Spring 2014

How Can Companies Harness a Learning Organization to Lead the Collaborative Culture?

Soojung Lee
Cornell University

Yin Jin
Cornell University

How Can Companies Harness a Learning Organization to Lead the Collaborative Culture?

Abstract

Employees in multinational companies tend to become departmentalized by business processes, and are increasingly losing touch with their organizations' goals and strategies. Learning Organization is a concept that focuses on the interconnectedness among employees in the same organizations by collaborating interdepartmentally and maintaining knowledge on new strategies, products, services, industries, and their macro-environment in order to give their organizations the competitive advantages over competitors. Our research investigated the best practices and made conclusions on how to implement the mentioned cross-functional concept.

Comments

Soojung Lee & Yin Jin
March 21th, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research Question

How can companies harness a learning organization to lead the collaborative culture?

Introduction

Employees in multinational companies tend to become departmentalized by business processes, and are increasingly losing touch with their organizations' goals and strategies. Learning Organization is a concept that focuses on the interconnectedness among employees in the same organizations by collaborating interdepartmentally and maintaining knowledge on new strategies, products, services, industries, and their macro-environment in order to give their organizations the competitive advantages over competitors. Our research investigated the best practices and made conclusions on how to implement the mentioned cross-functional concept.

Best Practices

Creating a platform where employees can share the best practices or lessons learned is an important aspect to build a collaborative learning organization. *McKinsey & Company* (a global leader in strategic consulting) is one of the leading companies utilizing an interactive form of knowledge management system to promote a collaborative learning organization. The company has given an emphasis on each employee's professional responsibility to contribute knowledge transfer across the board. It has been set as a group norm and how the employee contributes to the collaborative knowledge transfer is a part of personnel evaluation process. At McKinsey, employees must prepare a two-page summary of how and what they have learned from a project to share with co-workers and this documents are uploaded to the company's system called "Practices Development Network'. This system also includes "Knowledge Resource Directory", a guide to who knows what and who has done what kind of projects in the company. An employee can find the list of experts by tapping into this company's database, and reach out to the member who has the subject expertise. McKinsey's knowledge management systems encourage employees to learn and to teach others collaboratively, which leads to enhance the transfer of knowledge and the firm's ability to adapt and compete over time.[1]

Mercy Corps (an international relief and development organization) enhances the collaboration between employees worldwide by building employee's desire to learn, establishing informal learning network by cross-organizational community of practice, and developing organization-wide, technology-supported virtual communities of practice. Firstly, employees at Mercy Corps are encouraged to spend 5% of work time on learning organizational activities, which is included in their job descriptions. Acknowledging learning as part of employee's job, Mercy is able to highlight the organization's commitment to learning by changing the employee's mindset from "learning by job pressure" to "desire to learn." Secondly, Director-level cross-agency discussions are organized twice a year to encourage collaboration among agencies. Lastly, to support communities of practice and virtual teamwork throughout all levels, staff members who already use Clearspace, the online collaboration platform, are encouraged to talk about their experiences at regional meetings and to ensure that high-level managers know how to take advantage of the software. [4](See Appendix 1&2)

Recommendation

How to foster a collaborative learning organization?
1) Support building personal relationship among employees
One of the conventional components to building a collaborative learning organization is creating a database system, where employees can access it to store and retrieve data; however, organizations tend to get caught up with creating the "technical solutions," by simply creating channels for entries and conferences, instead of actually promoting the idea of collaborative work through relationship building. Based on case studies, effective interpersonal relationships and communications are critical in maintaining a collaborative learning organization. For example, British Petroleum successfully used video conferencing to facilitate knowledge sharing among its offshore oil drilling rigs; in addition, it promoted a company culture that recognizes individual contribution and face-to-face meetings. Organizations are beginning to recognize that personal relationships connect employees, and if they are actually encouraged and incentivized to build relationships, then they would eagerly use the technology channel to stay connected and share ideas and knowledge with one another.[2]

2) Senior management commitment
Commitment from the top means not only disciplinary or financial support, but also role modeling in a way that is visible to all staff, which is critical to building a cross-organizational collaboration: clear definition with full alignment and accountability is required. HRD and OD professionals need to take challenging and supportive stances with senior managers by getting into dialogues on managerial commitment to demonstrate and inspire collaboration among employees. Organizations' HR teams can make agreements with senior management teams, with specific procedures and review processes, in order to encourage and facilitate this type of cross-functional collaboration. [5]

3) Supportive environment
Trust, social cohesiveness, and a feeling of belonging to the group contribute to collaboration building. After participating learning programs and discussions, employees should be encouraged to demonstrate the learning result, and receive support for new learnings; in addition, employees should be allowed to take measured risks and mistakes. A strategic commitment and an agreed plan need to be established with senior team at the beginning of building a learning organization and modified to generate different support mechanisms to meet different needs of employees during implementation. Both intrinsic and extrinsic incentives can be considered for motivating employees to participate in learning activities.[5]

