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Learning Organization and its Cultural Manifestations: Evidence from a Global White Goods Manufacturer

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Abstract

Being a leader is critical and difficult to sustain in today's highly competitive business world. In present study, a leader company in white goods sector is examined to explore its core cultural competency. The critical characteristic of the company is found as its being a learning organization. Various cultural manifestations of the company are analyzed according to Senge's five disciplines. Exploratory case study technique is used in order to understand a complex phenomenon of being a learning organization.

Keywords: Learning organization, organizational culture, artifacts, espoused values, case study

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1. Introduction

Businesses competing in dynamic and turbulent environments should pursue the processes of learning, behavior change, and performance improvement (Slater and Narver, 1995). According to findings in various researches, organizational learning provides competitive advantage for companies through fostering innovation (Jiménez-Jimenez, 2008). In the present study, culture of a leader global white goods manufacturer (hereafter ABC Company) is examined through exploratory case study method via in-depth interviews, observations and documentaries provided by the organization. Studying learning organizations can bring new insights for strategists, since learning organizations are able to meet and shape the demands of their markets.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Organizational Culture

Culture involves three basic human activities: what people think, what people do, and what people makes. Its common properties are: culture is shared, learned, transmitted cross generationally, symbolic, adaptive, and integrated (Tharp, 2009). Culture's levels of analysis include nation, society, industry, organization and organizational subculture. It is not easy to separate organizational culture from larger levels of culture associated within the organization's environment, however organizational theorists believe that is necessary to do (Hatch,1997).

Semiotic (symbolic or language based) notion of culture gained great popularity in 1980's (Tharp, 2009). This can be considered as a movement of organization theorists who wanted to strike out new directions, since they were frustrated by modernist theories and methods (Hatch, 1997). Schein's study on organizational culture can be considered as one of the most influential studies.

Schein (1992, p.18) defines organizational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems." Schein argues that culture is both a "here and now" dynamic phenomenon which is constantly reenacted and created by our interactions with others (1992, p.3). According to him, organizational culture can be analyzed at several different levels. The term 'level' means the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. The author categorized the organizational culture into three levels: observable artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions.

Artifacts include all the phenomena can be seen, heard, and felt when a new group with an unfamiliar culture is encountered (Schein, 1992, p.23). Examples for the artifacts are the architecture and physical surroundings; its products; its technologies; its style (clothing, art, publications, etc.); its published values and mission statement; its language, gossip, jargon, and humor; its myths and stories; and its practices, rituals, ceremonies, and taboos (Schein, 1992, p.23; Tharp, 2009). According to Schein, climate of the organization is not the same thing with the culture of the organization but it is the product of some underlying assumptions (Schein 1992, p.24). Artifacts are easy to be observed but difficult to be deciphered unless the observer lives in the group long enough. Otherwise the observer should talk to the insiders to understand day to day operating principles that guide the behavior of the group (Schein, 1992, p.25). Dewey (1934) argues that culture is embodied in material artifacts (including identity claims as well as other identity artifacts such as logo, name, etc.) that can be used as symbols to express who or what the organization is (as cited in Hatch, 2002). Orlikowski(2007) states that materiality has been ignored in organizational theory : "It should be quickly evident that a considerable amount of materiality is entailed in every aspect of organizing, from the visible forms — such as bodies, clothes, rooms, desks, chairs, tables, buildings, vehicles, phones, computers, books, documents, pens, and utensils — to the less visible flows — such as data and voice networks, water and sewage infrastructures, electricity, and air systems." In the next level of organizational culture, there are espoused values and beliefs which refer ideals, goals, aspirations, rationalizations. Espoused values and beliefs may and may not be in parallel with behavior and other artifacts (Schein, 1992, p. 24). Espoused values are those championed by a company's leadership and management whereas enacted values refer employees' actual behavior. Values that gain long-term acceptance often become taken-for-granted that individuals are usually unaware of them. Thus, in the third level, there are basic assumptions which refer underlying, often unconscious, determinants of an organization's attitudes, thought processes, and actions (Tharp, 2009). This process is related with social validation which means that 'certain beliefs and values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group' (Schein, 1992, p.26). According to Argyris and Schon (1996), if the beliefs and values are not congruent with effective performance, it is observed that in many organizations espoused values reflect the desired behavior but are not reflected in observed behavior. For example in

U. S. organizations, it is common to espouse teamwork while individual competitiveness is consistently rewarded (Schein, 1992, p. 27).

