

Human Resource Management Plays a New Role in Learning Organizations

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ABSTRACT

Needless to say, the performance of Human Resource Management (HRM) has a tremendous impact on growth, market/book value, and productivity especially in today's global competitive market. In order to survive in today's business market, many companies have done their best to shift from their old shells to the new ones. Peter M. Senge (1990) devoted a new idea for those who wished to change their traditional business operation systems. The idea was to integrate the applications of the five disciplines of a learning organization into their companies. However, the processes of transforming are complex. HRM must play a new role in order to help the organization to apply the concepts of learning organization successfully.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Learning Organization

The phrase "learning organization" has become popular used nowadays in many different enterprises. It is because most enterprises have shifted from traditional operations to complex and flexible ones. Marsick and Watkins (1994) indicated that "learning organization" learns continuously and can transform itself. It empowers the people, encourages collaboration and team learning, promotes open dialogue, and acknowledges the interdependence of individuals, the organization, and the community. McCutchan (1997) noted that the fundamental source of competitive advantage in today's organizations was shifting from resources to knowledge and from relatively stable sources of technological and market advantage to the capacity to create such advantages. Spahr (1999) further explained that "Learning organizations are firms that recognize the critical importance of continuous performance-related training and development and take appropriate action to provide them" (p.254). Therefore, the key characteristic for the success of an organization is its ability to learn. "Learning organization" was invented in the 1980s to describe organizations that experimented with new ways of conducting business in order to survive in turbulent, highly competitive markets (Senge 1990). According to the core theory of the "learning organization" proposed by Peter M. Senge in 1990, there are five disciplines, "Personal mastery", "Mental models", "Building shared vision", "Team learning" and "System thinking". The applications of the five disciplines should fall into the following four main categories: communication and openness; inquiry and feedback; adequate time; and mutual respect and support.

Characteristics of a Learning Organization

Personal mastery

Peter Senge describes personal mastery is one of the core disciplines needed to build a learning organization. Since personal mastery applies to individual learning, organizations cannot learn until their members begin to learn. To start the personal mastery, the organization must define what individual is trying to achieve, and need a true measure of how close one is to the goal. After setting individual goals, critical reflection is significant as people develop personal mastery and continue to expand their ability to create the results they want. McCutchan (1997) stated that through dialogue individuals built shared vision which pulled the organization and it was people toward the goals they truly wanted to achieve.

Mental models

Kine & Sanders (1993) indicated that a mental model was one's way of looking at the world. It was a framework for the cognitive processes of our mind. In other words, it determined how we think and act. Mental models are the

deeply ingrained assumptions and paradigms that influence how we understand and act in the world (Senge, 1990).

Building shared vision

Garvin (1993) noted that a shared vision began with the individual, and an individual vision was something that one person held as a truth. In systems thinking that goal is most often a long term goal, something that can be a leading star for the individual. However, to shared visions would be very difficult because it is almost impossible for everyone in organization to have the same goals, and the drawing will probably be interpreted differently by people, but still there is something powerful about the imagery that most people can see. Senge (1990) stressed that when an organization had a shared vision, the driving force for change comes from creative tension. Creative tension is the difference between the shared vision and the current reality. With truly committed members the creative tension will drive the organization toward its goals. Thus, the leader of the organization should share his/her vision with the employees but not to force them to accept it. It's important to encourage others to share their vision. Based on these visions, the organization's vision should evolve.

Team learning

Contributors to The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook declare that team learning defines as a discipline that starts with "dialogue," the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together." Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. Team learning is not team building, describing the latter as creating courteous behaviors, improving communication, becoming better able to perform work tasks together, and building strong relationships. (Senge, 1990, p. 355)

System thinking

Humankind has successfully developed scientific knowledge by adopting an analytical method to understand and to figure out problems. This method involves breaking a problem into components, studying each part in isolation, and then drawing conclusions about the whole. According to Senge, this sort of linear and mechanistic thinking is becoming increasingly ineffective to address modern problems. (Kofman and Senge, 1993, p. 18) This is because, today, most important issues are interrelated in ways that defy linear causation.

McCutchan (1997) indicated that systems thinking tied all the other disciplines together and offers a set of tools to understand complex organizational issues. Systems thinking, along with transformative learning alters the individual's predominant ways of thinking in order for them to understand and manage in a world of increasing inter-dependency. Mastering systems thinking helps them see how their actions have shaped their current reality and that transformation develops the confidence that really can create a new reality in the future (Senge, 1990).

