Learning Motivation of Employees in Mainland China

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Abstract—Organizational learning is not a new concept, and perhaps has even peaked in the West in the late 1990’s. It was first adopted by some renowned companies as a system-wide organizational development tool. As time passes, with the rising needs of innovation and competitiveness for business survival, many researchers have acknowledged the importance of organizational learning: it was increasing recognized as a necessary ingredient for any organization to remain competitive in the long run, especially in the high tech environment. Effective organizational learning enables a firm to continuously adapt to external change and to improve its current processes, for long-term success. However, learning organizations need to undergo changes within organization, most importantly changes in the mindset of individuals and teams or units.

This paper reviews the development of organizational learning and examines the key factors that influence its effectiveness, in particular, the motivating factors. Contemporary understanding from literature will be compared with findings from study in a high tech manufacturing company in Mainland China, where it is commonly believed to be a hard place for promoting changes owing to its traditional culture. We would study what motivating factors of the firm directly affect employees’ learning. The case also would show that learning is driven by a combination of environmental factors and individual’s self-actualisation, as well by organizational factors in the long run.

Keywords: Organizational Learning, motivation

INTRODUCTION

It has been more than two decades since most of Hong Kong’s manufacturers have moved their factories northern to the Mainland China. Today, China’s open door economic policies have attracted investments from many developed countries. At the same time, China’s own industries have also broken loose from the previous SOE (State-owned Enterprise) mode of operation. This fast pace of development means that many of these organizations are facing increasing competition.

Creation and application of new knowledge has been seen as the key driver of economic recovery and industrial growth, similarly, in countries that have encountered economic recession or crisis in the recent years.

Organizational learning is believed to be the one of the ‘medication’ for manufacturing organizations to survive in this demanding environment, where the pace of innovation and technology advancement is relentless. Organizational learning is not just a learning process, or staff development training, it is the building up and reinforcement of a mindset to learn, apply and create knowledge within an organization.

A learning organization, therefore, is not just a building, that is full of information resources and learning facilities. It is one that has a common mindset where the learning process exists to stimulate the creation of knowledge in the pursuit of organizational goals. The creation is a long and arduous process for many organizations. The first step is to have deeper understanding of a firm’s readiness for organizational learning. For this, the measurement of the organization’s sub-cultures, values and motivation play vital roles.

Cultural factors are often seen as a key inhibitor of effective learning. Is it the same in Chinese culture. The major problem of promoting organizational learning is the inherent gap in the perception of top management and employees about the organizational goals and company culture. Employee’s intention and willingness to learn for the good of the organization depends on how big this gap is. Therefore, to implement organizational learning successfully, it should be a must to study the motivating factors perceived by employees, to help the building up of appropriate learning framework by making the gap between top management and employees closer.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

Organizational learning is existing processes involves activities and means that organization uses to organize knowledge with the expectation of higher level or competitiveness. While learning organization is an ideal form or framework of an organization. Esmeralda stated that organizational learning could also be expressed as the process by which individuals in
organizational develop knowledge based on their past experiences and perceptions. [Gupta, 2001; Ortenblad, 2001; Esmeralda, 1998]

Over two decades, a synthesis of theories and methods for deepening and accelerating organizational learning has been studied [Senge, 1990], from system dynamics, action science [Argyris, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1996], to group process; the personal creative process to collective thought [Issac, 1993, Schein, 1993].

Since the 1970’s, organizational learning has been seen as processes, it is about individuals learning as agents for the organization [Argyris & Schon, 1996]. It was proposed that organizational learning also means learning by a collective or humans as social beings. Thus, organizational learning would be the processes of specific kind of learning going on an organization [Easterby-Smith, 1997]

The predominant view of organizational learning based on Argyris & Schon’s ‘double loop’ learning concept influenced a number of advances in social sciences and system theories. The essential feature of this primary learning approach was the notion of envisioning the manager’s self-inquiry. This approach focuses on the learning-action role of individual managers interpreting their experiences, without addressing the group or cultural dimensions. Great emphasis was put on describing the human process of “action learning” through experience via various feedback mechanisms interacting with each individual’s sets of beliefs. [Calveri & Fearson, 2000]

Shared visions and tools of OL development were further emphasized. The OL theorists of MIT proposed the more robust descendant of systems thinking, as clearly stated in Senge’s five disciplines, the integration of individual learning and team learning towards the organization-wide collective sense of purpose. [Senge, 1990] Team learning became another issue of concern, further development of OL tools such as communication; dialogue, learning histories, leadership and use of specific tools were stated. [Isaac, Roth & Kleiner, Jaworski & O’Brien].

