Learning in Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

In work life, socially based learning occurs all the time. We learn from interactions between peers, genders, functional groups, and across hierarchies, and it happens in ways not normally recognized as learning (Jordan, 1993). Therefore, use of the term "social" learning reflects that organizations, organizational units, and work groups are social clusters, as are study groups and task groups, and thus learning occurs in a social context.

In this situation, social learning is defined as learning occurring within or by a group, an organization, or any cultural cluster and it includes:

- The procedures by which knowledge and practice are transmitted across posting cycles, across different work situations and across time;
- The procedures that facilitate generative learning—learning that enhances the enterprise's ability to adjust to dynamic and unexpected situations and to react creatively to them.

Social learning represents important processes that contribute to individuals' abilities to understand information, create knowledge from that information, and share what they know. Social learning is therefore intrinsic to knowledge management.

This article is based on research conducted by the Enterprise Social Learning Architectures (ESLA) team. The ESLA team was created in 1998 to carry out a research study into "social learning" and the organizational culture that supports such learning. The study, spanning a period of four years, took place in a number of different settings within the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO).

The findings of this research are of importance because the ADO, like other organizations, faces the problem that much of the organization's memory and knowledge is "walking out the door" in terms of the skills, experience, and the corporate knowledge of its ex-employees. In the current climate, the competitive edge lies in gaining the *knowledge edge*, and to do so requires an understanding of how new knowledge is generated within groups, what motivates people to share what they know, how it is shared between and managed amongst members of an organization, and to what extent organizational culture influences social learning. In this article, we explore some of the organizational factors that enhance social learning and as such, are instrinsically related to knowledge management, as there is a symbiotic relationship between the two concepts.

BACKGROUND

A key assumption underlying the study was that research aimed at explicating social learning requires a socio-technical approach. Many organizations invest heavily in implementing information technology in the hope of providing a seamless solution to managing information resources and organizational knowledge. Unfortunately, these initiatives are often implemented without much regard to how people in organizations go about creating, acquiring, sharing, and making use of information (Bednar, 2000; Davenport, 1994; Vandeville, 2000). The greatest knowledge base in the company does not reside in a computer database somewhere but in the heads of the individuals associated with that organization. These individual knowledge bases are continually changing and adapting to the real world in front of them. Therefore, these individual knowledge bases need to be connected together so that they can do whatever they do best in the shortest possible time. New communication technology will certainly support information sharing where physical proximity is not a possibility. However, the technology alone will not create the trust and interpersonal context necessary to achieve a true network. It is, therefore, necessary to prepare the cultural ground. Values cannot be shared electronically or via bits of paper. Organizations are not based on electronic networks, rather, relationships must be initially constructed

through face-to-face interactions (Davenport, 1994). Thus, knowledge sharing will depend on the quality of conversations, formal or informal, that people have (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

Research on the cultural aspects of those organizations that foster new knowledge and generative learning suggests that employee trust and open communication play an integral role. Higher levels of trust between managers and employees are correlated with more open communication (Ruppel & Harrington, 2000). Schein (1993) and Phillips (1997) suggest that information sharing promotes common identity, mutual trust, and organizational learning and is directly related to organizational cultures that foster generative learning. Schein (1993) also claims that opening up and sharing encourages integration between organizational subcultures and, in turn, organizational adaptation to change. Organizations have a responsibility to create a culture in which learning occurs and that culture will determine the quality of learning that takes place. Such a culture provides the opportunity for personal contact so that tacit knowledge, which cannot effectively be captured in procedures or represented in documents and databases, can be transferred (Davenport & Prusack, 1998; Webber, 1993). For this to occur, the focus has to be on increasing the ability of the individual, as it would be the collective result of many individual actions that would produce a result for the whole of the organization. In a culture that values knowledge, managers recognize not just that knowledge generation is important for business success but also that it should be nurtured.

The methodology of the study evolved over time and included qualitative and quantitative aspects. The research team used ethnographic techniques in the form of fieldwork, which entailed observing the work taking place in different settings, and using directed questioning to clarify issues. In addition to ethnographic observations, the ESLA team undertook extensive, semi-structured interviews with a stratified sample of staff to ensure that an adequate representation was achieved. More than 60 interviews were conducted, and all interviews and field notes were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the qualitative software package N'Vivo.

The quantitative method involved a questionnaire consisting of Likert scale questions, some open-ended questions, as well as questions ranking listed attributes. In addition, the questionnaires were designed to collect some demographic data about study participants. The response rate for the questionnaires was more than 90%.

The combination of methods offered complementary perspectives of each of the settings. The observations and interviews provided data that offered the insiders' points of view and also shed light on unique aspects of the various social settings that were studied, adding richness to the data. On the other hand, the quantitative surveys enabled generalizations across the settings and answered "what if" types of questions.

SOCIAL LEARNING ENABLERS

A set of overarching organizational values will determine what type of learning culture and organizational communication climate prevails within any company. The ESLA research findings indicate that in organizational cultures characterized by trust, transparency of decision-making, empowerment and forgiveness of mistakes, sharing of information is widespread. It is difficult to determine whether the organizational cultural values are an organizational "property" adopted by its staff or whether these values are influenced by individuals and their belief system. However, within the same organization, different units were operating according to a different "cultural code". This seems to indicate that each individual staff member can mold their organizational culture within the spheres of their responsibility or influence and, as stated earlier, it is the collective sum of individual actions that results in learning at the organizational level.

In addition to the overarching values, the research identified an additional set of factors that supports and enables effective social learning. These factors fall into two categories. The first, *Learning Capability Development*, refers to *characteristics in the environment* and provides a context in which the second category operates, such as organizational infrastructure. This second category is referred to as *Enablers* and represents *processes and strategies* that, if present and effectively applied in an enterprise, can facilitate social learning, such as Common Identity, Team Building, Access to Information, Development of Individual Expertise, and Induction and Enculturation.

As depicted in Figure 1, all of these social learning factors can, from time to time, be either inhibited or challenged by issues such as political and economic vagaries, budget uncertainty, organizational restructures, retrenchments, and so forth.

A graphical representation of the structured social learning architecture is shown in Figure 2.

A common finding through all the settings studied was the impact of trust and open communication on the enablers of generative and social learning. This is because of trust's impact on willingness to share knowledge and to voice ideas. Higher levels of risk-taking behavior have been found to result from increased trust in co-worker relationships (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995) and from supervisors showing concern for employees' ideas and feelings (Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Addition-