

# CHALLENGES IN BUILDING LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN MALAYSIA

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## **Abstract**

*Challenges are seen as a sign that building learning organization requires a consistent effort and one has to be committed enough to make sure that everything is working right. There is no simple way to build a learning organization. Each organization must develop a structure and style that is best suited for its own people, history, skill base, technology, mission and culture. The objective of this paper was to highlight the study of the challenges in building a learning organization that has been conducted in selected Malaysian organizations. Three organizations were selected for this study. The nature of the organizations varies based on their own functions. The study was conducted by means of qualitative research methodology. This means that the focus was to understand an event and its interaction within the natural context in order to determine what and how the challenges faced by the selected organizations in a building learning organization. The study found that the challenge faced by the selected organizations in a building of learning organizations are varied and indicates some evolving elements. It was observed that the elements of challenges are interpreted based on the organization's own identity. It can be concluded that the study had identified the elements of challenges in building a learning organization. It also provides some guidelines to enable the organizations' concern to develop into a full-fledge learning organization. The study implies that each organization has different challenges in building to be a learning organization. Therefore, it is necessary to develop ways of identifying challenges while building learning organizations.*

**Keywords:** *Learning organization, learning process, collective learning, human attitude, changing environment*

## **Introduction**

Malaysia is currently undergoing the process of becoming part of the world community. The changes that the present world is experiencing has affected the socio-economic development and moved its journey towards a new and more challenges phase. To date Malaysia has entered the phase of the ninth Malaysian Plan for the period of 2006 to year 2010 where the thrusts of development policy is to move the economy up the value chain, to raise the capacity for knowledge and innovation and to nurture a "first class mentality", to address socio-

economic inequalities constructively and productively, to improve the standard and sustainability of quality life and to strengthen institutional and implementation capacity.

In the meantime, Malaysia is also guided by a long-term plan, known as Vision 2020. Under Vision 2020, six basic principles of Malaysian development and nine strategic challenges for success were outlined. The six basic principles are (1) development will be focused on human needs, (2) development is comprehensive and cover all dimensions, (3) balance development between spiritual and physical need, (4) development will focus on the development of ethics and mannerism, (5) development which enhances social and economic justice, and (6) development which will be based on the care for ecological aspects. The nine strategic challenges form the foundations towards creating a fully developed Malaysia. The challenges are as follows (a) establishing a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny (b) creating a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished, robust enough to face all manner of adversity (c) fostering and developing a mature democratic society, practicing a form of matured consensual, community-oriented Malaysian democratic society, a model for many developing countries (d) establishing a fully moral and ethical society whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest of ethical standards (e) establishing a matured liberal and tolerant society which Malaysian of colors and creeds are free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religious beliefs and yet feeling that they belong to one nation (f) establishing a scientific and progressive society (g) establishing a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system (h) ensuring an economically just society, and (i) establishing a prosperous society, with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

Meyer (1982) depicts a complex set of factors in a research-based model of how to create organizations that learn. He found that there is a combination of strategy and culture in the organization set-up. The strategy is the organization's overall approach to its environment, and the culture incorporates the beliefs and values that drive the action. Culture and strategy shape action that give possible actions for learning and change. In another aspect, in order to understand the challenges facing in building learning organization Garrat (1990) identifies three characteristics of learning organizations as follows; (1) encourage people at all levels of the organization to learn regularly and rigorously, (2) have systems for capturing the learning and moving it where it is needed, and (3) value learning and are able to continuously transform themselves. McGill and Slocum (1993) mention that the key ingredient in management practices of learning organization lies on how organizations process their management experiences. They stressed that, the ability of the organization to learn is not measured by what the organization knows but rather by how the organization learn – the process of learning. Organization has leeway and choice of how they adjust to a changing environment.

Tobi (1993) includes three characteristics for an organization to create a learning organization. First, openness to new ideas. Second, a culture that encourages and provides

opportunity for learning and innovation, and third, a widespread knowledge of the organization goals and objectives and an understanding of how each person's work contributes to these goals and objectives. Meanwhile, Daniels (1994) has identified three characteristics of learning organization in order to understand the challenges. First, it values individual and organizational learning as a prime means of delivery of the organizational mission. Second, it involves all members through continuous reflection in a process of continual review and improvement, and third structures work in such a way that work tasks are used as opportunities for continuous learning. Stratchan (1996) has argued that to survive and prosper in today's turbulent business environment organizations may need to transform their traditional methods of organizing and managing into learning organizations. Thus, an assumption of this study is that organizations which have participative leadership and management styles, flat organizational structures and teamwork that foster both innovation and creativity – the key features of the learning organization – are most likely to meet the challenges thrown up by the environmental forces for change and practice double-loop learning.

Meanwhile, according to Marquardt (1996), there is no single guaranteed way in becoming learning organization. Each organization must develop a structure and style that is best suited for its own people, history, skill based, technology, mission, and culture. Furthermore, Sirajudin Salleh (1997) suggests four elements in transforming a non-learning organization to learning organization as follows; (1) individual attitude, knowledge and ability, (2) organizational vision, strategy and structure, (3) organizational culture and practices and (4) workplace environment. Appelbaum and Gallagher (2000) identify the critical challenge is to formally classify "organizational learning" as a major structural underpinning of organizational behavior, organizational development and, most critically, organizational strategy. This is in essence, the discipline from which its competitive advantage originates via contemporary research as it is applied to those organizations learning not to fail by competing successfully.

