

How do Organizations Learn?

Byron A. Ellis – September 04, 2017



Senge (1990a) indicated that “Organizations learn only through individual who learn.” Unfortunately, many organizational managers often ignore individuals who learn. However, if organizational managers are not maximizing the comparative advantages of learning individuals, their organizations cannot learn.

Senge recognized that individual learning by itself is only a necessary condition, but not a sufficient condition for organizational learning. For instance, when managers inflict pain on subordinates, learning employees often become reluctant to pass on their learning to the organization. Nonetheless, over the long run, superior organizational performance depends on superior employee learning (Senge, 1990b).

DePree (1987) argued that the first responsibility of a manager is to define reality and the last is to say thanks to employees. In between, the manager is a servant and debtor. However, most managers do not see themselves as servants and debtors to employees, rather they see employees as servants and debtors.

When managers inflict pain, they are unable to induce employees to enthusiastically support organizational goals (Burns, 1978). Heckscher, Eisenstat and Rice (1994) believed that hierarchy distortions interfere with collaborative managerial behaviors. In many instances, hierarchy and communication distortions are more acute when employees are more knowledgeable than managers. Many managers are reluctant to engage with knowledgeable subordinates, because they are afraid to reveal their lack of knowledge. However, the knowledgeable employee expectation is that managers would exploit employees' competitive advantages to benefit the organization and the employees.

Managers that inflict pain on subordinates often develop intimidating management styles, which affects organizational performance. When pain-managers introduce organizational innovations, lack of employees' trust prevents successful implementation. Often, the innovation disappears within three years; consultants call this process *successful failures*. Thus, managers that inflict pain are incapable of establishing transformational processes within organizations.

Heckscher et al. (1994) noted that it is learning individuals that introduce innovations to the organizations. Often, though, innovations originating from learning employees causes uneasiness and jealousies with pain-managers. Additionally, some intimidating managers commandeer employees' innovation making it their own. However, because they are often unknowledgeable of the intricacies of the innovation, they often fail at implementing it.

Managers must focus on maximizing the comparative advantages of learning employees to build and diffuse optimal organizational capacity. They could use teams to achieve commitment to common goals, to cement accountability, trust and collaboration, as well as synergy (Thompson et al., 2000).

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