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Learning Organization in Non-Governmental Organizations: A Brief Literature Review and Recommendations for Practice

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Abstract:

Learning organization is considered a pivotal aspect in improving organizational performance, which has become increasingly important for global leaders. This article attempts to review and critique Senge's theory of learning organization, followed by a conclusion and recommendations for practice in non-governmental organizations. The findings indicated that the five disciplines of Senge's theory encourage organizations' leaders to be inspirational, practical, and innovative within the organization. However, it is essential to consider the flaws of Senge's theory, namely the individual interests in the organization and insufficient evidence linking team learning to organizational learning, the existing top-down leadership approach, neglecting cultural differences, and the lack of experience-based value. It is vital for non-governmental organizations to consider these mentioned weaknesses of Senge's theory to ensure the efficiency of implementation.

Keywords: *Learning organization, non-governmental organization, team learning, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, systems thinking*

1. Introduction

In the fast-growing society, the concept of learning organization has attracted more attention amongst both practitioners and researchers (Bui & Baruch, 2010). Serrat (2017) indicated that the contribution that learning may make to the growth of effectiveness of an organization is valued by learning organizations. In this sense, Law & Chuah (2015) stated that one of the significant approaches to achieving organizational development is known as organizational learning. A current study conducted by Wadel & Knaben (2022) has indicated that each institution engages in some form of learning. However, only those with particular learning-related qualities are recognized as learning organizations. It can be argued that a learning organization can only exist when it possesses all the necessary features.

Peter Senge, a systems scientist, wrote *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990 and the updated version in 2006, which pointed out five disciplines learning organizations need to master: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning, which had laid a foundation for new and burgeoning interests in management practice. Although there exist several models of learning organization, this article focuses on reviewing the concept of and critiquing Senge's theory of learning organization, followed by a conclusion and recommendations for practice for non-governmental institutions.

2. What Is a Learning Organization?

After Senge's book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, was published in 1990, the reputation of the learning organization's concept significantly rose (Osagie et al., 2022). Although researchers and practitioners have shown an increased interest in learning organizations, Chai & Dirani (2018); Kim et al. (2015) claimed that the term has not been convergent among scholars. Senge (2006, p. 3) defined a learning organization as an organization "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 to see the whole together".

In this sense, the learning organization places a robust emphasis on ongoing learning, where employees aspire to nurture their competencies to generate better outcomes. Another study by Örtenblad (2018) has concluded that a learning environment that promotes trial and error and provides time for reflection is a crucial component of the learning organization. It could be argued that the critical aspects of a learning organization involve reflection and the habit of exchanging knowledge, ideas, and skills amongst the staff members within the company.

More specifically, a study on becoming a learning organization by Korn et al. (2021) has confirmed that the learning organization refers to a company where employees are not only encouraged to work and experiment collectively

but are also provided with the chance to pursue their aspirations. This study found that employees continue to learn through experience-based learning, knowledge exchange, feedback, and self-reflection to enhance their performance. Though this emerging definition is quite simple and more understandable, it seems vague. From the aforementioned definitions, it can be concluded that the learning organization is one in which every employee strives to establish a culture of continuous learning using various means, either individually or collectively, to enhance working performance to achieve organizational goals. It is evident that every staff member has a sense of cooperation, teamwork, and reflection with constructive feedback in producing greater results for the firm.

3. Senge's Five Disciplines of Learning Organization

At the heart of Senge's (1990) theory is systems thinking, "a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools" (p. 7) that support people in identifying the interrelatedness of actions and their effects on each other. Without systems thinking, people would be inclined to solve separated, superficial parts of the problem instead of looking from a more comprehensive, multifaceted angle; thus, the root cause might never be unravelled (Senge, 1990). In practice, some non-governmental organizations have been continuously attempting to resolve various external and internal threats; however, several recurring problems suggest that there might still be a lack of systematic approach within the organization itself (Senge, 1990). Argyris (1978), on a similar theme, described this phenomenon as single-loop learning, which happened when people in organizations focused on improving existing strategies or routines and overlooked the more significant pattern of changes. Organizations would learn better while employing double-loop learning, which was when people questioned the whole system's underlying policies, practices, and values and how it changed their course of action (Argyris, 1978).

