THE USE AND UNDERSTANDING OF LEARNING ORGANIZATION PRINCIPLES IN NGO MANAGEMENT

*Binson P Augustine, **Dr. M K Joseph

Abstract

Nowadays, creating and developing learning organization culture is becoming a main subject in the strategic plans of various organizations. Though the concept of learning organizations is familiar in the business world, its scope is not yet identified in non-profit sector. This quantitative study using survey research design tries to understand the level of understanding of learning organizational practices in non-profit organizations. The study focused on six NGOs involving 34 respondents including NGO Managers and Professional staff.The survey found that learning organization and its dimensions are not fully practised in most of the NGOs. The understanding of Learning Organization concept is varied among Management leaders and professional staff. The findings suggest that there should be an urge among NGO management to practise learning in their respective NGOs to promote individual learning and to make the organization to learn how to learn together.

Keywords:- Learning Organization, NGO Management, NGO leaders, non-profit organizations, Strategic Plan.

A learning NGO is an organization which actively incorporates the experience and knowledge of its members and partners through the development of practices, policies, procedures and systems in ways which continuously improve its ability to set and achieve goals, satisfy stakeholders, develop its practice, value and develop its people and achieve its mission with its constituency. (Aiken and Britton 1997).

The main purpose of this article is to study and evaluate the learning organizational practices and its conceptualization among Non

*Binson P Augustine, PhD Scholar, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Cochin, Kerala, Email: nevabinson@gmail.com

**Dr. M. K Joseph, Associate Professor, (Retired), Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Cochin, Kerala.

Governmental Organization (NGO) across the state engaged in rehabilitation activities.

Learning organization is defined as organization where people continually develop their capacity to achieve results they desire, whereby new patterns of thinking are nurtured, collective aspirations are freed and people learn to learn together (Senge, 1990). A more recent definition highlighted organizational learning, which is related to learning organization (Robelo & Gomes, 2011) as a process or capacity within organization which enables it to acquire, access and revise organizational memory thus providing directions for organizational action (Lin, 2008). According to Garvin a learning organization is "an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights" (Garvin, 1993, p. 80).

The learning organization literature in NGO sector is scanty in India and the term learning organization is a new phenomenon to the NGO sector in India. Though certain concepts of learning organization are practiced in some NGOs most of the NGOs lack proper strategic plan and organizational objectives. Vast majority of the NGOs are charitable organizations do not produce commercially viable outputs and, consequently, rely heavily on private donations in Kerala. As they operate in an increasingly competitive environment for donations and grants, organizational performance is increasingly a critical issue. The major impediments for learning in NGOs for most charities and philanthropic organizations are that most of them do not have organizational structure. They operate in an increasingly competitive context where being sustainable has emerged as a critical issue.

Learning organizational practices in non-profit sector is almost unknown in India. Though this practice has brought tremendous organizational changes in the corporate world, it is a fact that most of the non-profit organizations do not practice learning among its employees and top level management. Much research has not been focused on the impact of learning organization's significance to assess organizational performance and organizational development in non-profit sector in India. It has been identified that no single plan, model, or tool has the ability to address all challenges or impediments that non-profit organizations encounter, as these organizations, the regions they exist in, and the clients they serve, are unique, and so must be the solutions. (McConnell, 2013)

Objective of the Study

The overall objective of this cross-sectional survey study is to develop an understanding of how and to what extent managers and professionals in rehabilitation NGOs in Kerala conceptualize learning organization practice in order to manage their daily operation.

Specific Objectives:

This research employs the following specific objectives:

• What are the dimensions of learning Organization?

- How the identified learning organization dimensions are practiced in NGOs?

- How understanding of learning organization practice is varied among NGO leaders and professional staffs?

- What are the challenges do NGOs face in becoming Learning Organization?

Scope and Significance of the Study

NGOs are the primary beneficiaries of this research. The research will provide empirical data that can be used to formulate an explicit methodology about applicability of the 'learning organization' in NGOs and private organizations. The past study has shown that the vast majority of the Non-Profit Organization engaged in social development is not professionally managed and lacks self-sufficiency. Therefore, this survey research is aimed to investigate to what extent learning organization is practiced in the non-profit sector and what impact could be learning organization makes on the performance of the non-profit sector.