Martin et al. (2006) discusses the differences between three main perspectives in organizational culture studies which are integration, differentiation and fragmentation. Integration perspective mostly associates with strong cultures with excellent performance. This approach can be labeled as ‘value engineering’ since most of this research deals with prescriptions and techniques for generating value consensus even manipulating the innermost personal values of employees (Martin et al., 2006). While integration perspective argues that there should be consensus among different manifestations of culture such as artifacts, espoused values and basic assumptions in the whole organization; differentiation perspective argues that interpretations of manifestations are inconsistent and consensus can be observed only within sub cultural boundaries. Fragmentation perspective argues that consensus is not organization-wide nor is it specific to any subculture, but consensus among individuals is issue specific and short-lived (Martin, 2006). In present study, differentiation perspective is adopted.

2.2. Learning Organization

Senge (1990, p.3) defines learning organizations as “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”. Garvin (1993)’s definition of a learning organization is “an organization skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, and modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights”.

In his famous book “The Fifth Discipline”, Senge (1990) states that “if a learning organization were an engineering innovation, such as the airplane or the personal computer, the components would be called ‘technologies’. For an innovation in human behavior, the components need to be seen as disciplines”. According to Senge (1990), to practice a discipline needs to be a lifelong learner, thus it cannot be said that “we are a learning organization” just as it can be said “I am an enlightened person” (p. 10, 11). Senge formulates five disciplines of a learning organization as systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building shared vision, and team learning.

According to Senge, systems thinking integrates other four disciplines and turning them into a coherent body of theory and practice. Building a shared vision brings a long term commitment; mental models helps to discover shortcomings in the present ways of looking at the world; team learning offers a broader perspective than individual ones for seeing the larger picture; personal mastery motivates members to continually learn from his/her own actions (1999, p.12). The author summarizes the learning organization as “a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it” (1999, p.13).

Senge’s work is considered as inspirational by Bui and Baruch (2011). As a result of their study on higher education, authors founds that systems thinking has a positive impact on the process of knowledge sharing, while personal mastery and mental models appear to improve the process of strategic planning of organizations and the pursuance of work-life balance. What is more, team learning and shared vision can promote organizational knowledge sharing, as well as an individual’s self-efficacy and a better work-life balance. Last, shared vision also advances organizational strategic planning, while team learning can help academics to teach better.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Goal

Our research goal is to examine the culture of a leader company operating in white manufacturer sector in order to explore its core cultural competency and it is found as being a learning organization. Further

research is conducted to analyze our case according to Senge's learning organization framework at different cultural levels.

3.2. *Sample*

The company is a leader global white goods manufacturer which has been operating more than a half century, with almost 20000 employees working in more than 100 countries. It is controlled by a holding which is one of the largest industrial and service groups in the home country. It can be argued that the holding has a strong culture which influences the culture of its family companies.

3.3. *Data Collection*

In this research, exploratory case study method is conducted through in-depth interviews, analyses of existing organizational documentations and observations. Survey (positivist) research is a useful method to address some research problems however not adequate for complex phenomena (Näslund, 2002). Since organizational learning can be considered as a complex phenomenon, qualitative research method is preferred in the present study. In-depth interviews are conducted at strategic planning, public relations and human resources departments. The common aspect of these departments is they are all directly linked to CEO and they provide bridging and facilitating functions for the organization and its environment. Observations of the physical layout, people and behaviors, as well as the documentaries provided by the organization are used for our analysis.