When it comes to the forces that drive organizational learning, a shared vision is among the most powerful ones (Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) argued that the shared vision was something "palpable". It pervaded throughout the organization and brought a sense of wholeness to different actions. A shared vision connected people, or in other words, allowed people to become an integrated part of something bigger than themselves (Senge, 1990). Having a solid mutual cause that motivates employees to strive for accomplishments has been established to be a vital part of organizational learning (Flood, 1999; Senge, 1990). However, it still needs to be determined how exactly a vision is shared. Perhaps it was the mutual consensus that shared vision and common goals should be collectively created among all organization employees (Senge, 1990; Argyris & Schön, 1996), but some might argue that this could be just the leader's aspirations, provided that the employees thoroughly understand how that vision was created (Kouzes & Posner, 2009).

Like shared vision, mental models are an intangible but powerful force that could alter someone's actions (Senge, 1990). Mental models are our internal understanding of the world, the deeply ingrained image of how things work. Therefore, Senge (1990) believed that understanding a person's mental models – assumptions, ideas, perceptions – could explain why they do certain things (or not). Here we could see that Senge's work once again resembled Argyris's study, particularly his theories of action. Argyris and Schön (1974) claimed that what people say – their espoused theories – might not be aligned with what they do – their theories-in-use, which are their mental models. A member of the organization might communicate their espoused theories when asked about how they would behave in a specific situation instead of describing their theories-in-use, which could be attributed to their lack of awareness of the theories-in-use themselves (Argyris & Schön, 1974; Senge, 1990). Reflection and dialogue could be seen as common practices within an organization, but how "learningful" (Senge, 1990, p. 8) are the conversations and are they able to unearth people's thinking and expose them to changes, leading to continuous adaptations and eventually growth within the business, still needs more exploration.

Toward a more personal level of learning within the organization, Senge (1990) introduced personal mastery—a person's commitment to expanding their ability to produce the life they want. Personal mastery consisted of two underlying developments: a perpetual clarification of what is essential, and a continuous acknowledgement of reality (Senge, 1990). The motivation to unify what people want and where they are now generates lifelong learning (Senge, 1990). A similar theme was echoed by Bui and Baruch (2010), who claimed that personal mastery includes personal values, motivation, individual learning, personal vision, development, and training. In the business context, although individual learning cannot guarantee organizational learning, organizational learning cannot occur without its members' learning (Senge, 1990). Senge paid particular attention to this reciprocal relationship, claiming that organizations supporting employees' personal growth had a greater chance of increasing productivity.

Nonetheless, individually empowering people could lead to chaos and difficulties if there is a lack of alignment in the organization (Senge, 1990). A team of great individuals could only produce excellent outcomes if they were truly "thinking together" (Senge, 1990, p. 10). This is where team learning comes into the picture. Senge's (1990) discipline of team learning was built on the concepts of shared vision and personal mastery, albeit more than these two alone were needed to create success. The key element here was a level of collectiveness and coordination between team members. Although a certain level of individual skills and understanding was needed, team learning could only be mastered when the whole team collectively participated in the two practices: "dialogue and discussion" (Senge, 1990, p. 220). Notably, Senge stressed the distinction between these two practices, saying that the former was where "there is a free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues" (p. 220), and the latter involved back-and-forth presentations and defenses of ideas until one decision was made. The argument was that learning could only happen if a team could differentiate and practice these practices simultaneously since they were complementary.

4. Criticisms of Senge's Five Disciplines

Despite the popularity of the five disciplines, there are several unanswered questions that Senge failed to address. As Stoll & Kools (2017) pointed out, there is little agreement on how the five principles can be operationalized as various individuals interpret the aspects of the five principles differently. More specifically, the guidelines in terms of the five principles of learning organization for transforming an educational institution into a learning organization introduced by Senge are vague (Örtenblad, 2002; Stoll & Kools, 2017). As a result, the following paragraphs offer some critiques of Senge's theory.

The interconnection between organizational learning and team learning is Senge's initial area of weakness. Concerning team learning, Reese (2020) points out that Senge failed to demonstrate the connection between the team and the organization. Reese (2020) continues that it is still unclear how learning at the team level relates to learning across the business. It can be suggested that Senge should address this gap with more credible evidence; otherwise, it may lead to doubt among researchers and practitioners. Additionally, Senge disregarded internal organizational power dynamics and conflicting personal interests (Caldwell, 2012). Senge's learning organizations appeared to be political-free and power neutral; individuals were asked to integrate their self-interests and life goals into the organizations without any resistance (Caldwell, 2012). How the organizations regulate employees' disagreements about personal and moral values, interests, and power was unexplained, which was problematic (Caldwell, 2012). It could be concluded that Senge learning organization model's weak points are his failure to acknowledge the importance of individual interest in the organization and his vague demonstration of the connection between team learning and learning for the entire business.