This is core advantage of the contemporary learning organization. West and Burnes (2000) suggest that people within the four organizations studied were generally enthusiastic to learn, and recognized that, by increasing their skill levels and involvement, they would contribute more effectively to the organization and also increase their own employability. According to Prewitt (2003) a review of the relevant empirical research seems to indicate that organizations need first to establish a clear learning organization vision grounded in meeting a real business need and make certain the organization can create and sustain a culture to support these goals. Leaders in senior management positions must understand the significance of their own behavior in the value placed on learning and realign their assumptions about productive work to support continuous learning and development. Fauske and Raybould (2005) notice that five elements that influence organizational learning: priority of the learning in the organization, consistency and breadth of information distribution, unpredictability or uncertainty, the ease of learning new routines (how to) and the difficulty of learning new conceptual frameworks (why). Furthermore, Tolsby (2005) mentions that both managers and employees need to understand how the structural and affective aspects of a work process are

coupled, if they want to build a sound learning organization that stimulates knowledge generation and employee engagement.

According to Jennifer and Kerry (2006) learning organization is fundamentally different from other approaches to management and leadership for at least two reasons. (1) Whereas the bureaucratic paradigm (like all modernist ones) manages by reductionism (reducing any phenomenon to its elements, addressing each one, and finally adding together the results of each), the learning organization has a holistic preference, never forgetting the whole system. (2) Whereas the bureaucratic paradigm claims to be “value free”, the learning organization stands openly on certain values – on respect for human beings, who are far more than “human resources” or “factors of production”, on responsibilities between people, on collective commitments to communities of work and expression, on the struggle towards truth in improving processes of interaction and improving oneself. Besides that, according to Frahm and Brown (2006), the changes demanded by the learning organization approach cannot be mandated, but they can be led. They cannot happen rapidly, but as they begin to happen they can lead to major improvements. This is not working harder; it is not even just working smarter. It is working together in entirely new ways. It is envisaging new depths of personal mastery and commitment, addressed to newly-found shared visions, using powerful new methods of team learning that address the mental models and assumptions that each person brings to the collaboration. Meanwhile Timperly (2006) identifies three challenges faces by school leaders in building a learning organizations as follows such as did not perceive themselves or their skills to be the target of the initiative, despite being nominated as the focus, they were more concerned about teachers collaborating with one another than whether that collaboration was leading to improve student learning and they did not put in place robust organizational processes to support evidence-engaged professional learning.

Despite of the above, Yeo (2006) finds that leaders play a crucial role in facilitating system dynamics, influencing the rate and degree at which organizational members learn. Two such intervening factors as dialogue and reflection have been found to be the leitmotif of learning and knowledge co-construction in the workplace. Dealtry (2006), indicate that piecemeal and IT dominated practices around learning processes can produce a lack of coherence between learning investments and vision, strategic intent and need-to-learn needs of individuals in an organization. Solutions to these conditions are invariably subject, technique or single discipline driven without full consideration of the overall effect. It reveals that those professionals who manage learning have to be open to new ideas and to be equally receptive to new process learning in their professional practice. According to Serrat (2009), learning organization needs people who are intellectually curious about their work, who actively reflect on their experiences, who develop experience-based theories of change and continuously test these practice with colleagues, and who use their understanding and initiative to contribute to knowledge development. Prugsamatz (2010) indicates that individual motivation to learn, team dynamics, and organization culture practices all have a significant level of influence on organization learning sustainability in non-profit organizations. In fact, Van Winkelen (2010) identifies that there are two main factors that influence learning organization, (1) individuals not translating the implications of the learning

back to their organization, and (2) the organizations not having systems and processes to transfer and amplify the learning that was brought back.

### **Objective of the Study**

The general objective of this study was to gain an understanding of the challenges in building learning organization in Malaysian organizations context. Specifically, the objective is to gain insight and identify the challenges in building learning organization in selected organizations.

### **Methodology**

The study primarily examined the challenges of building learning organization in selected Malaysian organizations. The important aspect of the study was on the process rather than to determine outcome. This means that the focus was to understand an event and its interaction within the natural context in order to determine what and how the study of learning organization been conducted. Therefore, the study requires a research design that facilitates the understanding of the complex web and in-depth exploration of the data where the purpose was to investigate and generate insights. By understanding the above facts, qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate to conduct this study. According to Patton (1987) the nature of a study warranted the use of qualitative research methodology when the information needed are systematically gathered and analyzed through the perceptions, feelings and knowledge of people. As indicated by Bogdan and Biklen (1982) the qualitative researcher is interested in meaning – studying and understanding a particular phenomenon, the nature of events and the nuances of interaction. This approach is concerned with how people negotiate meaning and interpret their experiences through interacting with other people. It is up to the reader whether to generalize or not. The main focus of qualitative research is to be context sensitive. Since the study was intended to explore and not to generalize, the main concern therefore was to choose sample that would give more information relevant to the focus of the study. In qualitative research, the sample tends to be small and purposeful. The logic is not to generalize but to explore in-depth, information-rich cases (Patton, 1990).