Research Design

The main objective of this study was to describe the extent of utilization of learning organization practices and the level of understanding of learning organization practices among NGO managers and other professionals. This purpose called for adopting a quantitative research design that can provide numerical descriptive information and analysis. A survey design caters to this need to provide a quantitative numerical description of

trends, attitudes or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. From sample results, the researcher generalizes or makes claims about the population (Creswell, 2003; de Vaus, 2002; Jensen & Laurie, 2016). The survey design adopted for the study was cross-sectional, with the data collected at one point in time.

Sampling

This study used simple random sampling where each unit in the population has an equal chance of being selected. The sampling frame consisted of 12 rehabilitation NGOs in Idukki district of which six NGOs were selected using lottery method. From each organizations, the survey selected managers, professional staff, volunteers and care takers.

Survey instrument

The survey instrument used in this study was learning organization questionnaire. It is five point scales with 37 items. The questionnaire was designed to answer the research questions and intended to measure five major constructs related to learning organization namely personal mastery, mental model, shared vision, team learning and system thinking.

Research Findings

The overall purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how the learning organization is practiced and the understanding of various learning organizational dimensions among rehabilitation NGOs in Kerala. This section uses descriptive statistics such as frequencies, measures of central tendency and dispersion to describe the data. This

is followed with a summary of the results related to the learning organization dimension such as personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, mental models and system thinking.

As per the result shown in table 1, it is clear that the average mean of **Personal Mastery** is (M=4.08) and SD is (SD=0.8015).So, from the analysis the learning organization dimension, personal mastery is well understood and practiced in all the NGOs participated in the survey. According to Peter Senge, personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening one's personal vision, of focusing our energies, of

developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. The result above shows that individual learning which is one of the core aspects of organizational learning has got significance in all the six NGOs participated in the survey. Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs (Senge 1990:139). So the above findings substantiate the theory of Peter Senge on personal mastery.

The table 2 shows how the concept of mental model is understood among the NGOs which participated in the

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Personal Mastery

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LOQ1	34	3.00	5.00	3.9655	.77840
LOQ2	34	2.00	5.00	4.3793	.82001
LOQ3	34	3.00	5.00	4.0000	.70711
LOQ4	34	2.00	5.00	4.1034	.90019
LOQ5	34	3.00	5.00	4.2069	.77364
LOQ6	34	1.00	5.00	3.6897	.80638
LOQ7	34	3.00	5.00	4.3448	.61388
LOQ8	34	1.00	5.00	3.9310	.99753
LOQ9	34	2.00	5.00	4.1034	.81700
Valid N (list wise)	34				

Source: Primary data

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics for Mental Models

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LOQ10	34	1.00	5.00	3.9310	1.03272
LOQ11	34	3.00	5.00	4.2414	.78627
LOQ12	34	3.00	5.00	3.8276	.75918
LOQ13	34	3.00	5.00	4.0345	.62580
LOQ14	34	3.00	5.00	4.2759	.59140
LOQ15	34	1.00	5.00	4.4138	.90701
LOQ16	34	2.00	5.00	3.9310	.88362
LOQ17	34	2.00	5.00	3.7931	1.01346
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Source: Primary Data

survey. The average mean of the construct (M=4.0560) and SD =0.8249. So from the above analysis it is clear that mental model is practiced in the NGOs. Mental model are the deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations or even pictures and images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action.

The table 3 shows how shared vision is practiced in the selected NGOs. In order to measure shared vision, the researcher used seven questions in the learning organization questionnaire and the result shows that the NGOs do not give considerable importance to shared vision.

The average mean of shared vision is 1.42 (M=1.42) and standard deviation

is .6512(SD=.6512). So from the above table, it becomes clear that shared vision is usually not practiced in most of the NGOs participated in the survey. According to Peter Senge, when there is a vision shared among people of an organization, people excel and learn, not because they are told to, because they want to.

The table 4 shows the level of understanding of team learning as a dimension of learning organization. There are eight questions used to measure the construct of team learning and the average mean is 1.51(M=1.51) and standard deviation is (SD=.5471). So the analysis shows that team learning is not significant at all these NGOs. According

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for shared vision

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LOQ18	34	1.00	3.00	1.7931	.72601
LOQ19	34	1.00	3.00	1.6897	.76080
LOQ20	34	1.00	3.00	1.6552	.89745
LOQ21	34	1.00	2.00	1.4828	.50855
LOQ22	34	1.00	3.00	1.3103	.54139
LOQ23	34	1.00	3.00	1.3448	.66953
LOQ24	34	1.00	2.00	1.0345	.18570
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Source: Primary Data

