

Leadership & Organizational Learning in Knowledge Management Practices in Global Organizations

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This study attempts to find out potent organizational level variable(s) affecting the knowledge management processes and also to design a framework to be used by the firms. Based on the extensive review of literature relating to the practice of knowledge management in enterprises, an integrative framework with practical orientation is presented. The learning at an organizational level is a necessary precondition for becoming a knowledge managing company but the discipline of organizational learning thrives under higher form of leadership practices in operation. The framework developed could be customized to the needs of a particular business entity. The research framework articulates leadership practices in conjunction with organizational learning impacting knowledge management in the enterprise.

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Introduction

The art and science of knowledge management depends upon learning on the part of the members to reach at organizational levels and practicing significantly different leadership styles. This inquiry is a conceptual level effort in that direction. It is said that the present financial meltdown and its impact can be successfully overcome by increasing the understanding of different aspects of globalization and interrelationships between the underlying factors and their changes, whether their primary operating environment is domestic or global (Jokinen 2005).

The present world scenario makes it imperative to develop global competencies for persons especially in leadership roles in the corporations. McCall and Hollenback (2002) believe that these competencies should be based on a global business strategy which determines what kind of global presence is desirable, how many and what types of international or global jobs, projects, task forces, and other types of interactions exist such that what happens in a small city in USA impacts immediately and significantly on businesses in the Indian subcontinent as well. Zahra

(1999) says that tomorrow's global marketplace will reward companies which will value entrepreneurial risk taking, invest heavily in developing intellectual capital, promote individual growth, and adopt policies that are environmentally friendly. Competitiveness in 21st century will demand visionary and dedicated leadership.

Organizational Leadership for Learning Organizations

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The construct of Leadership is defined by knowledge, skills, and abilities, rather than by position or title. The core competencies of leadership can be learned, and the learning is a life-long process. It is purely a process by which a person influences others to accomplish an objective and directs the organization in a way that makes it more cohesive and coherent. The leaders carry out this process by applying their leadership attributes, such as beliefs, values, ethics, character, knowledge and skills. Today, CEOs are under constant pressure to find new sources of growth in an increasingly demanding and competitive business environment. Senge (2000) enunciates three core characteristics for a person to be in a leadership role in the present day organizations and they are of an architect, a teacher, and a steward. These three qualities helps in clarifying mission, vision and values; specifying strategies, structure and politics; creating efficient learning processes; and helping subordi-

nates continually develop their mental model and system thinking.

Today's CEOs must learn to inspire their organizations to new levels of inventiveness in everything that they do, not just in marketing or new product development (Leavy 2005). Therefore, it calls for a new kind of leadership role and thinking whereby all the stakeholders are internally energized for continuous renewal in people, processes, and products. Survival and growth of organizations are based on a dramatic shift in leadership. It is no longer the time of a heroic leader – the leader walks in and takes up all the space in the board room. Instead, the job of today's leader is to create space for other people to generate new and different ideas; to encourage meaningful conversation between people: and to assist them become more effective, agile, and prepared to respond to complex challenges (Martin 2007).

Contemporary organizations in India face continuous challenge for successfully translating quality improvements into sustainable competitive edge. Like people, organization should learn in order to adapt itself successfully to the ever changing business reality. Therefore, Lietaer (2002) has rightly said that a critical success factor for a firm in the knowledge economy for any kind of competitive advantage is that it should possess ability to learn and exploit its existing knowledge base. Shukla (1997) emphasizes the importance of organizational learning (OL) in Indian firms surrounded with qualitatively changed business environment due to globalization of Indian

economy. In Indian organizations, knowledge about customers is given the most importance and firms put serious effort in identifying the most crucial knowledge and then leveraging it for sustainable competitive advantage (Pillania 2007). It is noted that learning enables an organization to continually expand its “capacity to create its future” (Senge 1990).