There were many organizations that seem to embrace the concept of learning organization but very few had taken steps analyses the challenges. The study used purposive sampling to select organizations, which would provide a variation that would enrich the findings. Three organizations were selected based on the proposal accepted by the committee, to represent the three major sectors were chosen such as services and development, research and development, and economy and development. Basically, the sources of data in this research were interviews, observations and documents. This would permit the researcher to combine the strength of these techniques using a triangulation strategy. Data analysis is a going process that begins with data collection and ends with the writing up the study. The data collected in this study were first transcribed and analyzed according to each of the organization i.e. organization A, B and C. The transcriptions and analysis were done independently following specified time frame for each organization. The data were analyzed simultaneously during the data collection phase with the interview, observation or document.

The researcher looked for key concepts, key issues, recurrent events, and so on that became tentative categories. Pre and initial analysis was started after one interview had been completed and transcribed in order to discover any relationships, patterns, constructs or themes within the information. This analysis was used to refine future interviews and document analysis. Gradually, once categories became more distinct and refined properties, the researcher examined each category to ensure that it was conceptually congruent with the other categories. This process continued until sources were exhausted and the categories were saturated. Data collection and analysis ended at this point.

## **Findings**

This study found that there were various understanding towards the understanding of the challenges in building learning organization, but most viewed it as a continuous process of learning in organization. Organization A listed four important elements as follows: (1) make people believe in the new concept (learning organization), (2) the diversified culture in the organization, (3) it's rewards system and the approach used by the top management and (4) transition process from a government organization to a corporate body. To organization B, three elements were listed as follows: (1) the acceptance of all employees about applying learning organization and (2) unite employees together to make learning organization possible. Challenges are seen as a sign that implementing learning organization required a consistent effort and have to be committed enough to make sure that everything is working right. Each organization has its own views and perceptions regarding the understanding of the challenges of building learning organization. They way in which each organization perceives the challenges is based on the nature of each organization and its business orientation. But in conclusion, all the three organizations voiced almost the same elements on the challenges that they encountered. They indicate that the challenges that arise can be categorized into three main elements that is human attitude, management of organization and adaptation to the changing environment.

Human attitude was a first challenge that the three organizations has faced. The challenges on how to make people believed and interested in doing what the management has planned. This is very much related to a person's attitude on how they see and value learning as an important element in developing success of themselves and organization. It is also related on how to make a learning habit as a culture to everybody on the organization. The whole organization cultures have to change because culture is a main thing that allowed learning in an organization to happen. The situation is that the individual in the organization did not feel interested to learn and to ensure that their capabilities are consistent with the organization needs. This first challenge is in line with what have been mentioned by Senge (1990) as learning disabilities such as "I am my position", "the enemy is out there", "the illusion of taking charge", "the fixation of events", "the parable of boiled frog", "the delusion of learning from experience" and "the myth of the management team". In this circumstance, the important aspect of the understanding of the challenges of the building of learning organization is to facilitates and expose the employees to the learning activities in the

organization, There had to be encouragement among the employees to practice reading, attending seminars and providing database or information network.

The second was what it is meant by management of organization. The management has to put a clear policy regarding the organization management practices. Sometimes it happened during promotion practices, where top management only took at seniority rather than knowledge basis. The extraordinary knowledge and ideas that can give benefit to the organization. As mentioned by Pedler et. al (1991), a learning organization is the organization that facilitates learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself. There is no single definition of learning organization acceptable to all, many of them shared some distinctive characteristics or had their own framework. Besides that, there were also some similarities and differences on the understanding of the concepts of learning organization. The variability and complexity of the understanding had made several notable differences and similarities among the management. Therefore, the management should set the organization goals and objectives widespread among the workers and how can contribute to the improvement of the organizations.

The third was adaptation to the changing environment. The understanding of learning organization had an impact with the changing environment and the experiences where the organization had had with the environment. Besides that, the global environment pressure had some impact on the organization as to how they responded to it. According to Revans (1982), the organizations that excelled were the organizations that were always equal or greater than environmental changes. What is important is that each organization has to adapt to the internal environment changes. As stated by Gundry, Kickul and Prather (1985) the importance of environmental factors in a learning organization is that the employees and groups operate greatly influence the degree to which creative thinking and behaviors flourish. The organization had therefore to undergo to a very long learning and transformation process, continuously responding to the changes that took place around them and were always aware of public perceptions and opinions.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the challenges that the three organizations encounter are considered as the basic management problems occurred in the implementing of a new idea or creating an innovations within the organization. These challenges most of the time creates a positive impression to the staffs involve when they can worked through. The study implied that each organization has different challenges while taking step to build the organization into a learning organization. Therefore, it is necessary to develop ways of identifying the challenges while initiated to build learning organization.

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