

LEARNING ORGANIZATION – A NEW CHALLENGE IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Popescu, Constanța¹
Surcel (Georgescu), Antoaneta Roxana²

Abstract: *In a learning organization, the activities are conducted in a dynamic stimulating environment whereas the human resource is involved in a continuously creating, acquisition or knowledge transfer activity. The learning organization in the pre-university environment represents that place where the teaching staff learns on a continuous basis in order to adapt to the training needs of their pupils and the requirements of the labour market. Teachers have the possibility to permanently develop both professionally and personally. They do not cease to grow, they are not content with mediocre results, they are constantly involved in developing their creativity and didactic innovation. The organization's success relies on a continuous learning process and encompasses elements achieved in common, within departments and individually, through personal efforts. This research presents the most important results on the challenges faced by teaching staff within a learning organization. The data were collected following application of a questionnaire on a representative sample of teaching staff in pre-university education in the county, teachers who carry out their activities in academic, technological and vocational high schools. The data were used to outline an overview on the performance of the activity of the teaching staff within a large organization based on an ample learning process.*

Keywords: *learning organization, human resource, learning process, performance*

JEL Classification: M530, J24

Introduction

Any organization is mostly the result of what its members think and how they interact. In a learning organization the employees have the feeling that they achieve something important to both them and the others; they develop professionally and personally using new thinking methods and continuous learning, combining individual performance and performance of the organization. Collective decisions rely on dialogue and innovation; people are willing to take risks. Seeing each experience as an opportunity to learn together, employees develop their capacity on an ongoing basis, they achieve the results targeted; they aspire to performance and acquiring knowledge. Having ideas is always essential in the learning process; however, failure to implement them in order to obtain corroborated results at both individual and organizational level means that the organization limits itself to the stage of development and improvement of their activities. Learning organizations are able to transform the knowledge acquired into concrete manners of action, reacting to the changes occurred from the outside.

Relevance and Importance of Research

Building a learning organization is a difficult task that managers undertake, a task which starts with a positive attitude in relation to learning and with the prospect of a visionary process. The key word of such organization is “they learn together, the team’s experiences and the learning collaboration-based process trigger benefits for people, groups of employers and organizations”.

¹ Professor PhD, Valahia University in Targoviste, Romania, tantapop@yahoo.com

² PhD Student, Valahia University in Targoviste, Romania, rox30rox@yahoo.com

Theoretical approaches

Senge argues that the development of an organisational learning culture entails following five disciplines:

(1) The first discipline is called personal mastery – the discipline of personal development. It is concerned with fostering people who are willing to learn, and who can stand the tension between personal visions and objective reality;

(2) The second discipline referred to as is based on the concept of ‘theories-in-use’. These theories must be made explicit in order that the whole company can discuss them and develop collective mental models; Challenges and open questions raised by the concept of the learning organisation;

(3) The development of shared visions is the third discipline. A vision is ‘a purpose put into practice’. Such visions must be ‘owned’ by every employee and thus become the mission of the whole company;

(4) Team learning is the fourth discipline. According to Senge, teams are the basic learning units of modern organisations. (From his practical experience, however, he reports that a team of enthusiastic managers, who had individual IQs of over 120, showed a collective IQ of 63! Therefore, he proposes techniques for dialogue, so that the collective potential can be harnessed.);

(5) The fifth and last discipline – systemic thinking – is the most crucial one for Senge – hence his book is called ‘The fifth discipline’. Systemic thinking comprises all other disciplines and contributes to their integrated development and is based on ‘systemic archetypes’.

Materials and Methods

The investigative endeavour regarding the challenges to which teaching staff within a learning organization are subjected has used a complex research strategy which combines both quantitative and qualitative investigation methods. We are presenting below the set of methods and techniques used to collect information as well as their objective.

The objectives of the research are:

- Identifying characteristics of a school as a learning organization.
- Transforming the capacity of communication and collective thinking in order to develop the learning capacity as a team.
- Structuring some managerial competences for headmasters within a learning organization.

The qualitative research regarding the challenge to which a school as a learning organization is subjected is based on the following **hypotheses**:

- As a permanent learning unit, the team is characterized by a permanent adaptability to newness, creativity, intuition, systematic thinking and imagination.
- The attitude towards continuous learning is positive and based on how the team thinks and acts.

Documentary Analysis

In their approach of the learning organization, the branch literature classifies the contribution to the development of this concept into: founders, real-world Definitions and Critiques, Promoting Continuous Improvement, Innovation, Stakeholder Collaboration, Organizational Learning and Organizational Outcomes and Today's Approaches for Building Organizational Learning. One may get an overview of the founders of this concept from the table below:

Table no. 1 Literature about learning organization

Name	Categories	Publication	Description
Peter Senge	Founder (father of organizational learning)	The Fifth Discipline in 1990	he writes that a learning organization values, and derives competitive advantage from, continuing learning, both individual and collective
Chris Agyris	Founder	„Good communication that blocks learning”	how learning can improve organizational development success
Donald Schon	Founder	Theory in Practice and Organizational Learning	have a significant impact on the conceptualization of organizational learning
Margaret Wheatley	Founder	Leadership and the New Science	"chaos and complexity have emerged as serious branches of science."