The academicians as well as the practitioners have been constantly engaged in researching about global leadership competencies for the business organizations in the 21st century. It is simply because while increasing business need for global leaders has been felt what specific competencies are required to be a global leader have not been explicitly identified (Morrison 2000). It has been observed that excellent domestic leaders often have the same qualities as global ones, but excellent global leaders retain these capabilities even in completely unfamiliar situations. Kets de Vries and Florent-Treacy (2002) suggest that people with global leadership attributes depict more of the qualities of emotionally intelligent leaders who remain cool and composed even in tiring situations and deliver to the expectations of all concerned. Boyatzis et al. (1999) contend that emotional competencies such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management are demonstrated by a person whenever she/he interacts with the world around. Success in the global environment requires more than just knowing about different cultural norms and management theories, but it is putting this knowledge into leadership practice (Carey et al., 2004). McCall and Hollenback

(2002) observe that the global executives need to learn how to work cross-culture and most people require emotional education as well as an intellectual one. The challenges of global work arise in three areas: distance, country, and culture. When the world becomes smaller and the workforce becomes more diverse the key challenge for leaders is to effectively lead across cultural borders (Dalton 2003).

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The literature reveals that transactional leadership, largely studied until 1970s, believes in reciprocity that the relationships between a leader and followers is based on the exchange of some form of reward. The research literatures in the late 1970s and onward started talking about a new kind of paradigm to be referred to as transformational leadership. Here, leadership is perceived as engaging the hearts and minds of others around for getting the work done in more effective ways (Burns 1978). Transactional and transformational leadership do not exclude each other, as a leader can be both (Bass 1985). The research literature indicates that transformational as well as transactional forms of leadership would be positively associated with the processes of organizational learning. Lam (2002) and Sadler (2001) in their studies found transformational leadership to have significantly positive effect on encouraging and emphasizing teamwork

spirits and involvement at workplace. Similarly, Bass (1997) and Bass and Avolio (1990) also found in their studies that transactional leadership significantly helps improve the efficiency of organizational learning. Therefore, it may be deduced that both transformational as well as transactional forms of leadership have significant and positive effect on the functioning of learning organizations.

The knowledge leadership should be evident throughout the organization and it should operate at a range of levels. The effective organizations rely on leadership than leaders (Hubbard et al. 2002). The role of knowledge leader is to provide strategic visions, motivate others, effectively communicate, act as a change agent, coach others around, model good practices, and carry out the knowledge agenda (Debowski 2006). The knowledge leaders need to explain the goals of knowledge management so that people can identify their roles in achieving those goals. They need to provide guidance on any changes in processes and priorities needed to reach those goals (Debowski 2006).

Hubbard et al. (2002) is of the opinion that knowledge leadership, apart from having the ability to establish predictable and stable processes, needs to encourage innovation and creativity to responding to opportunities. Therefore, the knowledge leaders must have a good understanding of people, processes, systems and business principles which shape business decisions (Debowski 2006). The knowledge leader's strategic leadership operates from an understanding of the core business and how it relates to the

values of that organization (Maurik 1999). Therefore, the visionary leadership needs to operate at two levels: tactical and futuristic (Kouzes & Posner 2002). The enthusiasm, drive, and energy of the knowledge leader play a major role in building a commitment of others. Goleman et al. (2002) also notes that visionary leadership has a strong positive effect on organizational climate, and is particularly important when a clear direction is needed. Hence, the nature of the knowledge management development requires continual support by leaders to ensure that the value and outcomes of knowledge management are held firm in contributors' minds.

Learning organizations: Need of the Time

Organizational learning as a concept came to academic literature for the first time when March and Simon (1958) were involved in their pioneering work on understanding the complexities of organizations. Since then many authors have contributed significantly to the growth of this body of knowledge though the road to acceptance has not been a straight one. Unfortunately, both the definition and use of the term organizational learning are still associated with considerable confusion (Edmondson & Moingeon 1998, Easterby-Smith et al. 1998). Furthermore, the scholars have frequently associated the facilitation of organizational learning with the learning organization (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998). Throughout the 80s and the 90s, organizational learning achieved prominence amongst the ideas influencing management stud-

ies. The topic has attracted increasing attention, both in academic circles (Shrivastava 1983, Levitt & March 1988) and in business practice (Senge 1990, Argyris 1993). One of the main reasons for this is the increasing pressure of change on organizations.