3.4. *Analyses and Results*

In this part findings are analyzed and categorized according to Senge's five disciplines of a learning organization, which are personal mastery, building a shared vision, mental models, team learning and systems thinking.

3.4.1. *Personal Mastery in ABC Company*

According to Senge (1990, p.140), organizations only learn through people. Therefore, the author argues that motivation of the employees for growth, productivity and technological development matters. Senge defines "learning" as the ability to produce the results that one truly wants in life. Thus, learning organizations are possible only if they have employees at every level that practice learning (Senge, 1990, p.142). Marsick and Watkins (2003), argue that when individuals increase their learning capacity, they can enhance the overall capacity of the organization to learn as long as the company is receptive and able to place appropriate mechanisms to enable, support, and reward the use of what is learned. According to them, people with high level of personal mastery tend to learn continuously, thus it is a process and lifelong discipline. These people know what they want and where they are. They are aware of their in competencies and at the same time they have self-confidences.

During the meeting with the strategic planning department, it is stated that if they fail from a project they spend a huge effort on correcting their mistakes at the cost of losing time. Most of the members of the strategic planning department are present during the meeting. The meeting lasts for two hours and team members do not lose their attention. All of the team members seem curious and eager to share and acquire information. During the meeting with the public relations department, the members of the department stated that both successes and failures are owned by the company. However, it is also stated that taking an action might last long since they tend to behave precautious. Similar, statement is made by strategic planning department. Uncertainty avoidance of the company may not be low, thus only calculated risk can be tolerated. This tendency can be a barrier for learning and should be explored further. During the meeting with human resources department, it is stated that they do not compromise from training budget. As a story they told us, during the crisis time in a meeting, finance manager stands up and says that the company should not cut any training budget no whether what and he is applauded on

foot by others. Kim and Callahan (2013) state that training inputs are very important elements as predictors for learning transfer.

3.4.2. Building a Shared Vision in ABC Company

According to Senge (1990, p.206), shared vision is crucial for a learning organization since it brings focus and energy for learning. The author argues that when people share a vision by heart, they are connected together by a common aspiration. He states that “vision” is a familiar concept in corporate leadership however it is usually one person’s or group’s vision. These individuals’ visions are shared among people at all levels of their companies and create a common identity among enormously diverse people (Senge, 1990, p.207).

ABC Company’s vision was becoming one of the ten biggest white goods manufacturers in Europe. When present CEO took over the position in 2008, he saw that this vision was already reached. He revised the vision as being a respected and accountable brand with innovative products. In their web site vision of the ABC Company is stated as ensuring long term sustainable growth, increasing the market share globally, developing innovative product and applications, having a corporate responsibility, ensuring the integration and optimization as a global group and being a respected global company. When we have talked with strategic planning department, we perceive that vision is internalized and shared by the team. It is stated that they do not want to compete on price; their aim is to produce premium products with innovative aspects. However, this does not mean that the cost is not important. Not only the ABC Company but the culture of the holding has low cost and high quality target. This principle was set by the founder of the holding and it is still hold by the members. The impact of the founder can be seen in artifacts such as in every manager’s room there is a portrait of him. When we look at the products of the company, we can say that the products are premium, stylish and innovative. A senior retired manager who has worked at the strategic planning department stated that every employee in the company feels herself/himself as an important part of the vision since they are part of a big family from bottom to top.

3.4.3. Mental Models in ABC Company

Senge (1990) argues that our mental models determine not only how we make sense of the world but also how we take action. The author states that usually the best ideas never get put into practice, because they conflict with deeply held internal images of how the world works. Thus, the discipline of managing mental models (surfacing, testing and improving) is crucial for building learning organizations (Senge, 1990, p.174, 175). According to Senge, many mental models can exist at the same time and all of them need to be considered and tested against particular situation (1990, p.191). Senge argues that when operating in full advocacy, the goal is to win the argument; however when advocacy and inquiry are combined, the goal is to find the best argument. Senge calls this “reciprocal inquiry” that everyone states his or her thinking explicit and subject to examination (1990, p.191). Accordingly, if managers believe their world views are facts rather than assumptions, they will not try challenge or improve those views (1990, p.203).

