View Learning Organization in a Situational Perspective

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Abstract. Learning organization is an emerging management theory that many scholars and practitioners focus on recent years. However, it is not always applicable for all organizations. After reviewing the concept of learning organization and debates from scholars worldwide, this article analyzes some factors may impact the form of an organization, which include external environment, business strategy, technology and its transformation, the stage and scale of the organization and institutional culture. From the situational view, the author conclude that learning organization is not the only right option for every organization all the time, bureaucratic organization and organizational unlearning might be the alternative options to obtain the competitive advantages. The organization should keep a continuous adjustment accordingly.

1. Introduction
Learning organization which means all members keep learning sharing collectively across the organization is praised highly by scholars and practitioners. It seems that learning organization is a perfect choice. By contrast, this view not always the case with many critical voices recently and other rational alternatives. According to the situational view, whether the learning organization is the appropriate option should integrate influential factors into account.

2. Concept and development of learning organization
Though, the term learning organization first used by Garratt as the title of a book (Garratt, 1987), Senge is considered to be the pioneer of learning organization, as his book The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization being rewarded and respected by academics and practitioners. In the book, Senge pictured that the learning organization should be a place that people keep learning together continuously and new ideas are raising. Plus, he put forward five disciplines which help to form a learning organization: system thinking, personal learning, mental models, shared vision and team learning.

Most studies have been devoted to clarifying the difference between learning organization and organizational learning before defining what learning organization is. In order to make a distinction between learning organization and organizational learning, most academics regard organizational learning as the process of learning in organizations which focus on activities. Organizational learning is a process of deterring and correcting error (Argyris, 1997). C. Marine Fiol and Marjorie A. Lyles (1985) claims that organizational learning is a process which is useful to improve actions by acquiring more advanced knowledge and understanding. By contrast, learning organization is a form of organization (Finger and Burgin, 1999).
As for the clear and specific definition of learning organization, series of scholars have put forward their understanding of what is the learning organization. Watkins and Marsick stated that “learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles” (Watkins and Marsick, 1992). By creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, an organization that is able to flash back new knowledge and thoughts is a learning organization (Garvin, 1993). The organization which can promote all members to learn continually and transform itself can be taken as a learning organization (Pedler et al., 1997). Örtenblad maintains that in order to be a true learning organization, an organization should emphasize on four aspects: learning at work; organizational learning; developing a learning climate and creating learning structures. By integrating the four aspects, organizations can be called the learning organization (Örtenblad, 2004). Furthermore, based on the four versions of learning organization, Örtenblad (2018) later classified three forms of organizational aspects: organization as facilitator; organization as learning unit and organization as end process.

In addition, previous researches have also concentrated on the learning organization by identifying characteristics of learning organizations. A learning organization should be equipped with continuous learning, dialogue and inquiry, team learning, embedded system, empowerment, leadership, financial performance and knowledge performance (Watkins and Marsick, 1998). Pedler et al. (1997) indicated that a learning organization should contain eleven elements: a learning approach to strategy, participative policymaking, informing, formative accounting and control, internal exchange, reward flexibility, enabling structures, workers as environmental scanners, inter-company learning, learning climate and self-development opportunities. There are five identification of learning organization: training and education, rewards and recognition, information flow, individual and team development, vision and strategy (Griego et al., 2000). By reviewing the literature, most typical characteristics of learning organization are leadership, learning strategy, participative policymaking, enabling structure, learning climate, learning opportunities and reward for learning (Jamali and Sidany, 2008).

3. Criticize of learning organization
Since its appearance, learning organization has been praised highly by scholars and practitioners. It becomes the trend in organizational development and the ultimate goal for most organizations. However, as a form of organization, learning organization has its limitations and range of application.

