

Learning Organization:

A case study in Telephone Company in Brazil

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Abstract

This article reports a case study research in Telephone Company in Brazil, where it was analysed the Learning Organization practices. The data were collected through interviews with managers of the core units : Internet and Celular Telephone. The researchers asked about learning organization concept, experimentation with new approaches, learning through the best experience, etc.

The conclusions indicate a learning organizational conception connected with qualification and formation. The team work is used to accomplish activities in the sectors analysed, but it's unusual in the company. The communication is flowing and the group learn from the experiences . Another conclusion is that there is a organizational incoherence between "Theory in use" and "Theory espoused".

I - Introduction

The article presents and analyzes the data collected through study developed in a telecommunication company of Brazilian, which offers the services of conventional, cellular telephony, consulting to great customers and data communication.

The study had as a goal to identify the existence of practical organizational that lead to the learning organizational and to analyze, using the theoretical basis on the thematic, the adequacy of the practical to the context.

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The used method was the case study research. The collection of data was proceeded through interviews accomplished with two Managers of Business, one responsible by Internet's Business Unit and other by the Division of Expansion and Operation of Cellular Telephony. The intentional choice was concerned to the fact of investigators being identified that it was two units that, in their field, they are more subject of competition situations front to the market and they need to develop learning strategies and reaction to the changes.

The emphasis of the work fell again on the understanding of the learning organization perspective adopted by the company, searching to identify work models, ways of external relationships and its measures and subordination mechanisms which it obtains or not to reached success and to remain itself in the market.

Aiming at to understand the was learning occurs in the studied organization, one will become a relation among the empirical data, considering the practical form that the researched company has been working, and concepts and learning practices that the companies should adopt for the next century.

II - Learning Organization

Although the term " Learning Organization " has been brought more contemporarily , theoretical bases that support it build the diverse learning theories coming from pedagogy. It makes in a way, that transposed to the administration area, just like in education field, there is different approaches or paradigms that intend the hegemony in relation to the thematic.

Without the pretense to consider a resolution for such questions, to analyzing the learning organization theoretically, it was adopted as base Fleury's & Fleury(1995) concepts, that deal with a process change, resultant practical or previous experience, that can come or not, to disclose themselves in a perceivable change of behavior; Senge(1990) who deals it as a "metanóia", also, a mentality change; and the approach of Clarke and Monkhouse(1995), who refer to individual learning, pointing out that to learn isn't only to train.

Peter Senge(1990), the main author of the thematic, wrote that learning organization is the where the workers has conditions of expansion of the people's creative potential for the results fetching, in which differentiated reasonings are developed, with possibilities of outflow of the collective yearnings and constant learning on as to how to learn in group ("learning to learn").

To give support to its proposition, the same author systematized five basic disciplines that possess individual characteristics, but they are interdependent for the reach of the learning objective. They are:

- 1) Personal domain: self-knowledge of the personal objectives;
- 2) Mental models: grasped deeply ideas that influence our way of facing the world and our attitudes;
- 3) Common objective: objectives and commitments shared by the members of all the organization;
- 4) Learning in group: development of the members capacity to participate of a " reasoning in group ", and
- 5) Systemical reasoning: capacity to understand the whole group of the organization and to shimmer the changes that can take its improvement.

Then, when there are references to " companies that learn ", it will be as a vision systemical company, a learning to all, from bosses to employees, a change of mental model. That implies that the employee is engaged with the productive process of the company, with the customers and vendors; he can monitor, feel, react and learn regarding to the executed work.

Garvin(1993) relates Learning Organization with creation, acquisition and knowledge transfer, ally to the behavior modification, with views to the new learning. In this perspective, it identifies five activities that provide learning:

- 1) elaboration of systematic of problems resolution;
- 2) experimentation of new approach;
- 3) learning based on the own experiences and past history;
- 4) learning on the experiences and best practices of the others;
- 5) transfer of knowledge fast and efficiently through the organization.

