Leading in the Learning Organization

by Joel Baldomir

Leaders who focus on the development of knowledge-focused organizational systems may position their organizations to achieve sustainable success by identifying their organizations as learning organizations. Watkins and Marsick (1992) explained that "Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles" (p. 118). In a learning organization, the emphasis on the need for collective learning throughout the system can lead to overall organizational change, if properly communicated to all members of the organization. Leaders of learning organizations need to learn how to create a shared vision among their organization's members in order to foster an atmosphere of learning.

The Role of Organizational Structure

The structure of an organizational system can determine the appropriate approach that leaders should use to create a shared vision among the members of a learning organization. Finger and Brand's (1999) study of the Swiss Postal Service found that encouraging an atmosphere of learning in more traditionally structured organizations required techniques that the organization's members viewed as being nonthreatening. They discovered that identification as a learning organization decreased this threat when this identity was clearly communicated to the various members of the organization. Leaders who recognize this need can establish and encourage a shared identity by creating clear goals for the members of their organization. Mitchell and Silver's (1990) research on group performance found that having clearly-defined group goals resulted in a clearer sense of purpose and higher performance among group members. Group goals help to establish the vision of the learning organization and allow for some systematic measurement that the organization's members can use to evaluate their performance.

Like Finger and Brand (1999), Wheatley (2001) explained that many of the organizational systems that exist are left over from an antiquated approach to leadership where reductionist, linear thinking allows for only a limited view of an organization's needs. She added that a strict hierarchal-structured organizational system might do little to encourage members of the organization to work together within an organizational structure. By recognizing that the organization exists to provide a means of developing a collaborative perspective, the members of an organization might be better positioned to work together and acknowledge their need to be a part of the knowledge system (Tsoukas & Mylonopoulos, 2004).

King and Marks (2008) studied the dynamics of a knowledge system within the context of a hierarchal-structured government organization. They found that although the development of a knowledge-sharing culture has been viewed as something that is sought after by many organizations, the success of the system may also be dependent on the structure of the organization itself. The structure and culture of an organization are factors that should determine the strategies used by organizational leaders (Yukl, 2006). Within a learning organization, the leaders must be commitment to studying their organization and adding to their own knowledge in order to effectively encourage the learning acquisition of their followers. It is the leadership of the learning organization that is charged with the task of equipping their followers so as to allow for individual growth and development within the collaborative dynamic of the organizational system.

The Need for a Shared Vision

Leaders of learning organizations can best achieve cooperation or group collaboration through a process of creating a shared vision and clear purpose (Eisenberg & Goodall, 2007). Communicating a shared vision is key to uniting the various members of an organization; this allows them to redirect their attention from their own individual positions to the greater good of the organization (Wheatley, 2001). Senge (1990) found that for an organizational system to function effectively, members of an organization needed to ignore their own individual assumptions and strive to become a collective unit that thinks together. The desire to gain an organizational body of knowledge establishes the importance of the learning organization and creates a shared vision that can unite the members of the learning organization. Clearly understanding and communicating the need for the members of a learning organization to abandon their own self interests in favor of a higher organizational goal of collective learning is a strategy that will allow leaders to better

prepare an organization's members to prosper within the organizational system, as well as within their specific industrial field (Wheatley, 2001).

Sharing Information

For a learning organization to prosper and grow within their field, organizational leaders need to act in a manner that encourages the sharing of information between all of the members of the organization (Treleaven, 2004). Senge (1990) found that articulating the importance of the sharing of information is vital to the success of any organization. An effective organizational system is one that is adaptive, allowing all of its members to feel valued and empowered to accomplish any needed tasks (Wheatley, 2001). Willett (1999) went so far as to argue that an organization's members cannot behave responsibly unless they are given access to the knowledge that is gained from others in the organizational system. In learning organizations, granting members access to the information within the system is necessary for the successful adaptation of all of the members of the organization.

Creating Knowledge Links

The sharing of information is a key characteristic of a learning organization. Bogenrieder and Nooteboom (2004) explained that within an organizational, there is a need to establish knowledge links between the members of the organization and the organization as a whole. They further explained that the knowledge gained by the individual must be tied in to the knowledge gained by the collective organization. In learning organizations, developing relationships between the members of the system can form these knowledge links. A person's true effectiveness in an organization should therefore be measured based on his or her relationships with other organization members rather than on his or her individual accomplishments (Wheatley, 2001). The individual relationships within the learning organization are further strengthened by the creation of smaller learning communities. This approach forms a symbiotic relationship between the individual and the organization, thus establishing the importance of cooperative collaboration within learning organizations (Bogenrieder & Nooteboom, 2004).