Source: made by authors using data from Rebecca Cors, *What is a learning organization?*

Real-World Definitions and Critiques Since the 1990 publishing of Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*, many have attempted to promote learning at their organizations.

Below are perspectives from some of these practitioners about what a learning organization means is presented in the table below:

Table no. 2 Definitions and Critiques about learning organization

Definitions and Critiques	Name	Describes a learning organization
What Defines and Propels a Learning Organization?	Linda Levine	The organization remembers and learns Public recording is unobtrusive and useful in the execution of work processes and decision-making. Principles and concepts may refer to a group, an organizational unit(s), or a community, suggesting notions of scalability and tailoring. The notion of learning is different from the additive sum of individual contributions (the whole is more than the sum of its parts). Learning is applied to produce or modify individual dispositions, policies, processes, and procedures.
	R.P. Mohanty's Costa Mesa's	Customer power Information power Global investors power Global market power Power of simplicity Power of the organization Worker-executive dialogue about building the new facility was critical for engaging workers and improving designs. Cross training makes jobs more interesting, teaches employees new skills, and reduces injuries. Learning incentives promote cross training and reward good performance. Including workers in shift scheduling is one way to promote a strong work/life balance.

Source: made by authors using data from Rebecca Cors, *What is a learning organization?*

Quantitative Research on the Need for Training

The relation between Promoting Continuous Improvement, Innovation, Community Building and organizational learning is presented in the table below:

Table no.3

Definitions and Critiques	Name	describes a learning organization
Quantitative Research on the Need for Training	Deane Clark	make an interesting link between learning organizations and performance in their article "Creating a Learning Project Environment."
Learning Organizations Promote Innovation	Ramus and Steger	builds on parallels between the characteristics of learning organizations and those described in the literature on organizations that are designed to support innovation and employee creativity
Learning Organizations Foster Community Building	Dori Digenti	"Toward an Understanding of the Learning Community," explores the theory of a learning community as a mechanism for creating the learning organization

Source: made by authors using data from Rebecca Cors, *What is a learning organization?*

Many experts suggest that an assessment tool is a highly effective way to promote organizational learning. Recent investigations are developing ways to measure the impact of organizational learning on outcomes such as financial performance, productivity, waste production, continuous improvement, customer focus, and employee behaviors, satisfaction, and performance.

To become a "learning organization" one has to create a learning atmosphere (Rothwell 2002). The question is whether the team as a learning organization has, within a school, the conditions required to transform the attitude towards continuous learning into a positive experience based on thinking and action at group level and not in an individual manner.

Results

The sample of the teaching staff in the pre-university education in Dâmbovița County used for the quantitative research is made of 295 teachers of 1267 in total.

The distribution of the sample in line with the type of education establishment where teachers perform their activities and their residence area is presented in the tables below:

Table no. 4 **Distribution of the sample**

SAMPLE SIZE	TYPE OF EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT					
	ACADEMIC		TECHNOLOGICAL		VOCATIONAL	
	number	%	number	%	number	%
295	112	37.96	122	41.35	61	20.67

source: <http://statistici.insse.ro/>

As data provided by the National Institute for Statistics in 2014 indicate, in Dâmbovița County there are 30 high schools in total in which 1267 teachers work (482 teachers teach in academic high schools and colleges, 442 in technical high schools, 83 in resource major and 260 in vocational schools). In terms of their representation by sex, in Dâmbovița County there are 393 male teachers and the rest of them are female teachers.

The distribution of the sample on the age criterion shows similes with the academic seniority criterion and is similar to the distribution by age bracket in the total of the teaching staff in the county as shown in table 5:

Table no.5 Distribution of the sample

AGE BRACKET (YEARS)	TEACHING STAFF INTERVIEWED (%)	ACADEMIC SENIORITY (YEARS)	TEACHING STAFF (%)
below 30	4.3	below 5	5.6
31-40	33.5	6-10	9.0
41-50	42	11-20	39.5
over 50	20.2	over 20	45.9

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

A higher weight is held by teaching staff in the urban area that carry out their activity in technological high schools, academic high schools and colleges, vocational high schools; most of these education establishments are situated in towns/cities, as indicated by the table below:

Table no. 6 The distribution of the sample

TEACHING STAFF/RESIDENCE AREA	RURAL %	URBAN %
295	22.4	77.6

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

Most of teaching staff interviewed (89.4%) reached a high degree of didactical maturity (didactical qualification: level I – 60.3%, didactical qualification: level II – 23,5%, PhD 5,6%). In selection of teaching staff account was taken of the curricular area to which they belong: mathematics and sciences 22.3%, language and communication 20.1%, technologies 34.9%, arts and sport 3.5%, man and society 19.2%.