Dealing the company learning , Nonaka and Takeuchi (1996) related it with the capacity to create, disseminate and incorporate the knowledge to the products and services of the company. They develop a model of how to administer an organization based on the creation of knowledge. Knowledge, for the authors, can be divided in *tacit* and *explicit*. The first one is personal and it involves intangible factors as faiths and values. The explicit knowledge is expressed through the formal language, embracing that type that easily is transmitted among the people. Through the interaction among tacit and explicit knowledge is that it becomes possible to identify different ways of knowledge conversion. The authors' basic conception is in the faith that the creation of the organizational knowledge is due to a continuous and dynamic interaction between the tacit and the explicit knowledge.

In the vision of Clarke & Monkhouse(1995), learning in the organizations has been acquiring more and more relevance, since there are not doubts that the companies success will demand severe patterns of managerial competence. The load of the company, financial resources and production with quality won't be by itself , success warranties. The challenges to be faced presuppose more and more:

- 1) homogeneity; the innovation needs to have meaning for all the interested parts and to assist sectorial, regional and international differences;
- 2) relevance, to satisfy the fundamental objective of the business;
- 3) the important is not the size, but the capacity to learn and to innovate and,
- 4) aggregation, there is a need of a communion of information.

It is noticed that the Administration schools has develop a decisive role for the success or not of learning organizations. There is a very big concern on some administration schools in that sense. The students are looking for a larger link with the subject and trying to take for the interior of the companies that new vision, or, that new " survival guide". However, in some visits to companies it may be noticed that great part of the same ones is not still working in this sense and there is a certain fear on the part of managers when investigated on " programs of learning organizational ", because they feel much more familiarized with " programs of total " quality.

In that sense, he/she is justified the relevance of the present work, that tries to understand the learning practices adopted in the context of an organization: Telecommunication Company T.

III - Characterization of the Company T

The Company T offers services of conventional telephony, cellular telephony, consultancy to great customers and data communication. It counts on 2.270 employees, in a relation of 3,79 used by installed terminals, the smallest index among all the companies operators of the Sistema Telebrás.

Internet's Business Unit is responsible for the management of all the regarding to Internet inside the company. This way commercialization, operation, expansion, training, analysis of the competition and management of this product is under responsibility of the work group.

The Division of Expansion and Operation of Cellular Telephony is responsible for the planning, project, implantation, operation and maintenance of the Cellular Mobile Systems in the State.

IV - Presentation and Analysis of the Data

Although the thematic of learning organizations can be considered of a recent treatment by the literature, it is possible to identify practices in that perspective in certain organizations.

Seeking to understand the learning practices adopted by the investigated organization, identified from now as company T, it will presented data and its analysis. So, it will be pointed out the thematic investigated and the collected data, accompanied of the referring theoretical considerations.

1. Conception of learning and requirements to learn.

In the manager's of the area of Cellular Telephony perspective, learning understands three stages:

1) theoretical knowledge, through training with base in the transmission of concepts and techniques to accomplish some activity;

2) trainee, as a professional executes the concerning activities to his training and he begins a phase of questionings about the first stage;

3) learning consolidation of concepts and of techniques, where the learning cycle is completed. Therefore learning in itself is a continuous activity, that there must be several cycles.

The concept of learning presented can be identified with the constant phases in the cycle of learning of Kolb (apud Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1995). The first moment presupposes theoretical learning back to learn how to do. The second moment refers to the knowledge practical applying (to do) and finally to question what it was learned until then (to contemplate).

He considers that the learning cycle is completed when the apprentice questions the learning (to think) and he can suggest changes (to decide). The learning is noticed as a continuous process, that it involves formal activities, as training (in the sense of possibility of absorption of knowledge), but that is characterized as a recurrent process, that doesn't have end.

The Internet's Business Unit management understand the learning as a mix of specific technical courses, generally out of the company, with the practical experimentation. According to the interviewee: "It involves a minimum time that is about one year for somebody of the area. In that period the person has to learn how the service works, its peculiarities, the treatment with the customer and with the competitors, and besides this person has to be informed of what is happening in this area, has been changing fast. "

For this professional, the performance in its business really needs a constant learning, but that happens more in a training conception than of " learning organization ". In this sense, Clarke and Monkhouse (1995) they articulate that the learning presupposes not only the training offered by the companies, because the same is driven to the correction and the elimination of mistakes. Of course certain tasks needs short term training but they need to be improved long term and that incessant search of learning and improvement is that has to be developed in the companies.