Organizational learning may be considered as long-term activities that build competitive advantages over time and requires sustained management attention, commitment, and effort. The role of leadership is the prerogative for building a learning organization. A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin 1993). Organizational learning has also been viewed as a process through which an organization continuously acquires new knowledge and adjusts itself to successfully adapt to internal and external environmental changes and to maintain sustainable existence and development (Chen 2005). To achieve all these important competencies, Garvin (1993) believes that it is time to move away from high aspirations and mystical advices which are being given to managers and move on to clearer guidelines for practices and operational excellence. Such a scenario had been in place for successful learning organizations like Honda, Corning, and GE which have effectively managed their learning capabilities in such a way to ensure that it occurs by design rather than by chance. Moreover, leading learning organizations also have employees training which have especially been designed for developing/sharpening

behavioural skills than technical skills that have a short shelf-life (Kiernan 1993). The prime example of such an organizational attitude can be noticed at Xerox Company. It has implemented a group training program for all its employees at all levels which has been named as 'Leadership through Quality' that focuses on how to work in teams and in problem-solving processes (Goh 1998).

Moreover, there seems to be apparent difficulties with the notion of organization learning as a whole. There is clear evidence that learning does take place in organizations during dynamic interactions amongst individuals, groups, and the organization itself (Akgun et al. 2003, Chan 2003). The benefits of organizational learning are well recognized in terms of improved innovation (Chanal 2004), achieving and sustaining change (Boyce 2003), and in developing competence (Pedler 2002). For long-term success, organizations should be able to learn continuously, to leverage from the knowledge they capture, to apply it to reality and to increase innovative knowledge (Liedtka 1999) for competitive advantages. The process of effective organizational learning, by way of sharing information and knowledge among organizational members, enables individuals and organizations to reflect on the consequences of their behaviours and actions, to obtain insights from an environment where they operate, to understand the environment, and hence to interpret the meaning and react to it in more accurate approaches (Jones et al. 2003).

In the new economy, organizations may face learning overload; thus improv-

ing organizational learning capability is critical for competitive advantage (Goh 2003). A strategic learning capability involves “strategically figuring out what an organization needs to know and then taking action to acquire that knowledge (DiBella 2001). The relationship between organizational learning (OL) and knowledge management (KM) has been best put forward by Garvin (2003) when he says that an organization that learns is an expert organization in creating, acquiring and transmitting knowledge, and modifying its behaviour to self-adapt. Organization which learns is expert in five activities: systematic resolution of problems, experimentation of new focuses, use of their own experience and past in order to learn, learning from the experiences and more appropriate practices of other companies (benchmarking), and transmitting the knowledge to the whole organization quickly and efficiently (Garvin 2003). In this context, it is pertinent to say that the kind of economy that India is today requires firms to continuously get into the organizational learning mode.

Leadership for Smart Companies

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The smart organization is credited to possess a significantly different leadership style practiced for achieving the set goals. In these organizations, the main task of leaders is to encourage knowledge shar-

ing, supporting learning through mistakes, and creating continuous team learning (Macneil 2001). Popper and Lipshitz (2000) emphasize that leader can create organizational structure and shape up organizational culture to result in influence through various affairs, actions, and service; thus leadership to actually affect organizational learning. Leadership has also been found to improve the process and the result of organizational learning activities (Lam 2002). The research literatures indicate transformational as well as transactional forms of leadership to be positively associated with processes of organizational learning. Lam (2002) and Sadler (2001) in their studies found transformational leadership to have significantly positive effect on encouraging and emphasizing teamwork spirits and involvement at workplace. Similarly, Bass (1997) and Bass and Avolio (1990) also found in their studies that transactional leadership significantly helps improve the efficiency of organizational learning. Therefore, it may be deduced that both transformational as well as transactional form of leadership have significantly positive effect on the functioning of learning organization. Leaders are needed to empower all the members of the learning organization by developing a shared vision, providing resources, delegating authority, celebrating successes, and most importantly, by being learning architect (Hitt 1995).

