem is composed of supporting, integrated technological networks and information tools that allow access to and exchange of information and learning. All these tools create knowledge freeways. The two major components of the technology subsystem applying to managing are: 1) technology for managing knowledge and 2) technology for enhancing learning involving the use of video, audio and computer-based multimedia training. The objective of this research is to study the characteristics of the learning organization and to determine influencing factors which would allow a private university to achieve such status, by deploying Marquardt’s (1996)

conceptual framework of five dynamic subsystems (Fig. 1).

Figure1 Conceptual Framework: Five Dynamic Subsystems

METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative research methodology. Initial data collection was undertaken using measuring instruments based upon Marquardt's Learning Organization Profile (LOP). The LOP was used to evaluate the extent or degree of actual application of learning organization by the university at the present condition, based on the assessment by the academic and administrative staff. Two hundred people were polled: 122 academic and 78 non-academic staff from the total work force of 248 employees. An analysis was undertaken to determine the present condition by using means of each subsystem. The results were then used to set up topics for in-depth unstructured interviews using an informal dialogue style. A purposive sampling method was used. The samples were selected based on key informants who were executives and stakeholders of the university, knowledgeable about a learning organization, and involved with the implementation of the university's learning organization. Fourteen people were interviewed, the President of the University Council, the College Council Member, the Rector, the Chairman of the Knowledge Management Committee and stakeholders. The results described the characteristics of the learning organization and the instilling factors involved. The data was synthesized as groups of factors in accordance with the corresponding theory and related literature. The researcher also proposed recommendations for the development of a

learning organization.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The results as shown in Table 1 indicate high overall LOP score calculated from subsystem's scores. This is interpreted that the university has achieved the learning organization characteristic in each subsystems as defined by this theory, or the university has already applied all of the learning organization concepts. Therefore, it can be concluded that the characteristic of each subsystem is close to the theoretical characteristic of the learning organization and the acceptable practice, as indicated by the high level of means as shown in Table 1. It can also be concluded that the academic and non-academic staff were believed that the characteristics of the learning organization of the private university were in accordance with the theoretical framework of the five subsystems.

Table 1 Means of the Characteristics of Learning Organization

Subsystem	Present Condition	
	Means	Interpretation
Learning	3.8507	High
Technology	3.8130	High
People	3.7720	High
Organization	3.7555	High
Knowledge	3.7385	High
Overall Learning Organization	3.7859	High

The interviews revealed that the executives' opinions were in accordance with the five subsystems. The factors supporting the learning organization and the weak points that require further development were the most important components derived from the assessment. The comparison of the research results on the learning organization of a private university and the theoretical concept of other academics on the learning organization are as follows:

- The learning subsystem was the strong support point of the university because organizational staff proved eager to learn from the individual, the team and organization. The most exceptional skills of the staff were extensive work experience, and the capability for self-directed learning, as all staff were aware and

had plans for continuous development. The weak points were that staff lacked the listening skills or capacity for frank dialogue which could allow unbiased development and integrated learning. This skill affects the knowledge subsystem, in the transfer of knowledge. This conclusion was in accordance with “Exploring the relationship between organizational learning and career resilience among faculty members at Qatar University” (Abu-Tineh, 2011), and was consistent with Senge’s (1990) learning organization theory.

- The technology subsystem had one supporting factor, the capacity to support teleconferences, e-learning, and web sites. This subsystem was in accordance with “Utilizing the university as a learning organization to facilitate quality improvement” (Meade, 2005) and “Assessing learning organization dimensions and demographic factors in technical and vocational colleges in Iran” (Nazari & Pihie, 2012). This factor is usually mentioned with the knowledge subsystem. It is still a weak point as the university was unable to implement a technology subsystem, thus, creating two weak points which were efficiency of the technology system development staff, and the development of technology for knowledge management and utilization.
- The people subsystem was the strongest point of the institute; its supporting factors were the leadership characteristics which enable learning processes and creativity in the organization, including staff support through power designation, and the existence of knowledge networking with other education institutes, government agencies, communities and parents, which allows continuous knowledge exchange, such as multi-disciplinary study and work training programs, as well as leading to the production of graduates who meet the demands of the business sector. This system was the most important factor in transforming the university into a learning organization. This conclusion is consistent with the research papers “Is yours a learning organization?” (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008), “Becoming a learning organization through partnership” (Borzsony & Hunter, 1996) and “Academic staff’s perceptions of characteristics of learning organization in a higher learning institution” (Ali, 2012).
- In the organization subsystem, the university had six supporting factors: (1) a message of common visions, (2) organization culture as the learning culture, (3) a strategy for organization development toward a learning organization, (4) support systems and a learning environment, (5) a line matrix organization structure which allows coordination and command across the command lines for the university’s