2 - Strategies for the learning of a collective way /groups.

In the researched Units, there is a first stage of individual learning, accomplished through reading of books and manuals or formal training, accompanied by a more experienced person guiding. The second phase is accomplished in group because training it doesn't still have conditions of assuming alone an activity and, finally, the third are accomplished in a mixed way, there are cases in that there is total responsibility for an activity, and another are accomplished in group.

It is observed that practices that value the learning and the development of collective activities exist. Initially there is the individual learning, but that is shared in a second moment, from the theoretical knowledge, to the practical activity. There is not an understanding that the individuals should store the knowledge and to keep them for itself, that agrees with the theoretical of the Learning (Senge, 1990; Fleury and Fleury, 1995; Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1995; etc).

The manager exercises a role of facilitator of the learning of the new members, without removing them the possibility of they learn alone. On the other hand, it calls the attention for the subject that there should be somebody with more experience facilitating the learning process, what links with one in the ways of learning proposals for Garvin (1993), that is to learn from the experiences of the other ones.

3 - Process of the employee's integration in the company, in the specific sections and posterior accompaniment.

The employee's integration is accomplished through some formal trainings, that has as objective to give a vision of the business. Whenever the recruiting of numerous groups happen, those employees are submitted to a month of presentations in every areas of the company. In the training, independent of the activity that will developed, the employee receives information on sales, marketing, finances and technology. After that stage he goes by specific trainings of his area. The selection, because it's a state company is accomplished by public competition. There are not instruments of evaluation of formal acting. Annual promotion granted for the employees' part exists, where the indication of who will be promoted belongs to the division boss. The career plan is in consolidation phase. The

communication processes are informal, or through e-mail, an electronic tool that every employee disposes.

It is contacted that the practices of human resources are set in a traditional perspective, that is, there is not a strategic vision of HR as it has been adopted by the subject organizations the processes of productive restructuring.

A concern exists in facilitating a systemic vision of the organization, through the knowledge of several areas of the company. Although the initiative facilitates certain knowledge of the whole, the activities are accomplished through formal trainings, what takes to question, until it facilitates the learning in the sense exposed by Senge (1990). Being more explicit: To what extent a socialization activity, as a formal training of integration, facilitate to reinforce the other four disciplines proposed by the author mentioned previously.

4 - Possibilities to share the learning

In the two Business Units , there are periodic meetings to evaluate the form of accomplishing the activities. Several changes were accomplished in the structure of the division and in the work methodology based on the meetings. There is an effective participation of all the collaborators in the decision of how to reach the objectives defined by the high direction, what includes the discussion of their suggestions. It isn't found the same type of procedures in the most divisions of the organization.

The interviewee that acts in the Cellular Telephony considers that its team works in the sense of reaching the objective presented by the direction. It agrees the exposed by Senge (1990), that makes necessary a discipline capable to transform the individual objective into a collective objective, so that the organization can learn as a system.

Besides, it reinforces the idea of the development of the work again in group, which, according to the same author, it takes much more significant results than through the individual learning.

However, the two managers call the attention for the peculiarity to manage its Business, in relation to the whole of the organization. In Internet appears the limitation of human resources as a enshorter of the shared learning. It is pointed out that doesn't exist

any program now for alteration of processes. At the most it makes periodically organization chart alterations.

It is noticed that there is not a lot of learning in group; learning is more to some areas where decisions are taken together. Starting from such observation, it is considered important, when the return interview be accomplished the interviewees, to alert for what Senge (1990, p. 18) writes:): "É difícil lembrar de uma organização que tenha se mantido numa posição de grandeza sem objetivos, valores e compromissos que sejam compartilhados em conjunto pelos membros da organização inteira".

That is one of the important facets of the subject, because out any difficulty, it makes necessary the ability to manager the transformation of individual objectives in coletive, so that the organization can learn as a system.

5 - Objectify common.