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for Team Learning

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LOQ25	34	1.00	3.00	1.6552	.55265
LOQ26	34	1.00	3.00	1.5172	.57450
LOQ27	34	1.00	4.00	1.5517	.68589
LOQ28	34	1.00	5.00	1.7931	.90156
LOQ29	34	1.00	3.00	1.5862	.68229
LOQ30	34	1.00	2.00	1.4483	.50612
LOQ31	34	1.00	2.00	1.4828	.50855
LOQ32	34	1.00	2.00	1.5517	.50612
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Source: Primary Data

to Peter Senge, 'Team learning is viewed as the process of aligning and developing the capabilities of a team, to create the result its members truly desire' (Senge 1990:236). Team learning ensures good result for the organization and members will grow more rapidly than could have occurred otherwise.

The table 5 shows how system thinking is practiced and understood by the respondents in the survey. There are five questions to measure the construct of system thinking in the learning organization questionnaire. As per the above table, the average mean of all the construct is 3.93 (M=3.93) and standard deviation is .6854(SD=.6854). So from the above analysis, it is clear that the practice of system thinking is usually true in the case of all the NGOs participated in the survey. According to Peter Senge, system thinking is the corner stone of learning organization. We tend to focus on the parts rather than seeing the whole, and fail to see organization as dynamic processes.

Suggestions

According to the result of this study, the meaning of learning is well understood by the professional in the NGO but NGO Managers and supporting staff do not have comprehensive understanding on the concept of learning organization. It is vital to create a learning culture within the organization to promote learning organization culture in the non-profit sector. The next level of thought is the practice of various dimensions of learning organizational practices in the NGOs under study. According to the result discussed in the previous chapter in all the NGOs participated in the survey personal mastery, mental models and system thinking are well executed in the NGO management while the practice of shared vision and team learning is moderate in all the NGOs. Most of the NGOs participated in the survey has got a traditional hierarchy where a single person or a group of people are the decision makers. According to peter Senge, the very first thing needed to create a learning organization is effective leadership, which is not based on a traditional hierarchy, but rather, is a mix of different people from all levels of the system, who lead in different ways (Senge 1996).

Secondly, there must be a realization that we all have inherent power to find solutions to the problems we are faced with, and that we can and will envision a

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics for System Thinking

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
LOQ33	34	3.00	5.00	4.1724	.60172
LOQ34	34	3.00	5.00	3.6552	.55265
LOQ35	34	3.00	5.00	3.4483	.68589
LOQ36	34	3.00	5.00	4.1034	.85960
LOQ37	34	3.00	5.00	4.3103	.66027
Valid N (listwise)	34				

Source: Primary Data

future and forge ahead to create it. As Gephart and associates point out in *Learning Organizations Come Alive*, "the culture is the glue that holds an organization together;" a learning organization's culture is based on openness and trust, where employees are supported and rewarded for learning and innovating, and one that promotes experimentation, risk taking, and values the well-being of all employees (Gephart 1996,39). If vision of the organization is shared among the employees it may contribute to team learning and which in turn pave the way for the organization to transform to the learning organization. A non-profit organization's ability to adapt, innovate, and function more effectively as a whole can be increased by converting it into a learning organization. The following are some ideas for developing a learning culture in a non-profit:

- Dedication to Leadership: Make sure the leadership is dedicated to creating a culture of learning in the organization. Showcase the importance of learning by being personally invested in and involved in it.

- Clearly State Your Learning Goals: Clearly define learning objectives that are in line with the mission and goals of the organization. Share these goals with every individual within the organization.

- Promote Open Communication: Establish a communication climate that is transparent and open.

- To support ongoing learning, encourage debates, questions, and comments.

- Offer Opportunities for Training and Development: Invest in training initiatives that advance the expertise and abilities of staff members. Encourage continual professional growth to ensure that the group stays current with market developments.

- Accept Technology: Make use of technology to access online materials, webinars, and e-learning. Put in place cooperative platforms for communication and information exchange.

- Encourage cooperation amongst various teams and departments. Promote the sharing of thoughts and viewpoints in order to enhance learning. Establish mentorship initiatives to promote the sharing of information.

- To find areas for improvement, evaluate programs and projects on a regular basis. Encourage a culture of introspection to evaluate achievements and obstacles.

- Promote Innovation: Promote a culture of creativity by rewarding fresh concepts and methods. Give new solutions resources and assistance so they can be tested and put into practice.

