

5. Learning

Organizational Learning

Organizational learning is a way for organizations to adapt to their settings and to gather information to anticipate future changes. High performance organizations with the characteristics in this section, are designed for organizational learning. They integrate information into the organization's memory for availability and use in new situations. The need for such learning resulted from the realization that traditional, hierarchically structured organizations were not very good at anticipating environmental changes or at sharing information across functions such as production, marketing, and engineering.

A Global View of Organizational Learning

Organizational learning was first defined in Section 1 as the process of acquiring the knowledge necessary to adapt to a changing environment. In the context and themes of this section, the concept can be extended to global organizational learning—the ability to gather from the world at large the knowledge required for long-term organizational adaptation. Simply stated, people from different cultures and parts of the world have a lot to learn from one another about organizational behavior and management.

ARE MANAGEMENT THEORIES UNIVERSAL?

One of the most important questions to be asked and answered in this age of globalization is whether or not management theories are universal. That is, can and should a theory developed in one cultural context be transferred and used in another? The answer according to Geert Hofstede is “no,” at least not without careful consideration of cultural influences. Culture can influence both the development of a theory or concept and its application. As an example, Hofstede cites the issue of motivation. He notes that Americans have historically addressed motivation from the perspective of individual performance and rewards—consistent with their highly individualistic culture. However, concepts such as merit pay and job enrichment may not fit well in other cultures where high collectivism places more emphasis on teamwork and groups. Hofstede's point, and one well worth remembering, is that although we can and should learn from what is taking place in other cultures, we should be informed consumers of that knowledge. We should always factor cultural considerations into account when transferring theories and practices from one setting to the next.

A good case in point relates to the interest generated some years ago in Japanese management

approaches, and based upon the success experienced at the time by Japanese industry. Japanese firms have traditionally been described as favoring *lifetime employment* with strong employee-employer loyalty, seniority pay, and company unions. Their operations have emphasized a quality commitment, the use of teams and consensus decision making, and career development based upon slow promotions and cross-functional job assignments.

Although the Japanese economy and many of its firms have had problems of their own recently, management scholars and consultants recognize that many lessons can still be learned from their practices. However, we also recognize that cultural differences must be considered in the process. Specifically, what works in Japan may not work as well elsewhere, at least not without some modifications. Japan's highly collectivist society, for example, contrasts markedly with the highly individualistic cultures of the United States and other Western nations. It is only reasonable to expect differences in their management and organizational practices.

BEST PRACTICES AROUND THE WORLD

An appropriate goal in global organizational learning is to identify the "best practices" found around the world. What is being done well in other settings may be of great value at home, whether that "home" is in Africa, Asia, Europe, North America, or anywhere else. Whereas the world at large once looked mainly to the North Americans and Europeans for management insights, today we recognize that potential "benchmarks" of excellence for high performance organizations can be discovered anywhere. For example, the influence of the Japanese approaches as a stimulus to global organizational learning is evident in many of the workplace themes with which you will become familiar in this book. These include growing attention to the value of teams and work groups, consensus decision making, employee involvement, flatter structures, and strong corporate cultures. These and related concepts and themes are well represented in today's high performance organizations.

As the field of organizational behavior continues to mature in its global research and understanding, we will all benefit from an expanding knowledge base that is enriched by cultural diversity. Organizational behavior is a science of contingencies, and one of them is culture. No one culture possesses all of the "right" answers to today's complex management and organizational problems. But a sincere commitment to global organizational learning can give us fresh ideas while still permitting locally appropriate solutions to be implemented with cultural sensitivity. This search for global understanding will be reflected in the following chapters as we move further into the vast domain of OB.

Learning from Experience¹⁾

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO GET FEEDBACK

It may be difficult for leaders to get relevant feedback, particularly if they occupy powerful positions in an organization. Yet leaders often need feedback more than subordinates do. Leaders may not learn much from their leadership experiences if they get no feedback about how they are doing. Therefore, they may need to create opportunities to get feedback, especially with regard to feedback from those working for them.