Conclusion

In this fast changing world, a collaborative learning organization is needed to stay ahead of the pack. Many case studies show that how collaborative learning organization helped corporations to outperform during economic downturns. Those successful companies had continued efforts to keep their open connections within the firm, employees, and even to its external environment, to help the knowledge flow across the organization. This form of organization would help employees to contribute to the organization's continuous improvement and capability enhancement through interaction with different levels of employees, teams and sharing knowledge with others.[3]

Appendix

Appendix#1
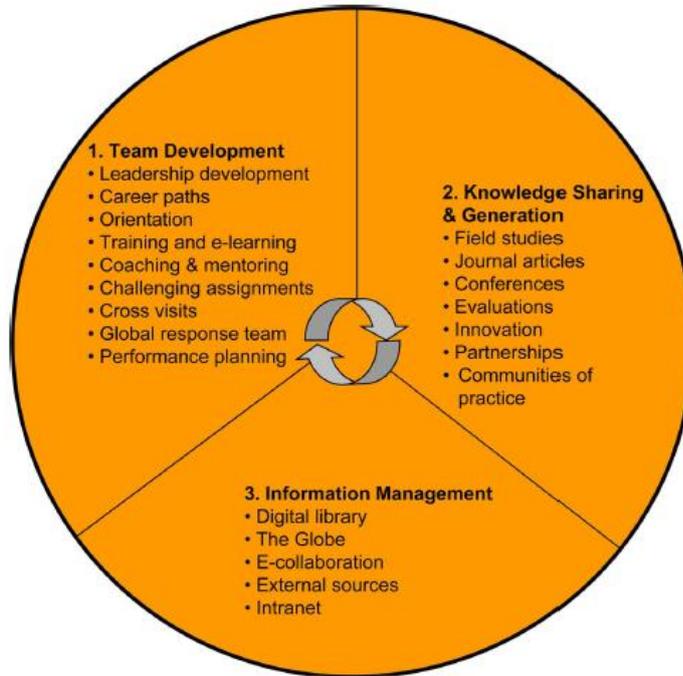
*Components of learning at Mercy Corps(copyright 2007 by Mercy Corps)

Appendix#2

SYSTEMIC TENSIONS AND SOLUTIONS IN LEARNING INITIATIVES AT MERCY CORPS

Systemic Tensions	Desire to Learn vs. Pressures of the Job	Investing in Strategic Learning vs. Keeping Operating Costs Low	Formal Learning vs. Informal Learning	Local Flexibility vs. Organization-Wide Standards	People vs. Technology
Solutions at Mercy Corps	• Emphasize in job descriptions that 5% of time should be allocated to learning • Incorporate time for feedback processes on all levels of the organization • Leverage demanding project tasks for learning	• Build learning into grants • Create partnerships with both non-profit and for-profit organizations • Develop long-term strategic learning to improve first response emergency relief	• Restructure training to include more informal time • Support communities of practice • Tie training back to employees' actual work	• Nurture flexibility and innovation at program level • Enforce standards on operational level • Encourage cross-visits between teams	• Initiate learning conversations around commonly shared data • Integrate technology into face-to-face meetings • Support virtual communities of practice • Involve staff members on all levels of the organization

*Mercy Corps's Learning Initiatives

Cited Reference

1. Marquardt, Michael J. *16 Steps to Becoming a Learning Organization*. Alexandria, VA: American Society for Training and Development, 1996. Print.

2. Goldsmith, Marshall, Howard J. Morgan, and Alexander J. Ogg. *Leading Organizational Learning: Harnessing the Power of Knowledge*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004. Print.

3. James, Constance. "Designing Learning Organization." *Sciencedirect*. N.p., n.d. Web. 21 Mar. 2014. <www.sciencedirect.com>.

4. Smith, S., & Young, A. (2009). Adapting to Change: Becoming a Learning Organization as a Relief and Development Agency. *IEEE Transactions On Professional Communication*, *52*(4), 329-345

5. Newwbold, C., & Pharoah, N. (2009). What it means to be a learning organization. *Strategic HR Review*, *8*(3), 12-16. doi:10.1108/14754390910946521

6. Sirirat Sae, L., Kim Hua, T., & Ken, P. (2005). Enhancing learning effectiveness through connectance diagrams: A new tool for learning organisations. *Learning Organization*, *12*(3), 261-274

7. Laszlo, A., Laszlo, K., & Johnsen, C. S. (2009). From High-Performance Teams to Evolutionary Learning Communities: New pathways in organizational development. *Journal Of Organisational Transformation & Social Change*, *6*(1), 29-48. doi:10.1386/jots.6.1.29_1

8. Organizational learning vs the learning organization: a conversation with a practitioner. (2005). *Learning Organization*, *12*(4), 383-388.