Senge remains to employ a top-down leadership style even if he is dedicated to promoting the learning culture through encouraging shared vision, team learning, and individual mastery. Caldwell (2012, p. 42) claimed that instead of "a theory of agency", learning and change in organizations, Senge's learning organization is solely "a reconfigured top-down leadership theory of systemic organizational change". Therefore, Caldwell (2012) continued that self-independence, shared knowledge, and change inside Senge's learning organizations are restricted instead of opening new possibilities. In this regard, it could be seen that organizations' leaders may have a greater tendency to utilize their positions of authority to control their subordinates and make decisions as opposed to inspiring and empowering team members to work. Due to a lack of empowerment and delegation in the organization, each individual is less likely to get the chance to define their own visions and goals. As a result, it can also be challenging to encourage a learning culture, the autonomy of learning, and decision-making and achieve the organization's common vision.

Senge appears to disregard the importance of practice by giving systems of expertise precedence over practical application. Caldwell (2012, p. 45) contends that "Senge essentially reformulates a system ideal of expertise that allows him to conceive the learning organization as the outcome of learning through expertise rather than learning through practice". Given that ideas are often provided by experts, this may discourage collective intelligence amongst team members. Individuals could be less likely to be involved in knowledge sharing, discussion, and dialogues. Senge's deficit might, therefore, be filled by constantly providing feedback while learning from the experience of authentic practices.

Similar to Caldwell's idea, Retna (2002) also criticized Senge's framework for neglecting the cultural aspects. She argued that Senge's "mono-cultural, North American perspective" was unacceptable in the face of increased globalization. Since Western and Eastern cultures are not always similar, if not strikingly different, the complexities of a national culture or a mix of different ones strongly impact human interaction and self-realization (Hofstede, 1993). Senge's book was based in an American capitalist society, which focuses on profitable businesses, while for non-governmental, non-profit organizations that are based in a different context, employees might have different motivations that the organization could not cater for.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has given a brief overview of Senge's theory on learning organization. The five disciplines are helpful as an innovative, inspirational, and practical leadership-based model of organizational learning (Bui & Baruch, 2010). It has served as the foundation for many successful studies in the management field (Neshat et al., 2017; Goh, 2019; 2020) and has influenced positive learning practices in many organizations (Bui & Baruch, 2010). Therefore, it is essential for non-governmental organizations to review Senge's theory and consider applying the five disciplines to improve their learning practices. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that Senge's theory is not without its weaknesses, which include the individual interests in the organization and insufficient evidence connecting team learning to organizational learning, appearing a top-down managerial approach, a lack of value placed on the significance of practices, and ignoring cultural differences. These issues should be addressed when applying the theory into practice to ensure problem evaluation of the organization's learning capacity.

With that being said, the following are suggested for non-governmental organizations to improve their organizational learning. First and foremost, leaders should ensure that the organization's vision is indeed a shared vision: that it has the capacity to connect its members and inspire them to work toward a mutual purpose. Many theorists have recognized this as a vital contribution to the success of learning organizations (Flood, 1999; Senge, 2006; Reese, 2020). A truly shared vision eliminates the problem of top-down leadership and the influence of leaders on organizations that Senge (1990) mentioned in his work; however, distributed leadership is not always guaranteed (Caldwell, 2012). It would be beneficial for organizations to keep revising their governing ideas based on their members' inputs to ensure that it is still relevant and stays a truly shared vision.

Secondly, it might be beneficial to create more individualized development programs tailored to employees' real-life needs (Jarvis & Judge, 2021) to foster long-term commitment to the organization. This resonates with Senge's (2006)

view that personal vision is the groundwork for lifelong learning. Moreover, reflection and self-evaluation in development programs could serve as a helpful means for leaders to manage members' mental models and ensure their alignment with the values of the organization. This practice fosters individual learning and team learning, as it is argued that learning in organizations cannot take place if there is no individual learning (Senge, 1990). Nevertheless, intrinsic personal motivation should be considered circumstantial until more empirical research can validate the impact of an organization's development strategy on members' learning (Bui & Baruch, 2010).

Regarding team learning, Senge's theory failed to notice and negotiate the impacts of human agency, especially cultural context, in a professional working environment. It is suggested that managers should be more aware of employees' cultural values and the cultural setting of the organization and make efforts to create a learning culture that takes these variables into consideration (Škerlavaj et al., 2013).

Last but not least, regarding the systems thinking approach, it would be recommended to have a comprehensive, systematic review of the recurring issues. The board and the middle managers should evaluate the organization's performance, determine the root cause of blockages, and work out the solutions together. An awareness of non-system thinking and single-loop learning within the organization should be noticed and eliminated as soon as possible to maximize learning opportunities.

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