First of all, leaders should not assume they have invited feedback merely by saying that they have an open-door policy. A mistake some bosses make is presuming that others perceive them as open to discussing things just because they say they are open to discussing things. How truly open a door is, clearly, is in the eye of the beholder. In that sense, the key to constructive dialogue (i.e. feedback) is not just expressing a policy but also being perceived as approachable and sincere in the offer.

Some of the most helpful information for developing your own leadership can come from asking for feedback from others about their perceptions of your behavior and its impact on your group's overall effectiveness. Leaders who take psychological tests and use periodic surveys or questionnaires will have greater access to feedback than leaders who fail to systematically solicit feedback from their followers. Unless leaders ask for feedback, they may not get it.

TAKING A 10 PERCENT STRETCH

Learning always involves stretching. Learning involves taking risks and reaching beyond one's comfort zone. This is true of a toddler's first unsteady steps, a student's first serious confrontation with divergent worlds of thought, and leadership development. The phrase 10 percent stretch conveys the idea of voluntary but determined efforts to improve leadership skills. It is analogous to physical exercise, though in this context stretching implies extending one's behavior, not muscles, just a bit beyond the comfort zone. Examples could include making a point to converse informally with everyone in the office at least once each day, seeking an opportunity to be chairman of a committee, or being quieter than usual at meetings (or more assertive, as the case may be). There is much to be gained from a commitment to such ongoing "exercise" for personal and leadership development.

Several positive outcomes are associated with leaders who regularly practice the 10 percent stretch. First, their apprehension about doing something new or different gradually decreased. Second, leaders will broaden their repertoire of leadership skills. Third, because of this increased

1) Source: Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy, *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons of Experience* 5th ed. (Asia: Mc Graw Hill International Edition, 2006). pp. 433-437.

repertoire, their effectiveness will likely increase. And finally, leaders regularly taking a 10 percent stretch will model something very valuable to others. Few things will send a better message to others about the importance of their own development than the example of how sincerely a leader takes his or her own development.

One final aspect of the 10 percent stretch is worth mentioning. One reason the phrase is so appealing is that it sounds like a measurable yet manageable change. Many people will not offer serious objection to trying a 10 percent change in some behavior, whereas they might well be resistant (and unsuccessful) if they construe a developmental goal as requiring fundamental change in their personality or interpersonal style. Despite its nonthreatening connotation, though, and actual 10 percent. In baseball, for example, many players hit 0.275, but only the best hit over 0.300 - a difference of about 10 percent.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Leaders learn from others, first of all, by recognizing they can learn from others and importantly, from any others. That may seem self-evident, but in fact people often limit what and whom they pay attention to, and thus what they may learn from. For example, athletes may pay a lot of attention to how coaches handle leadership situations. However, they may fail to realize they could also learn a lot by watching the director of the school play and the band conductor. Leaders should not limit their learning by narrowly defining the sorts of people they pay attention to.

Similarly, leaders also can learn by asking questions and paying attention to everyday situations. An especially important time to ask questions is when leaders are new to a group or activity and have some responsibility for it. When possible, leaders should talk to the person who previously had the position to benefit from his or her insights, experience, and assessment of the situation. In addition, observant leaders are able to extract meaningful leadership lessons from everyday situations. Somethings as plain and ordinary as a high school care wash or the activities at a fast-food restaurant may offer an interesting leadership lesson. Leaders can learn a lot by actively observing how others react to and handle different challenges and situations, even very common ones.

KEEPING A JOURNAL

Another way leaders can experiences for their richness and preserve their learning is by keeping a journal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Journals are similar to diaries, but they are not just accounts of day's events. A journal should include entries that address some aspect of leaders or leadership. Journal entries may include comments about insightful or interesting quotes, anecdotes, newspaper articles, or even humorous cartoons about leadership. They may also include reflections on personal events, such as interactions with bosses, coaches, teachers, students, employees,

players, teammates, roommates, and so on. Such entries can emphasize a good (or bad) way somebody handled something, a problem in the making, the difference between people in their reactions to situations, or people in the news, a book, or a film. Leaders should also use their journals to "think on paper" about leadership readings from textbooks or formal leadership programs or to describe examples from their own experience of a concept presented in a reading.