Figure1 presents the characteristics that define the learning organization, and for individuals and group to practice the Characteristics in their organization. Two characteristics are individual; three are group-based. The characteristics listed in Figure1 are concrete cognitive and behavioral tools, as well as specific types of social interaction and structural conditions, that help to improve the qualities of the organizations.

Characteristic	Personal mastery - individual	Mental models - individual	Building shared vision - group	Team learning - group	Systems thinking - group
Definition	The ability to see reality as it exist, and to define what goals are trying to achieve	As one's way of looking at the world; the ability to compare reality or personal vision with perceptions	The ability of a group to hold shared visions of future with commitments and mutual understandings	The capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together."	The ability in developing scientific knowledge by adopting an analytical method to understand problems.
Practice	Willing to face limitations and difficulties; ability to deal with change; being responsible to their behavior	Being more openness and positive to things and to colleagues; willing to adopt new challenges	more effective communication flows; easier to ease the arguments, to build team trust and commitment, and being more cooperative	Group self-awareness; learning for everyone; helping and encouraging others' learning; enhanced creativity	Long-term improvement or change; decreased organizational conflict; continuous learning among group members

Figure1: Characteristics of a Learning Organization and Practices

Human Resource Management in New Era

Sphr (1999) stated that “Human Resource Management (HRM) is the utilization of human resources to achieve organizational objectives” (p.4). Since overall business markets have increased great competitions, HRM gradually appears to be enormous and expanding. Nowadays, the HRM system normally includes five functional areas which are human resource planning, recruitment, and selection; human resource development; compensation and benefits; safety and health; and employee and labor relations (Sphr ,1999).

Ever since the 1970s, in the business circle that was already client-oriented and excellence-pursuing, many managers started to break, in large scale, the management pattern featuring the traditional hierarchic system. It was replaced by a flattened organization to shorten the decision-making process, shared vision shared by organizations and staff, cooperation and specialized divisions among trans-functional teams, and the opening and exercising of information technology. While in the essence of operation, they re-considered and re-designed work processes to trim costs, reshape corporate culture, image, responsibility, ethics and values through overall promotion of product quality, service efficiency and speed. In addition, it also requires them to change organizational culture and may even need to make a clean break with past. Sphr (1999) noted that HRD had a strong influence on organizational culture because HRD could develop direct links between performance and rewards tend to create cultures conducive to achievement. Thus, human resource now plays a new role which not only recruits and manages employees but also provides a well rewarding system to encourage employees to dealing with challenging or difficulties. For serving a good role, Human Resource Department (HRD) must focus on how to create the conditions for learning instead of investing in precisely defined organizational structures quickly made obsolete by changing conditions. Marsick, V. (1990) mentioned that a learning organization is supported by a learning culture where people work together to nurture and sustain a knowledge-creating system. Therefore, it is important for HRD to create a learning atmosphere and delivering new information for its employees. In addition, HRD is responsible for preaching their people about company’s vision, vales and systematic problem solving techniques. Only if people within the organization learn to examine their values, co-create visions, redesign their approach to solving problems, and think systematically, they could become world class adapters in a work environment that is fluid, fuzzy, and fast.

In the past, the measurement of the company’s profits usually is productivity, because high or low productivity has a direct effect on wages, the cost of products, the consumption of resources to produce goods, the quality of work life, and the survival and competitiveness of industries and of individual firms. Nowadays, productivity has a larger definition. It has to connect with creativity, flexibility, world vision and the ability of using new technology. HRD can

also be in charge for the improvement of the company's productivity.

Human Resource Management in Learning Organizations

Adapting to changeable business environment is essential for a successful organization. Learning organizations exist because they make human powers more strong to deal with challenges. Therefore, Human Resource Management (HRM) must play a new role in order to help the organizations shifting from their old shells to new ones. Figure 2 provides some ideas for HRM to help employees to be part of learning organizations.