In ABC Company, management philosophy had started to change after transmission to professional management in 1965. Beforehand, the company had a more paternalistic management. In 1970s, sales function became more important beside production. In 1980s, the challenge was catching the quality standards and becoming international. ABC Company applied quality circles which aimed active participation of workers in quality management and by this way motivation of the employees was expected to be higher. In 1990s, innovation and R&D became the new challenges. Also, in those years there were important organizational changes as well. Organization was more hierarchical and functional before 1990s. In order to prepare for competition which was about to increase due to customs union, the ABC company was started to be leaned. Hierarchical layers was lessened, managers was selected to their ability to be a team leader instead of commanding and structure. Harrison et al. (2009) argues that organizations turn to normative control systems replacing hierarchy with ideology as a means of inducing participation. By this way, flattery organization structure instead of a hierarchical one can facilitate innovation and adaptation much better especially in turbulent environments and intense competition.

During our interview with the strategic planning department, director of the department states that the company adopts systematic working, at the same time they are flexible enough to compete with domestic and international brands. When present CEO was assigned his position in 2008, he changed the vision and increased the integration within the company. He is known as an analytical person who pays attention to details. A member of the strategic planning department states that the CEO always takes feedback from vice presidents of each department, if the information or answers are not satisfactory; he asks the bottom lines of the hierarchy. Present director of strategic planning department who was assigned in 2009, increased the participation spirit in the department as well. A retired manager from strategic planning department states that in the company the power distance is not very high and there is a good communication within and among the various departments. During our interview with public relations department, it is stated that in spite of a conservative culture, there is always a move towards good and new. In the interview with the HR department, it is said that underlying values of the company are equality and justice, empathy, holistic perspective, honesty, openness and empowerment. Also we are told that there are two main career paths in the company: being a manager or specialist. Regardless of the position it is said that every employee is given a great importance. If one employee is very promising, HR can move that person to a better position. Thus, it can be argued that talents are protected by HR function. In house trainings are provided for the employees in order to ensure their professional development.

When we consider ABC Company's brief history and our interviews with the key departments, we can say that the company has successful attempts to catch the day. With TQM practices and six sigma projects the company reflects its intention toward development and change. Today, ABC Company has several patents. According to Beck (1992), patents are the indicators of the situation that information actually brings capital. Based on these facts, it can be argued that present mental models are questioned and improved within the ABC Company. However, we believe that there is still a room for more participative management. During the interviews, we observe that in spite of empowerment efforts; still managers have considerable control over decisions. The managers have also separated rooms, this may imply that the power distance is not very low. Another point is that ABC Company might have underestimated their main competitors based on the confidence of being a sector leader in the home country. However, strategic planning department is aware of the potential dangers of this tendency and try to change their approach.

3.4.4. Team Learning in ABC Company

According to Senge (1990, p.234, 235), an unaligned team is wasted of energy. In contrast, aligned team has a synergy, commonality of purpose, a shared vision and understanding of how to complement one another's efforts. Senge argues that in an aligned team individuals do not sacrifice their personal interest to the larger team vision but the shared vision is internalized as an extension of their personal vision. Author states that empowering an individual creates chaos unless there is an alignment among the team members. Thus, Senge defines team learning as "the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire" (1990, p.236). Author argues that individual learning is not enough for organizational learning; however if team learning is achieved, this can be translated into organizational learning. There are three critical dimensions in team learning: thinking insightfully about complex issues, innovative and coordinated action, and impact of team members on other teams. The discipline of team learning involves dialogue and discussion, while former is related with deep listening, latter is related with searching for the best view (Senge, 1990, p.237). These dynamics distinguish group intelligence from groupthink (Senge, 1990, p.238). Another crucial point is that team learning needs practice; there should be a continuum movement between practice and movement (Senge, 1990, p.238).