Communicating Purpose

A leader's ability to effectively communicate the purpose of certain tasks is essential to maintaining collaborative learning within a learning organization. Hertel, Niedner and Herrmann's (2003) study of Linux software developers found that clear identification and communication of one's specific purpose within a system could lead to the successful completion of organizational tasks. The study focused on 141 software developers working on a large open source project. The nature of this particular project made it necessary for the software developers to focus on both their own individual knowledge and the collective knowledge gained form their project team (Hertel, Niedner & Herrmann, 2003). Their own identification as Linux developers working together on a larger task allowed them to communicate and share their findings with their fellow teammates, thus creating an open, collaborative, learning-focused system. Within learning organizations, leaders should encourage this level of open communication.

Thinking Long Term

Leaders of learning organizations also need to look beyond the short-sighted perspectives that prevent some organizational leaders from embracing the concept of the learning organization. The perceived lack of practicality and additional time investment often impact an organizational leader's decisions concerning the creation of learning organizations (Cremer, Garicano & Prat, 2007). Issues of cost and competition may, in the short term, make it seem undesirable for some leaders to embrace the concept of a learning organization, but as Senge (1990) pointed out, the return may not be immediately seen because most knowledge systems are, "generally oriented toward a long-term view" (p. 92). The learning organization needs leaders who possess the ability to look beyond the immediate organizational tasks and focus on the greater good that comes from the collective purpose of seeking knowledge that will benefit the organization as a whole.

Conclusion

Maintaining the effectiveness of a learning organization requires the total commitment of the leadership and all of the other members of the organization. The successful organizational leader is able to move the organization toward becoming a true learning organization by establishing a shared organizational identity and is able to clearly convey this identity to all members of the organization. Effective leaders of learning organizations are those individuals who encourage the

pursuit of individual and organizational knowledge by creating a shared vision of the future of the organization. They possess the ability to identify the role that each individual member plays in the organizational system and allow for the open exchange of information between all members. These are the skills that will allow leaders to be successful within learning organizations.

About the Author

Joel Baldomir is an instructor at Nyack College's School of Business & Leadership and an adjunct instructor of communication at Dominican College. He is currently working toward a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship.

Email: joelbal@regent.edu

References

Bogenrieder, I., & Nooteboom, B. (2004). The emergence of learning communities: A theoretical analysis. In H. Tsoukas, & N. Mylonopoulos (Eds.), *Organizations as knowledge systems: Knowledge, learning and dynamic capabilities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Cremer, J., Garicano, L., & Prat, A. (2007). Language and the theory of the firm. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (1), pp. 373-407.

Eisenberg, E. M., & Goodall, H. L. (2007). *Organizational communication*. Boston, MA: Bedford St. Martin's.

Finger, M., & Brand, S. B. (1999). The concept of the 'learning organization' applied to the transformation of the public sector. In M. Easterby-Smith, L. Araujo, & J. Burgoyne (Eds.), *Organizational learning and the learning organization*. London: Sage.

Hertel, G., Niedner, S., & Herrmann, S. (2003). Motivation of software developers in open source projects: An Internet-based survey of contributors to the Linux kernel. *Research Policy*, 32(7), pp. 1159-1177.

King, W., & Marks, P. (2008). Motivating knowledge sharing through a knowledge management system. *Omega*, 36(1), pp. 131-146.

Mitchell, T., & Silver, W. (1990). Individual and group goals when workers are interdependent: Effects on task strategies and performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 75, pp. 185-193.

Senge, P. M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*. London: Random House.

Treleaven, L. (2004). A knowledge-sharing approach to organizational change: A critical discourse analysis. In H. Tsoukas, & N. Mylonopoulos (Eds.), *Organizations as knowledge systems: Knowledge, learning and dynamic capabilities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tsoukas, H., & Mylonopoulos, N. (2004). *Organizations as knowledge systems: Knowledge, learning and dynamic capabilities*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Watkins, K., & Marsick, V. (1992). Building the learning organization: A new role for human resource developers. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 14(2), pp. 115-29.

Weick, K., & Westley, F. (1996). Organizational learning: Affirming an oxymoron. In S. Clegg, C. Hardy, & W. R. Nord (Eds.), *Handbook of organization studies*. London: Sage.

Wheatley, M. (2001). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. New York: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Willett, C. (1999). Knowledge sharing shifts the power paradigm. In M. Maybury, D. Morey, & B. Thuraisingham (Eds.), *Knowledge management: Classic and contemporary works*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Yukl, G. (2006). *Leadership in organizations* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.