The management of the tied up to the Cellular Telephony Business Unit sends to the difficulty in answering for its collaborators. Through restored them to other subjects, the interviewee suggests that they work in the sense of reaching the objectives traced by the high direction of the organization. However, when questioned, he sends to the individual (employee). It could be inferred that there is not an objective thoroughly recognized by the employees' group, what would take to the observance, without an attitude change that picked the commitment on the application of the implicit knowledge in the organization. (Nonaka and Takeuchi ,1996)

In the perspective of the management of Internet's Business Unit there is an understanding that: " No, the organization doesn't work for a common objective, with rare exceptions. It depends a lot on the people being engaged or not, and even political links".

Again it fits to retake one of the five disciplines of Senge here (1990), common objective, that refers to value and commitments shared together by the members of the whole organization. Because, when a concrete and legitimate objective exists, people give everything of themselves and they learn, not for obligation, but for free and spontaneous will.

1. Interpretation: “It is difficult to remind of an organization that has maintained in a position of greatness without objectives, values and commitments that are shared together by the members of the whole organizational”.

6. Freedom to create

Both interviewees point out the possibility to create, but in the specific sphere of Business. While one of them points out the implantation of a philosophy that contemplates the responsibility and authority to accomplish a task, including the creativity, the other marks that, what happens is that generally those ideas are not taken ahead.

In the specific case of the areas, it seems that there is incentive to creativity and autonomy. However, it is noticed that happens a dysfunction in relation to the application, because according to Kao (1997) it is not enough to be creative if they do not offer conditions that facilitate the execution of the projects in the organization. The employee is usually manipulated and he becomes unsatisfied.

7 - Incentive to learning for changes in the competitive market

In the Division of Expansion and Operation was marked: We " have an average of 150 hours / year of training for collaborator, that is a good pattern to Brazil. Now it is very difficult of answering if it is enough to prepare a collaborator for the competitive market. We have been stimulating the continuous learning, specially in the subject of foreign languages and information through Internet, because it is very important we are ' up dating " with countries more advanced in telecommunication. The organization is getting ready to enter in a more direct way in the competition, given the perspective of privatization of telecommunications ".

It is noticed that training does not appear only identified as training, as some authors understand (Roux, 1983), but as learning possibility that includes readings, to be done and researched.

Through the exposed it is possible verify that the organization has worried about the personnel training, a more individual learning or certain sections, but it doesn't come if

preparing appropriately for a change organizational. It would be necessary a change of more global conduct, so that it could not, as a whole, to enlarge its competence when facing the future of larger competitiveness.

The management of Internet points out that for a while the company doesn't still enter in the climate of competitive market, because it stays protected by the monopoly of the telecommunications. In its specific case, there is competition among several suppliers, that seems to indicate because they work in teams, there is shared learning and they act considering the competition and the necessary flexibility to answer a competitive market

8 - Existence of self-diagnosis mechanisms

The two interviewees point out that self-diagnosis mechanisms don't exist in the organization. In the case of Internet, diagnosis is made by the financial result, that means, all is being sold and the participation in the market.

Certainly the self-diagnosis is an important tool in the sense of the organization to learn on herself. Through it, it is possible to contemplate fundamental aspects for the organization as Garvin (1993) said:

- Use of systematic methods for the problems solution;
- Experimentation;
- Learning through post experiences;
- Learning through the others;
- Knowledge transfer.

9 - Coherence between the verbalized speech and the actions.

According to the professional that acts in the area of Cellular Telephony: " This question is really very difficult of answering. A company like ours is very complex, and each manager's behavior or director sends this subject for the individual case".

His verbalization express a difficulty in visualizing the organization in a systemic perspective. Before that, he refers to its complexity.

It is noticed that the organization doesn't have a concern in regulating the managers' behavior, in a way to create an only mental model. He suggests that the knowledge can be

implicit a many times, without being expressed in a tacit way. (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1996).

On its side, the Internet Management is expressed in a clear way: " In fact coherence doesn't exist. It is spoken in changing a lot, but one acts always in the same way ".

Given the exposed it, is possible to verify that there are discrepancies among the tacit, explicit and articulate knowledge among the members of the organization and the implicit knowledge, that one has characteristic more individual and understands faiths and systems of values (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1996).

Associating this answer one another subjects, one becomes possible say that there is a discrepancy between the " theory in it use " and the " theory espoused"(Argyris, 1992).