- Collaborate with external specialists, consultants, or mentors. To obtain fresh insights, go to conferences, workshops, and industry events. Utilize data and feedback to enhance and improve the educational initiatives.

A non-profit organization can develop a culture that values and prioritizes learning by implementing these techniques, which will ultimately increase the organization's long-term performance and impact.

Conclusion

All the NGOs which participated in the survey are not true Learning Organizations but majority of them practice Learning Organizational concept in one way or other. A learning organization is a strategic commitment to capture and share learning in the organization for the benefit of individuals, teams, and the organization. It does this through alignment and the collective capacity to sense and interpret a changing environment; to input new knowledge through continuous learning and change; to imbed this knowledge in systems and practices; and to transform this knowledge into outputs. In this context while analyzing the result, we understand that the understanding and practice of learning organization is varied among NGOs which participated in the survey. According to Peter Senge all learning organization dimensions are interrelated and inter connected. There is no team learning without individual learning or personal mastery. Mental models give away shared vision and team learning. System thinking connects the whole organization with its sub units. So conceptualization of learning organization without any of these dimensions cannot transform the NGO as a learning organization.

It is the responsibility of each organization to become "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together" (Senge, 2006, p. 3). To create a culture and environment that will act as the foundation for a learning organization begins with "a shift of mind - from seeing ourselves as separate from the world to connected to the world" (Senge 1996,37); seeing ourselves as integral components in the workplace, rather than as separate and unimportant cogs in a wheel. Finally, one of the biggest challenges that must be overcome in any organization is to identify and breakdown the ways people reason defensively. Until then, change can never be anything but a passing phase (Argyris 1991,106). Everyone must learn that the steps they use to define and solve problems can be a source of additional problems for the organization (Argyris 1991,100). It is essential for non-profit sector to be a learning organization to withstand all the impediments to achieve professional development and organizational sustainability. So practicing the essence of learning organization, conceptualizing its meaning and professional execution of all its dimensions can ensure a good continuous learning environment in the non-profit sector. Since NGO are doing great service to the nation and humanity, it is an absolute need to see them as learning Organizations

References

1. Argyris, C. (1991, May- June). Teaching Smart People How to Learn. Harvard Business Review69 (3) 99-109

2. Buhovac, M. J. Epstein (2004). Managment Accounting Guidline. Performance Measurement of Not- For- Profit Organizations . Canada: The Society of Management Accountants of Canada and the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants.

3. Creswell, J. W. (2003). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods Approaches (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.

4. De Vaus, D.A. (2002).Surveys in social research (5 ed.). St. Leonards, Australia: Routledge

5. Garvin, D. A. (1993, July- August). Building A Learning Organization. Harvard Business Review , 71 (4) 78- 91.

6. Gephart, M. A., Marsick, V. J., Buren, M. E., & Spiro, M. S. (1996). Learning Organizations Come Alive. Training and Development, 50 (12), 34-35.

7. Harris, S. G. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization, Peter Senge, New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990. New York: Doubleday.

8. Johnson, Kenneth W. 1993. The Learning Organization: What is It? Why Become One? Navran Associates' Newsletter.

9. Korten, D, Klauss, Rudi (eds.) (1984).People-centered development : contributions toward theory and planning frameworks. London: West Hartford, Conn Kumarian Press.

10. Laurie, E. J. (2016). Doing Real Research: A Practical Guide to Social Research .London , U K: SAGE Publication.

11. Lin, H. F. (2008). "Empirically testing innovation characteristics and organizational learning Capabilities in the business implementation success", Internet Research, 18 (1)60-78

12. Michael D Lord & Annette L Ranft, (2000,December.). "Organizational Learning About New International Markets: Exploring the Internal Transfer of Local Market Knowledge," Journal of International Business Studies, Palgrave MacMillan; Academy of International Business, 31(4), 573-589,

13. Mc Connell, T. (2013). The NPO dilemma: HR and Organizational challenges in non-profit organizations. The Philanthropist, 25(1),47-55.

14. Marquardt, D. R. (1999). Organizational Learning. New York: CRC Press.

15. Niven, P. R. (2008). Balanced scorecard Step-by-step for Government and Non-profit agencies(2nd ed.). Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

16. Senge, Peter. (1996, December). Leading Learning Organizations. Training & Development, 50 (12), 36-4.

17. Wierdsma A, Joop. S. (1992). Becoming a Learning Organization: Beyond the Learning Curve (Addison-Wesley Series on Organization Development). Workingham: Addison-Wesley Longman Ltd.