benefit, enabling rapid advance and development due to flexibility, connection, and assistance across the command lines, (6) an implementation style which emphasizes a quality orientation system with rapid coordination. The weak point in this subsystem was the unstructured knowledge management system. This conclusion is consistent with “The learning organization and teaching improvement in academics departments” (Collie, 2002), and “Universities: can they be considered as learning organizations?” (Bak, 2012). “Organizational design choices in response to public sector reforms: a case study of mandated hospital networks” (Grafton, Abernethy, & Lillis, 2011), follows Senge’s (1990) learning organization theory and Pedler, Burgoyne, and Boydell (1991).

- The knowledge subsystem had two supporting factors: the continuous search and building of knowledge, and the utilization of knowledge. The research papers “Lifelong learning implication for the university of the 21st century” (Halai, 2013), “Learning organization in the information age: the case of Selcuk University, Turkey” (Ogut & Berber, 2003) and “Potential of organizational memory for creating service performance: A cross-level analysis” (Lai, Huang, Lin, & Kao, 2011), showed that these two factors shape the learning organization. However, the university was still unable to make the best use of these factors. There were problems in two stages: knowledge upkeep, analysis, and knowledge mining. These might arise from responsibility for self-evaluation and connected with the need to evolve toward the university’s common goals, or insufficient emphasis on a knowledge subsystem, organization structure in an organization subsystem, and lack of dialogue skills in a learning subsystem. Thus, knowledge transfer and exchange cannot be implemented. This vulnerability requires immediate rectification.

The data synthesis showed that organization development toward learning organization in a private university had 13 supporting factors (Table 2).

All factors were interconnected from all subsystems. Therefore, all factors must be developed at the same time.

Table 2 Supporting Factors (DI = Degree of Importance)

DI	Factors supporting the development of the learning organization
1	Leadership characteristic enabling support and power designation
2	Knowledge exchange network
3	Staff eager to learn
4	Organization learning culture
5	Knowledge enable environment (facilitating staff learning)
6	Suitable organization structure, flexibility
7	Clear vision on learning organization
8	Strategy on learning organization implementation
9	Quality orientation work system with the analysis on changing environment
10	Skilled staff, specialist level (tacit knowledge)
11	Continuous search and building of knowledge
12	Knowledge utilization
13	Appropriate utilization of technology to support organization wide learning

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The data synthesis showed this private university had six weak points. The findings can be used for organization development through initiating projects which would compensate for these weaknesses (Table 3).

This research can be used in the study and development of other types of organizations toward a learning organization and for further research. Future research should gather comparative data from many institutions.

Table 3 Weak Points and Implications, by Subsystem

S*	Weak Point	Implication
L	1) Staff lack of dialogue skill	1) Dialogue Development
O	2) Lack of clear structure for the knowledge management implementation	2) Structure improvement. 3) Project “learning work unit”
K	3) Knowledge upkeep	4) Develop system and mechanism for knowledge gathering and maintaining 5) Designate responsibility in knowledge storage and transfer 6) Project “leadership for learning process”
K	4) Knowledge analysis and knowledge mining	7) Reward the work unit which implements knowledge management 8) Project “Knowledge mining” 9) Train staff for knowledge gathering, analysis and mining
T	5) Efficiency of the system development for users	10) Enable staff to connect with the information highway
T	6) Development of technology for knowledge management and utilization	11) Develop the capability of the executive for utilizing technology for learning. 12) Develop center for learning with mixed media technology 13) Develop and utilize remote learning technology 14) Develop capability in technology search software.

Note: *S: subsystems, L: learning, O: organization, K: knowledge, T: technology

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