Firstly, the concept of learning organization is too ground. As we can see from the definition and characteristics of learning organization, the focus of most discussions is too abstract and ambiguous, it’s hard for practitioners too apply (Garvin, 2000). After reading the theories of learning organization, it’s still not easy for managers to define whether the organization is a learning organization and assess the level of learning in an organization. According to Örtenblad (2018), there are four theoretical perspectives to decide which organization is the learning organization, the inclusive approach, the exclusive approach, the middle ground approach and the contextual approach. The inclusive approach means that an organization can be called learning organization just with at least one single element. However, in this way, nearly every organization is the learning organization. The exclusive approach implies only when the organization equipped with all elements, it can be taken as the learning organization. Hence, the demand is unactionable to achieve. The middle ground approach suggests that there are some necessary elements for learning organization and an organization which have these elements is entitled. The last approach is the contextual approach which implies that different definition and standards should be developed in various context. But there is still no agreed definition of learning organization in each context. To sum up, meaning and assessment of learning organization is unclear for practice.

Secondly, learning organization is an ideal form for organizations to achieve. Easterby-Smith et al (2004) claim that imaginations of learning organization are fictitious models for real organizations to imitate. Supporters of learning organization suppose that it’s vital to reduce control and increase organizational learning because of the changeable world climate and fast-paced innovation. However, as we can see, requirements of learning organization are kind of subjective for practitioners. First of all,
although elements are provided by academics to develop a learning organization, there are unavoidable intervening variables that may influence the outcome. For example, learning culture (Maria, 2003) and learning environment (Dymock, 2003). Then, scholars assume that learning organization can be regarded as a tool to facilitate the transformation continuously. On the contrary, based on empirical research, using learning alone is kind of impossible to boost the innovation of a traditional organization.

Thirdly, the premise of learning organization denies the rationality of bureaucratic organization. First, the aim of learning organization is to achieve a stable, ordered and structured organization. While in order to develop the learning organization, it requires organism, informality, decentralization and non-hierarchy which is contradict to the purpose.

In addition, the assumption of learning organization ignores the differences in kinds of organizations. The expert power and executive power for example. Learning organization advocates information and knowledge flowing across levels in organization which based on the belief that everyone is important or every position is important. However, Gold (2012) points out that there are four types of talent management. Except the inclusive people and inclusive position, attention should also be given to the exclusive people and exclusive position. To some extent, sharing may raise the dissatisfaction of executive and managerial elites.

4. Learning organization is not the only choice
According to the above analysis, it is obvious that learning organization is not always the right way to run an organization because it’s too utopian and may not be appropriate in every situation. There are other alternatives for organizations to choose excluding the learning organization. On one hand, traditional organizational forms are still able apply to today’s organizations. Bureaucratic organization for instance. On the other hand, following the information age, some emerging ideas and forms of organization also have their strengths, such as, organizational unlearning.

4.1. Bureaucratic organization
The design of bureaucratic organization based on the Weber’s theory of bureaucratic control. Weber depicts that a formal organization depends on rational-legal authority and should contain a fixed division of labor, hierarchical positions and authority, administration guided by written documents and following general rules, providing comprehensive and professional employee training, and commitment to official tasks from full-time employees (Walton, 2005). Additionally, there are three fundamental principles for rational bureaucratic organization: formalization, instrumentalism and rational-legal authority (Jaffe, 2001). The framework of bureaucratic organization has been widely used in the world in the last decades. Although, there are many criticizes on bureaucratic organization in recent years, it proves the rationality of its existence by using strong vitality. The form of bureaucratic organization is in accordance with organization in which the majority of employees are low-skilled and the majority of tasks are repetitive (Lončar, 2005). Plus, the industry environment is stable and predictable, such as manufacture industry and fast food industry. Though, bureaucratic organization is not conform to the concept of learning organization that the organizational structure should be flat and non-hierarchy, it’s still an indispensable way for organizations and still has been widely used.