According to the interviews conducted with strategic planning department and public relations department, it is stated that the company is like a big family. This is a characteristic that separates the ABC firm from its competitors. In such a climate, team learning can be more effectively achieved. Present CEO also has spent effort on increasing the integration among various departments. During the interviews it is also mentioned that there can be some disputes between some departments that such as

sales and production. Still people from different departments come together to solve the problems. A retired manager states that tenure and age is very important in the ABC Company. Same statements made during the interview with public relations department. It is said that 10000 hour of work experience is very valuable, even more important than the title. A person becomes a specialist after 3 years, even he/she does not hold a managerial title, he/she can take strategic decisions. People can express their ideas and suggestions within or among the departments, thus an effective solution can be achieved without losing the big picture. It is also stated that turnover rate is very low in the company, life-time employment is common and these factors also increase cohesiveness among employees. Therefore, we can suggest that the climate is appropriate for team learning.

3.4.5. System Thinking in ABC Company

Senge defines the fifth discipline as systems thinking. According to him, this discipline integrates other four disciplines (shared vision, mental models, team learning, personal mastery) and in return systems thinking needs those disciplines to realize its potential (1990, p.12). According to Senge, most of the problems are related with our ability to grasp and manage the increasingly complex systems of the world (1990, p.14). Systems perspective tells that we should look beyond personalities and events, but look into the underlying structure which can shape behavior and produce similar results (Senge, 1990, p.43). According to Senge, systematic structure is related with the key interrelationships that influence behavior over time. These interrelations are among key variables such as population, natural resources in a developing country or engineers' product ideas and technical and managerial know how in a high-tech company. But this does not mean people are separated from the structure; people are part of the structure and they have a power to change it; they are not helpless actors but active participants in shaping their reality (Senge 1990, p.44, 69). System thinking tells us in order to understand the most challenging managerial issues, thus we need to see the whole system that generates the issues (Senge, 1990, p.66). There is no outside, organizations and its issues are part of a single system and the cure lies in the relationship with the "enemy" not blaming someone or something else (Senge, 1990, p.67). Thus, system thinking is a discipline for seeing wholes; interrelations rather than linear cause-effect chains, processes rather than snapshots (Senge, 1990, p.68).

Since 1990s, the ABC Company has started to become a more process oriented company to achieve increased customer satisfaction and profitability. Present CEO has also spent effort on the integration of the departments. Shared vision and sense of belonging strengthen integration in the company. Public relations department states that if one employee is in trouble personally, ABC Company always supports its employee. Likewise, ABC Company provide continuous support for its suppliers as well hence even suppliers feel themselves as a part of a big family. This stakeholder orientation of the firm can be considered as it has been good at systems thinking discipline. The departments which we have conducted in-depth interviews are strategic planning, human resources and public relations departments. The common point of these departments is that they are directly linked to CEO of the company. Therefore, these departments especially the strategic planning department and human resources departments have bridging and facilitating functions. Therefore, system thinking is supported through not only the personal initiatives of leaders but through mechanisms of the company. Caldwell (2012) criticizes Senge's notion of system thinking by not considering the issues of practice and issues of power but depending only the notion of 'distributed leadership'. We can argue that ABC Company has mechanisms to balance the power struggles of the leaders, which can limit the self-interest practices and foster organizational learning. Huang and Shih (2011) suggest that most of the organizations adopt formal lectures or knowledge management methods to act as a learning organization, and human resource departments take the leading role for the changing activities. In our case, strategic planning department has a crucial role as well.