10 - Planning

Both managers say that the objectives established by the high direction are really monitored and collected by several responsible managers by each activity. Being considered here that the planning facilitates a " future " vision (Senge, 1990), it is said that there is a concern by part of these managers in taking its collaborators to an engagement in relation to the objectives established by the superior administration of the company. The managers are the facilitators in this process.

The administration of Internet points out the existence of several planning types: technician, whose function is to implanting new equipments; of new services, whose function is to monitor market, looking for new products and market niches and training, among others.

Being analyzed theoretically, it is verified that the planning is one of the basic activities so that the organization can monitor its beginnings, its activities and its objectives. Senge (1990) relates the role of planning with learning and of managerial planning with institutional learning. It is verified, through the use in several planning ways, that the organization is concerned that such activity is constituted in an institutional learning, that includes several sections of the organization.

11 - Analysis of the results before the System and its competitors

The results are appraised based on quality indicators that analyze telecommunications companies, beyond market research from time to time to evaluate the degree of the customers' satisfaction.

In the specific case of Cellular, quality and economic indicators are considered the best in Brazil. However they have little information about the international reality, which would be in this globalization moment more important. The administration of Internet serves as a model for the other TELE's.

The analysis method presents an indicative of being proper, embracing given referring aspects of the market. There is a concern with the learning through the " benchmarking ", that is to say, with the situation of the organization and competition, related to the competitive advantage (Kao, 1997).

V - Conclusions

The managerial world is in constant change; today there no borders for the international competitions, technology runs to accompany the market demands and innovation makes necessary. So, the companies should go back to innovation, that is strongly related to the learning process.

The concern with the conversion of learning approaches of organizations is considered recent, and an important possibility before the changes. Considering specifically learning organizations, certain characteristics are observed:

- work development in team;
- mutual trust among the members of the team;
- compensation of forces and limitations; and
- existence of a larger common objective than the individual objectives. (Senge, 1990).

From this brief characterization, it's possible to analyse the learning process in this telecommunications company , as a whole, from the vision of two Business Managers interviewees in the company.

Through the case study, it can be verified that the work is developed in team both analyzed unit, which doesn't mean that it is the same practice adopted by the remaining

organization. It is considered that special ways of the business (Internet and Mobile Telephony), become subjects like: learning, objectives, responsibility, creativity, be shared so that the work group establishes changes according to the autonomy that possesses. Although it is said that restricted learning possibilities to certain areas can have an important role circulator for the organization remaining, it is possible to stand out that the organization needs to make possible spaces for the implantation of current changes of learning in group, taking risk of atrophying its potential.

One can infer that there is a trust among divisions members and a concern in compensating possible differing learning, so that the differences don't intervene in the objective plans. The objectives of the organization are defined by the superior administration, where it is concluded that the other members don't participate in its definition, remaining them to the execution.

The incoherence between the " Theory in uses ", and the " Theory espoused " represents a considerable menace so that the organizational processes happen in a more rational way, because to turn the explicit knowledge facilitates the communication and sharing of learning.

Starting from this analysis, it is possible to infer that the organization in study doesn't possess a systemic vision of business, but that several subsystems sees each other as a system. The interviewees tell that the whole differ from of the parts that they manage and becomes explicit the perception that they lost the integration notion with the whole (especially one of them, who refers textually that he can only answer about his Division and sometimes he says he would have to ask to the collaborators individually).

The fact of the organization be protected by telecommunications monopoly certainly should have strong influence on the little concern in relation to the compromise with a common objective.

It is verified that the concept of learning related to work is strongly linked to the activities correlated to the first two apprenticeships of the learning cycle of Kolb (Swieringa and Wierdisna, 1995), that means, to the training and the formation. It is comprehensible, historically, that learning has been associated to the formal education and that the organization of which they are have a policy of educational interventions value.

Being considered the studied theoretical perspectives, it is possible infer that the organization under focus facilitates learning in specific sections and it would be more compatible with the learning conception presented by Garvin (1993), especially when he refers to the learning through the past experiences and learning from the others.

Concluding, it is suggested that the organization develops learning mechanisms, in a systemic perspective, taking risk of never adapting to the demands that the competitive market will impose with the next liberates competition in the area of telecommunications business.

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