4.2. Organizational unlearning
Nowadays, our lives are filled with the idea of learning. Especially in organizations, the function of learning, which has been taken as one of the appraisal variable for a good worker, has been respected highly. With the circumstance of change and knowledge economy, people and organizations informed that learning is vital for sustainable development. Under the pressure of learning, the concept of unlearning appeared. By comparing with organizational learning, general speaking, unlearning is a process of discarding knowledge in order to achieve a new learning (Hedberg, 1981). While organizational unlearning means the discarding of knowledge or organizational misplacement.
Knowledge and experience in organization be accepted to be challenged (Sherwood, 2000). Lyles (2001) asserts that organizational unlearning is the process of fit with changing environment and situations by reframing. Learning organization advocates information flow and knowledge sharing across levels in the organization, then organizational memory been developed and facilitating the problem solving in organization. While in the perspective of organizational unlearning, organizational memory may hinder the development of organization, especially when faced with intractable or wicked problems. Therefore, organizational memory should be removed. Easterby-Smith et al (2004) argue that the concept of unlearning is necessary because attention should also be emphasized on the opposite side of the organizational learning. Under the pressure of learning, unlearning may break new ground for the development of organizations.

5. Best fit instead of best practice, a situational view

Recently, learning organization has attracted great attention and becomes the hot organizational form that nearly every organization exerts efforts to pursue. Even though, learning organization seems as a perfect way to run a company and there are some successful empirical examples, best practice is not suitable for all situations. As we discussed above, the other options, such as, bureaucratic organization and organizational unlearning, all have meaningful existence and range of application. Organizational form should fit with external environment, business strategy, technology and its transformation, the stage and scale of organization (Robbins, 2016). Developing an organizational form should take these influential factors into consideration rather than catching up the trend blindly.

External environment includes general environment and task environment. In the analysis of general environment, PEST analysis has been widely used by analyzing factors in political, economy, society, technology and so on (Anon, 2011). The social habits can be taken as an example. Learning organization advocate the culture of sharing, while in some cultures and countries, people are used to ambiguous information and they are unlikely to share information and knowledge. It may become the biggest obstacle in developing a learning organization. Task environment means the departments which has direct influence on the organization, such as, customer, supplier and competitor. In addition, complexity and variability are the two main characteristics of the external environment which deeply affect the choice of organizational design. For example, if the external environment is too complex and unpredictable, learning organization may be a better choice to fix complicated problems by using collective thinking. On the contrary, it requires clear responsibility and task arrangement in a simple and stable industry. Bureaucratic organization may be the best choice in this specific context.

Organizational design and organizational form should be in line with organizational strategy. The shift of strategy focus may lead to the stress transformation of official work and give rise to the change of the level of importance in different departments and positions.

Corresponding organizational design works better with different business strategies.

The third influential factor is technology. The improvement of technology has certain effect on the managerial roles in organization. With the appearance and rapid development of information technology which requires more alternatives for organizations, the idea of unlearning that promotes the breaking of old rules and acceptance of new knowledge becomes more prevail.

The stage and scale of organization also have impact on the organizational design and organizational form. For instance, the organizational structure is informal in the starting stage. Hence, Organic and flat organizational design is unavoidable. With the development of organization, it requires power and specialization. In the following stage, most organizations would become more similar the bureaucratic organization. Therefore, organizational design and form will modify and change according to the developmental stage. Besides, organic structure is more suitable in the organization which is less than 2000 workers, while the large organizations are supposed to be more mechanistic.

Most scholars tend to make clear distinction among multiple organizational ways. But as for particular organization, it can make use of the characteristics from kinds of organizational forms, by
adapting suitable design ideas and in accordance with situational factors, it may develop a unique organizational form which is useful in its certain situation in the end.

Therefore, there is no need to for organizations be limited to the one specific organizational way, such as, learning organization.

6. Conclusion
Even though, as an emerging organizational form, learning organization provides a new-style for organizational design. It may facilitate the organization adapting to the changing world and as it turns out, there are some successful evidences. However, the limitations and adverse effects implies that the learning organization is not the only right option nowadays. There are still other possible choices for certain organizations, such as, bureaucratic organization and organizational unlearning. According to the difference of external circumstances and internal situations of the organization, the choice for the way of organization differs. For the purpose of obtaining and maintaining the competitive advantage to the full extent, the organizational design and form should take more factors into consideration, for example, external environment, business strategy, technology and its transformation, the stage and scale of organization and the institutional culture. To conclude, it’s impossible to have a Universalist approach for every organization and all the time, hence, learning organization is not the only right choice and the organization can only find the fittest organizational way through continuous adjustment instead of stick to best ones.

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