Despite the limited descriptive and prescriptive models for team learning and effective OL processes, creation of knowledge is expected and spurred. Sets of processes for knowledge creation models for establishing processes to spur new knowledge were introduced. [Nanaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Allee, 1997]

Thus, organizational learning is not only a form of learning; it also becomes a philosophy of organizational development. Many researchers stated that OL is a naturally tendency of an organization to survive, [Kim, 1993; Hawkins, 1994] instead of a prescribed set of processes. [Easterby-Smith & Araujo, 1999; Argyris & Schon, 1996]

It is inevitably that importance of knowledge cannot be ignored; attentions should be paid to who learns and where the knowledge exists. [Leymann, 1989; Burgoyne, 1999] Besides, there has been debated about the entities of learning. Arguments are continued for years on the topic of either individual learning in cognitive ways or organization learns as if it is an individual or even collective. [Argyris & Schon, 1978; Hedberg, 1981; Cook & Yanow, 1993] This raised the other important issue, the location of knowledge, which is expected to be in line with learning. According to Dogsdon, it involves the means that the organization uses to disseminate information throughout its ranks and the ways that the information is processed and stored. [Dogsdon, 1993] In short, this is what the recent researchers stressed, knowledge management.

MOTIVATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

While the knowledge creation cannot be omitted in organizational learning, motivation of learning is another key issue should be concerned, together with learning approaches and cultural determinants. (FIG. 1.)

Motivation is proven with close relationship with organizational learning. [Y. Gabriel & D. Griffiths, 2002] Studies conducted showed that motivation stimulates employees in continuous learning. In order to maximize the level of organization knowledge utilization, organizations put huge efforts on motivating their employees to take advantage of knowledge. Thanks to the many theorists, many motivational theories have been built and constructed in the past decades, since Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Motivational factors are agreed to be the cornerstone of motivational theories, and should be determined [Maria Osteraker, 1999]. However, there exists criticism about the determination of motivational factors inside an organization based on the motivation theory of needs [Carr, 1996 & Carr & Pihlanto, 1996]. The values of employees in specific organization influenced by factors such as society, organizational culture and personality are overlooked.

CASE IN CHINA (SURVEY IN SAE)

Company Background and current situation
SAE Magnetics (HLK) Ltd was established in Hong Kong in 1980, it became a wholly owned subsidiary of TDK Corporation Group in 1986. It is one of the world's leading independent manufacturers of magnetic recording heads, head gimbal assemblies and head stack assemblies for computer hard drives. Currently SAE Magnetics is the supplier of more than 30% of the magnetic recording heads sold worldwide, with annual sales of over US$1.3 billion.

Creation of new knowledge has been agreed to be the key driver of economic and technology growth, which benefits most of the countries under recession after the several economic crisis in the recent years. SAE, as one of the pioneer in high-tech manufacturing with latest technology development and knowledge, is trying to equip itself to be one of the world class Learning Organization, to make it-self to be more competent to compete with other world class leading enterprises. Organizational learning is highly promoted and adopted as improvement initiative. For the better understanding of the employees’ intention of learning, before an appropriate learning framework or approach is introduced, the motivating factors of employees in learning are preliminarily studied.

Respondents’ background

200 Employees from 4 different business units of SAE were invited to participate in the study. Respondents are from various functional units – Manufacturing, Production/Material, Quality, Engineering, etc. The survey is to study the perceived motivating factors of employees to learning, with which they will be motivated to learn in organization. Respondents are divided into 3 categories- Management, Supervisors/ Engineers/ Professionals and Technician/ Clerical. It was emphasized that all data collected would be kept in confidential, and reviewed only for academic research use.

Altogether, 109 questionnaires are returned. The response rates and distribution of respondents are shown as in Table I below. Participants are asked to vote for their perceived motivating factors of learning, and rate the factors from 0-100 points, as to make the total score equal to 100 points.

TABLE I
The Distribution of Respondents:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A. Management</th>
<th>B. Supervisors/ Engineers/ Professionals</th>
<th>C. Technicians/ Clericals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BU1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BU3-PE/QA</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BU3-MFG</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BU3-PMC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IE</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total staff</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distributed questionnaire</td>
<td>36 (18%)</td>
<td>136 (68%)</td>
<td>28 (14%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response</td>
<td>9 (8%)</td>
<td>75 (69%)</td>
<td>25 (23%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Rate</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Motivating factors from Employees’ perception