There are at least three good reasons for keeping a journal. First, the very process of writing increases the likelihood that leaders will be able to look at an event from a different perspective or feel differently about it. Putting an experience into words can be a step toward taking a more objective look at it. Second, leaders can (and should) reread earlier entries. Earlier entries provide an interesting and valuable autobiography of a leader's evolving thinking about leadership and about particular events in his or her life. Third, journal entries provide a repository of ideas that leaders may later want to use more formally for papers, pep talks, or speeches. Good journal entries provide leaders with a wealth of examples that they may use in speeches, presentations, and so on.

HAVING A DEVELOPMENTAL PLAN

Leadership development almost certainly occurs in ways and on paths that are not completely anticipated or controlled. That's no reason, however, for leaders to avoid actively directing some aspects of their own development. A systematic plan outlining self-improvement goals and strategies will help leaders take advantage of opportunities they otherwise might overlook. Developing a systematic plan also will help leaders prioritize the importance of different goals so that their efforts can be put into areas with the greatest relative payoffs. Leaders who carefully choose which seminars and conferences to attend may help themselves maximize their contribution to their personal development goals. Leaders should look for opportunities on the job or in volunteer work for responsibilities that may further their growth. Leaders should recognize, however, that they may experience conflict - both internal and external - between doing more of what they already do well and stretching developmentally.

The following is an example of such a conflict. Suppose Sheila is an accountant who has just joined the board of a local charity. Because handling financial records is something many people do not enjoy, and because Sheila has a demonstrable knack for and interest in it, others on the board may well ask her to become the treasurer. Almost certainly Sheila would do as good a job as anyone else on the board. But suppose Sheila's personal goals included developing her public speaking skills. In such a case, doing what she does best (and what others want her to do) might stand in the way of growth in another area.

Sheila has several alternatives. She could refuse the job of treasurer because she has had her fill of accounting. Alternatively, she could accept the job of treasurer and look for yet another activity in which to develop her public speaking skills.

Unfortunately, both of these options may present their own problems. Still another alternative would be to negotiate to expand the role of treasurer to allow greater opportunity to blend the role with her own developmental goals. For example, Sheila might choose to make regular oral reports to the board instead of submitting solely written reports. Additionally, she might take on a larger share of speaking at local service clubs for the purpose of public education about the charity and her own expert view of its needs with regard to fund-raising and financial support. The point here is that leaders simply need to be deliberate in seeking opportunities to put their personal development plans into action. Leaders should exercise control over events to the extent they can; they should not let event exercise a counter productive control over them.

A leader's first step in exercising control over his personal development is to identify what his goals actually are. The example above presumed Sheila already had identified public speaking as a skill she wanted to improve. But what if a leader is uncertain about what he or she needs to improve? As described earlier, leaders should systematically collect information from a number of different sources. One place a leader can get information about where to improve is through a review of current job performance, if that is applicable. Ideally, leaders will have had feedback sessions with their own superiors, which should help them identify areas of relative strength and weakness. Leaders should treat this feedback as a helpful perspective on their developmental needs. Leaders also should look at their interactions with peers as a source of ideas about what they might work on. Leaders should especially take notice if the same kinds of problem comes up in their interactions with different individuals in separate situations. Leaders need to look at their own role in such instances as objectively as they can; there might be clues about what behavioral changes might facilitate better working relationships with others. Still another way to identify developmental objectives is to look ahead to what new skills are needed to function effectively a higher level in the organization, or in a different role that the leader now has. Finally, leaders can use formal psychological tests and questionnaires to determine what their relative strengths and weaknesses as a leaders may be.

On a concluding not, there is one activity leaders should put in their developmental plans whatever else might be includes in them: a problem of personal reading to broaden their perspectives on leadership. This reading can include the classics as well as contemporary fiction, biographies and autobiographies of successful leaders, essays on ethics and social responsibility, and assorted self improvement books on various leadership management issues. A vital part of leadership development is intellectual stimulation and reflection, and a active reading program is indispensable to that Leaders might even want to join (or form) a discussion group that regularly meets to exchange ideas about a book everyone has read.