Discussions

Starting from the capacity of a team to create the results at which all the members aim, the respondents perceive the capacity to relate and act in a group as a challenge which relies on understanding the processes which encourage and support learning. The responses on the situations for which learning in a team is required are highlighted below:

Table no. 7 Situations requiring learning in a team

Team learning situations	%
Implementation of new processes	19
Restructuring the activity within the organization	12
Innovation in didactic activity	26
Change of organization's values	20
Change of working practices	23

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

Referring to team learning and how this can be achieved within a school, teaching staff interviewed consider this type of education as follows:

Table no.8 Team learning achieved within a school

Forms of achieving team learning	%
Exchange of information between colleagues	19
Exchange of expertise between colleagues	21
Access to common knowledge	22
Sharing observations and personal conclusions	9
Developing organizational competences	29

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

The learning process is difficult and specialists believe that it may create barriers for the performance of new activities and the emergence of management forms within the organization. With regards to the elements of the organizational culture generating knowledge, the teaching staff interviewed express their options as indicated in the table below:

Table no.9 Elements of organisational culture

Elements of organizational culture facilitating knowledge	%
Encouraging change	27
Expressing ideas	15
Participation	25
Communication	22
Dialogue	11

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

Using some specific techniques enables the team to have the maximum efficiency, especially under circumstances of the diversity of its members. As shown below, fulfilment of tasks is most times prevented by:

Table no.10 Problems occurring inside the team

Problems occurring inside the team	%
emotional	34
social	58
other human needs	8

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

One has observed that when the team members are very different, there will be strong conflicts in its early development as a team, conflicts which, if properly mediated, will reduce in time and the team will be highly efficient as a result.

In terms of diversity within the learning organization, the respondents consider as most beneficial the following situations:

Table no.11 Diversity manifestation directions

Diversity manifestation directions	%
Background variety	42
Numeric equality (women/men)	25
Collaboration at national level (variety of cultures)	33

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

The opposite responses, which refer to sources of inhibition with regards to learning in a group, are presented in the table below:

Table no.12 **Diversity manifestation directions**

Diversity manifestation directions	%
Resolving disputes for personal interests	12
Significant age differences	27
Different personalities	33
Identical thinking/comfortable existence	9
Lack of creativity/innovation	19

Source: made by authors using data from the quantitative research

Conclusion: The discipline of learning in a team is built on the dialogue that allows discovery of meanings which are rarely encountered in the individual learning model. People think together and actively participate to identification of the best solutions possible, with a medium and long-term impact.

See below the characteristics of the learning organization:

Table no.13 **Characteristics of the learning organization**

No.	Characteristics	Relating to school as a learning organization
1.	Continuously provides learning opportunities	Continuous improvement/training programmes ensure learning opportunities at individual level. Team learning is based on knowledge and expertise of team members in problem solving
2.	Uses training to achieve goals	Solving problems starts from team members' knowledge and expertise. Organizational goals and individual goals intertwine.
3.	Identifies the connection between individual performance and organizational performance	Rapid and efficient transfer of knowledge to organization involves combining personal goals and group goals.
4.	Encourages dialogue and creates an environment for the employees to express opinions and take risks	Supports open communication and makes people feel safe in relation to asking questions and manifesting curiosity
5.	Uses creative tensions as a source of energy and renewal	Inside a homogenous team people indulge themselves in self-satisfaction; creativity and innovation are inexistent. Tensions develop imagination and innovation towards task fulfilment.
6.	Becomes aware of the relation with the environment where their activity is performed	The school operates in a dynamic, complex and competitive environment, and a continuous learning process is vital to excel in such an environment.

Source: made by authors using data from *Rebecca Cors*

It is essential to have new ideas in the educational process. Implementation of such ideas corroborates individual aspirations and organizational aspirations in an open vision which leads towards performance.

A school as a learning organisation has the capacity to change and adapt routinely to new environments and circumstances as its members, individually and together, learn their way to realising their vision.

Within a learning organization, teaching staff will not limit themselves to what they already know; they will not be satisfied with mediocre results. Conversely, they “will constantly develop their capacity to generate the results targeted” and will permanently adapt to new generations of students.

References:

1. Cors, R.,2003. What is learning organization? Reflections on the Literature and Practitioner Perspectives, on-line Article
2. European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2013. Key data regarding teaching staff and school leaders in Europe. Edition 2013. Eurydice Report. Luxemburg. The Office for Official Publications of the European Union
3. Kools, M. and Stoll L., 2016. “What Makes a School a Learning Organisation?”, OECD Education Working Papers, No. 137, OECD Publishing, Paris
4. Rothwell, W. J., 2002. The Workplace Learner: How to Align Training Initiatives with Individual Learning Competencies. New York, AMACOM
5. Popescu, C.,Răboacă, Gh., Ciucur, D. & Iovan, D.,2006. Metodologia cercetării științifice economice, Bucharest, Editura ASE
6. Senge, P., 1990. The Fifth Discipline. New York, Doubleday
7. Senge, P., A. Kleiner, et al., 1994. The Fifth Discipline Field Book: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization. New York, Doubleday
8. Vlăsceanu, M., 2003. Organizații și comportament organizațional, Iași, Editura Polirom