Results are shown in Table 2, where N is the number of participants voted for the specific motivating factor. Participants rated the factors from 1-100 points, in order that the factors they voted would altogether score to maximum 100 points. The mean score is then tabulated by dividing the total points each factor got with N=109, the total respondents number.
TABLE 2
MOTIVATING FACTORS FROM EMPLOYEES’ PERCEPTION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivating factors as at Oct 2002</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from superiors</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12.0690</td>
<td>6.88129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pressure from company</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12.4324</td>
<td>5.84779</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational culture</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>17.8421</td>
<td>9.94052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Competition</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>17.9778</td>
<td>9.57860</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18.5893</td>
<td>10.41987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job relatedness</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>18.7097</td>
<td>8.68084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social culture</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>19.0862</td>
<td>11.08228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self satisfaction</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20.8889</td>
<td>14.50526</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self willingness to learn</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>21.3492</td>
<td>15.08595</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>22.7662</td>
<td>13.66892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 2
MOTIVATING FACTORS BY VOTING

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS
According to the results obtained, majority of employees concern promotion (N=77), self willingness (N=63), job relatedness (N=62), cultural factors (N=58, 57) and rewards (N=56) accordingly as the key motivating factors. Whereas, pressures from superiors (N=29) and company (N=37) and peer competition (N=45) are viewed to less important in motivating their learning. The voting percentage distribution is shown in (Fig. 2.)
Job fulfilment, Promotion

Promotion and job-relatedness are the two main factors for learning, since these can directly beneficial to their job. Employees are found to be more concerned with the physical and environmental factors like promotion, job-relatedness and cultural factors. They pay attentions on resources, and promotion (N=77, M= 22.76) as the key concerns as promotion is always associated with earnings, and living standards. Employees are seeking better physical environment, by getting better job position. Thus, learning will be appreciated if it is job-related (N=62, M=18.7), since it is directly beneficial to their job performance, as they perceived.

Achievement motivation- Career development

It is after the basic requirement of job goals and job security are fulfilled, employees would set their higher level achievement goals; they identify their job promotion (N=77, M22.76) and career enhancement as perceived achievement values. Promotion is primarily associated with ability of earnings, it is also viewed as personal achievement. Self-regulating processes occur as the motivated cognitive processes, employees’ cognitions are pre-programmed with different values. They would try to achieve their expected goals, such achievement is accompanied with feeling of self-verification and self-enhancement, according to social cognitive theory.

Personal motivation

Self-willingness (N=63, M=21.3) and feeling of satisfaction (N=54, M=20.8) play important roles in motivation, it does mean that employees are not only concerning about their basic needs, they are also eager to satisfy themselves, their spiritual needs, on higher levels of Maslow’s needs hierarchy, feelings of self-esteem and actualisation exist, employees with motivated cognitions are with the mentality to actualise their ideal-self, after their pragmatic-self has been satisfied. It can be seen that Self-willingness is accepted by more employees as important motivating factor than feeling of satisfaction. It may be because self willingness is the personal motive, with which, feeling of satisfaction can be achieved. According to achievement motivation theory, achievement is one type of motives other than personal intrinsic motives, such as preferences and values. Therefore, employees are with intrinsic willingness to learn, but may not have the achievement goal of satisfaction feeling.

Environmental determinants

Besides the instinctive and intrinsic factors, external factors influence people’s mind as environmental determinants., e.g. social culture (N=58, M=19.0), organization culture(N=57, M=17.8) and pressures from superiors (N=29, M=12.08). In this case, these factors are not as important as those personal factors. However, they still affects the learning motivation. Motivation can be achieved by enhancement of self-efficacy on specific situations, by changing people’s mind through external reinforcements, such as rewards and recognitions. Cultural factors, such as organizational culture in the company, influence employees learning to cope with the working requirements.

WHAT CAN MANAGEMENT DO THEN?

With the information ‘grasped’ from study of employees’ motivation in learning, managers can understand more about their subordinates, that they are emotional beings, with needs from different levels. Physiological needs are commonly accepted as the core issue to be satisfied, while their personal factors and external motivational factors are influencing their intention to learn. It is undoubtedly that learning should be motivated by changing mindset, thus the behaviour. At the meanwhile, resources should be sufficiently provided as to let employees have the feeling of satisfactory and without harsh feeling, for both their personal needs and learning needs.

FURTHER STUDY

With the general understanding, on employees’ perception in learning for the good of the company, further study can be carried out on employees’ work goal and their satisfaction level, with comparison to the top management’s expectation. The inherent gap can then be identified. Learning motivation can be more achievable by putting the both parties closer or minimizing the gap, as there will be lesser misperceptions and conflicts. Learning can then be introduced as part of routine operations, with clear objectives set. In the long run, company may not only benefit from organizational learning, but also the harmony.

REFERENCES
Motivation

Learning

Knowledge Creation

Organizational Learning

Culture

FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURE I

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND THE INFLUENCING ELEMENTS