Empirical Findings

Davenport (1999) also believes this to be the case and maintains that KM is gradually expanding in scope, consuming not only learning organization (LO) but

also other emerging concepts such as business and customer intelligence. Spinello (2000) argues that organizational learning and knowledge sharing are intimately connected with each other. The knowing process is composed of sharing, thinking and learning components that have a reciprocal relationship. Knowledge sharing enables managers to keep the individual learning flowing throughout the company and to integrate it for practical applications. In a study by Swan et al. (1999), it has been found that there is an apparent decline in interest in the concept of learning organization since 1995 and has been offset by a sharp increase in enquires into KM. Pemberton and Stonehouse (2000) believe that successful learning organizations create an organizational environment that combines organizational learning with knowledge management.

Organizational learning which is also known as generative learning (Senge 1990) is necessary especially for organizations that are operating in a highly dynamic environment where the rate of knowledge obsolescence is far greater (Wijnhoven 2001). Organizational learning which results into organizational knowledge is much talked about but little understood (Tsoukas & Vladimirou 2001). Therefore, thinkers like DiBella (2001) feel that there is a need to “bridge the divide” between knowledge management (KM) and organizational learning (OL). A knowledge management company moves from single-loop learning into what is known as double-loop learning. Double-loop learning occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that

involve the modification of an organization’s underlying norms, policies, and objectives (Smith 2002).

Knowledge Management as a Practice

Knowledge seems invisible, but it clearly drives the bottom line (Pascarella 1997). The value of knowledge is increased when it has a key purpose and focuses on mission, core values and strategic priorities. Knowledge assets, like money or equipment, exist and are worth cultivating only in the context of the strategy used to apply them (Stewart 1997). Knowledge management is a formal, directed process of determining what information a company has that could benefit others and then devising ways to making it easily available (Liss 1999). Therefore, the steps in this process include how knowledge is captured, evaluated, cleansed, stored, provided, and used (Chait 1998). It is unfortunate that very few organizations handle explicit and tacit knowledge effectively for business excellence. Exceptions are learning organizations that are skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge and at modifying their behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin 1993).

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Knowledge management is a process that facilitates knowledge sharing and

exchange and establishes learning as continuous process within an organization. Therefore, knowledge management and learning go hand in hand (Lopez et al. 2004). Davenport et al. (1998) defines knowledge management as a process of collection, distribution, and efficient use of the knowledge resource. O'Dell and Grayson (1998) believe knowledge management as a strategy to be developed in a firm to ensure that knowledge reaches the right people at the right time, and that those people share and use the information to improve the organization's functioning. Similarly, Bounfour (2003) defines knowledge management as a set of procedures, infrastructures, technical and managerial tools, designed toward creating, sharing and leveraging information and knowledge within and around organizations.

The knowledge that organizational members have can be broadly categorized into two parts as explicit as well as tacit knowledge and both of them work inter-dependently and in turn leading organization to the path of success. Explicit knowledge has been found to be increasing, being used as well as emphasized in both practice and literature, as a management tool to be exploited for the manipulation of organizational knowledge. For Scarborough et al. (1999), groupware, intranets, list servers, knowledge repositories, database management and knowledge action networks allow the sharing of organizational knowledge. Similarly, Pan and Scarborough (1999) believe that explicit part of knowledge is systematic and easy to communicate in the form of hard data or codified procedures. In other

words, explicit kind of knowledge can be transmitted across individuals formally and easily. On the other hand, tacit form of knowledge is subconsciously understood or applied, difficult to articulate, developed through direct action and experience, and shared through conversation, story-telling, etc. Blumentitt and Johnston (1999) contend that information can be captured and stored in digital form whereas tacit knowledge repositories reside only in intelligent systems, which are within individuals. Tacit knowledge needs to be considered as "knowledge-in-action" which presumes that this is knowledge that has not been articulated as opposed to explicit knowledge that is readily accessible within the organizational domain (Platts & Yeung 2000).