3.4.6. Categorization of the Findings

In this section, our findings are categorized according to their visibility in the ABC Company's culture (see Table 1). Schein states that artifacts are the most visible parts of the organizational culture, whereas espoused beliefs and values refer the statements made by the organizational members.

Table 1. Cultural Manifestations

	ARTIFACTS	ESPOUSED BELIEFS AND VALUES
Personal Mastery	high training budget (+) employees' openness to an academic research (+)	experience is more important than title(+) new comers should be patient in climbing career ladders(-) avoiding mistakes(-)
Shared Vision	strong slogan for vision statement (+) founder's portraits in every managers' room (+) premium and innovative products (+)	high quality and reputational brand target (+) employees feel as they are part of a big family(+)
Mental Models	quality circles(+) 6sigma projects (+) patents (+)	openness, flexibility (+) revised vision(+) underestimating the main competitors(-)
Team Learning	friendly climate (+) full team are present in the meeting (+) personal performance targets (-) managers have separated rooms(-)	integration among departments (+) solidarity (+) sense of belonging (+)
System Thinking	HR and strategic planning departments have bridging and facilitating functions (+)	holistic approach to problems (+) process orientation (+) stakeholder orientation (+)

Note: (+) means positive indicator, and (-) means negative indicator of the category

4. Discussion and Conclusion

We have conducted an exploratory case study on ABC Company in order to understand its core cultural competency. Based on in-depth interviews, observations and documentation; core competency of this company is perceived as its being a learning organization. Findings are analyzed according to Senge's fifth discipline model and categorized according to Schein's organizational cultural levels of artifacts and espoused values. Our results show that the company confronts many characteristics of the learning organization. However, there are some inconsistencies as well.

During the interviews it is understood that there is a general avoidance to make mistakes, so that decision are taken very slowly and cautiously in the company. However, avoiding mistakes can be an obstacle for learning. Mistakes can even facilitate innovation. Smith et al. (2014) argues that members of a learning organization are encouraged to question norms, to explore new avenues of thinking and to make mistakes in order to improve their products/services and production methods. Another issue is related with the new comers. New comers are expected to work at least 10000 hours so that their inputs are considered as an asset. However, during this period, a new comer can be assimilated, especially in a strong culture like in the ABC Company. According to us, sometimes new comers' unbounded ideas or feedbacks can be more valuable than an experienced member. Also, during the interview with HR and strategic planning department, we learned that the performance targets are set as individual targets. However, this can foster individualism and competition among the employees. Another point is that due

to their being market leader, the company may have been underestimated their main competitors in the market. So, this can lead to competency trap. Last, all managers have separated rooms. Many other companies adopted open offices layout for ensuring equality and communication among employees. So, this may show power distance is not very low and communication is not as strong as it can be for a learning organization.

Beside some inconsistencies, ABC Company is a successful and unique example of a learning organization. This company has a relatively traditional structure, however flexible and innovative at the same time. The decisions are analyzed in detail before they are put into practice. The company is like a big family with low turnover rate. Employees are seen as assets. Experience and knowledge are considered even more valuable than title. As a cost of losing time, key departments spend effort on correcting their mistakes. As Hofstede et al. (1990) state “what is good or bad depends in each case on where one wants the organization to go, and a cultural feature that is an asset for one purpose is unavoidably a liability for another”.

Present study has some contributions to the literature. First, Senge’s model is analyzed according to different cultural levels of Schein. Second, exploratory case study as a research method can provide deeper understanding of complex subjects as organizational learning. Our analyses can be beneficial for the decision makers in designing the organizations as learning ones.

Our study has some limitations. Basic assumptions level of learning organization culture for ABC Company should be explored as well; since there can be inconsistencies with the stated values and enacted ones. According to the study of Weldy and Gillis (2010), perceptions of managers, supervisors and employees differ from each other about the dimensions of learning organization. Quantitative and qualitative research methods can be used together to reach to satisfactory numbers of employees from various departments and hierarchical levels, since our study is limited to core members working at the key departments.

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