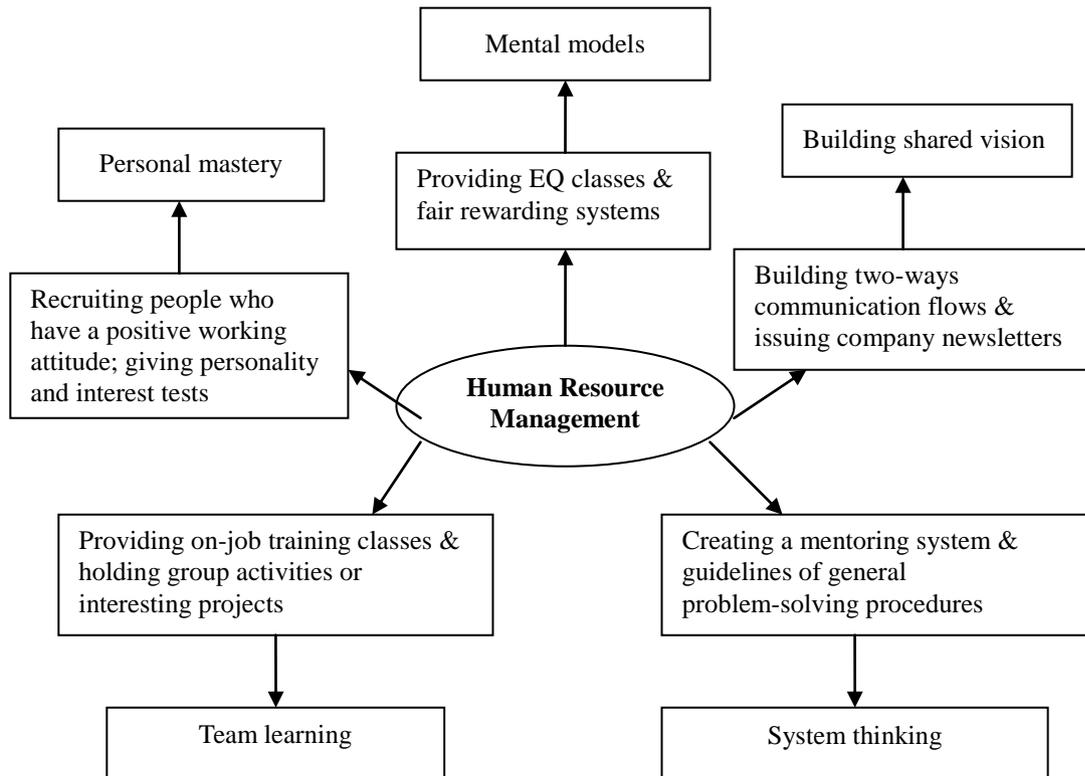


Figure2: Human Resource Management in the Learning Organization

HRM is capable to provide various ways to help people within the organizations to achieve five disciplines (Senge, 1990) -- "Personal mastery", "Mental models", "Building shared vision", "Team learning" and "System thinking". Some useful strategies for HRM to play a new role are listed below:

1. **Personal mastery:** Since HRM is also responsible for hiring employees, it would be important to find out if the new employees are truly love their jobs and willing to learn things from their jobs. Recruiting people who have a positive working attitude will benefit the organization to create a better culture. In addition, for the purpose of employees knowing better about themselves, HRM can give personality and interest tests & self-analysis lists. By doing these, people will be more easily to face their limitations and difficulties, and to deal with change.
2. **Mental models:** For the purpose of training their minds, HRM can provide people with EQ classes. In addition, fair rewarding systems are necessary for encouraging employees to be more openness and positive to things and to colleagues and willing to adopt new challenges.
3. **Building shared vision:** For the purpose of building shared vision, HRM needs to provide two-ways communication flows and issuing company newsletters so that people will be easier to hold shared visions of future with commitments and mutual understandings.
4. **Team learning:** For the purpose of team learning, HRM needs to provide on-job training classes and holding group activities or interesting projects to give people chances to work and to learn together. By attending these classes or activities together, the teams will be easier to build their self-awareness, to helping and encouraging

others' learning and to enhance their creativity.

5. System thinking: For the purpose of helping people think more systematically, HRM needs to create guidelines of general problem-solving procedures to employees. In addition, establishing a well mentoring system will be necessary for guiding new comers to adopt organizational culture.

Learning activities providing by HRM

A further explanation about what those learning activities are would be important for HRM to implement its new role. McCutchan (1997) urged that the HRM strategies to create a learning organization were many and include activities that focused on work redesign, experiential learning, dialoguing, and mechanisms to learn from customers (Marsick & Watkins, 1994); systematic problem solving, experimentation, and demonstration projects (Garvin, 1993); and Senge's (1990) five disciplines. Especially for Senge's (1990) five disciplines, they would need a set of practices which one spends one's life mastering. HRM helps employees practice their learning to integrate with the essence of the strategies or disciplines are the premise for cultivation of a learning organization.

CONCLUSIONS

The term of learning organization has been widely used in many firms. The characteristics of learning organization are useful for solving many complex problems of today's companies. The most essential idea of learning organization is that "each goal has to do with how we think, what we truly want, and how we interact and learn with one another" (Senge, 1990, p. 11). Human resource management (HRM) can play an important role in transforming traditional firms to the new looks with the characteristics of learning organization. HRM certainly helps some of today's most successful organizations to embrace these ideas by using several strategies, and to see the individuals are the most precious resource in their organizations.

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