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On the other hand, the management thinkers and practitioners have also made several attempts to define knowledge by distinguishing between data, information and knowledge (Wiig 1993). The literature is full of various classifications of knowledge the most widely discussed and quoted among them are the ones developed by Wiig (1993), Nonaka (1994), Edvinsson and Sullivan (1996), Carayannis (1999) and Despres and Chauvel (2000).

Wiig's (1993) KM framework consists of three building blocks and they are:

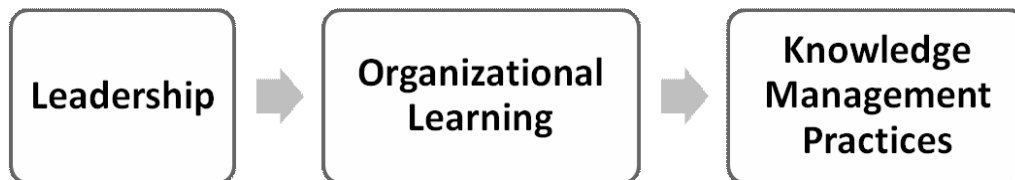
exploring knowledge and its adequacy, assessing value of knowledge, and manage knowledge activity. On the other hand, Nonaka's (1994) SECI model is the most widely discussed theories in KM literature. His KM model was developed from empirical evidences which he gathered in case studies of Japanese firms (Honda, Canon, Matsushita, NEC, Sharp and Kao). For the ICM of Edvinsson and Sullivan (1996), the intellectual capital of any organization has four major ingredients, namely human capital, structural capital, complementary business assets, and intellectual property. In other words, the ICM model is mainly concerned with management of resources for achieving innovation, and commercialization of innovation for monetary benefits. Carayannis' (1999) views on KM is slightly different from the others in the area of KM and his contribution lies in the organizational cognition spiral (OCS) and organizational knowledge network (OK Net). Finally, Despres and Chauvel (2000) developed a meta-model that is based on four dimensions of KM, namely, time, type, level and context. They suggested three levels of social aggregation to knowledge: individuals, groups and organizations. It is primarily on the basis of findings of other researchers that they have constructed a theoretical frame-

work of KM, but have been very successful in placing each concept appropriately in connection with others and is completely meaningful.

At the same time, it is also necessary to note that these theoretical frameworks on KM though developed out of simple literature reviews or meta-analysis or live case studies have tried to provide some deeper understanding of managing knowledge across firms in different cultural settings. However, it is contended that none of them can independently claim to unearth the complexity of creating, managing, and using knowledge for any kind of competitive advantages by organizations across cultures. Hence, it is asserted that the knowledge management (KM) frameworks of these theoreticians are to an extent industry or culture specific and as a result cannot be blindly applied by practitioners.

A Framework

Literature reveals that leadership, organization learning mechanisms and knowledge management practices of the firms are intimately related. In other words, there seems to be a positive influence of one over another and when implemented by the practicing manag-



(Proposed by the author)

ers, will provide a competitive edge to the organizations. The above diagram summarizes what the discussed research literatures have to convey to the organizations in operations across culture.

The diagram as mentioned above states it clearly that the knowledge management practices of a firm is dependent upon learning by the members at an organizational level which is to be guided, facilitated, coordinated by the leadership as provided by the top management. Hence, learning organization is a result of a particular kind of organizational leadership and which in turn develops a kind of knowledge when managed properly to guarantee corporate success. On the other hand, this framework which has been arrived at conceptually requires empirical validity before taking it directly to the workplace. Though it has not been tested empirically, it is assumed here that it may work well in organizations across different industry segments.

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