Effective Learning Through Optimum Distance Among Team Members

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INTRODUCTION

For several years, researchers have argued that too much closeness or distance among the team members inhibits intellectual debate and lowers the quality of decision-making. In fact it is often said that if two people always agree, then one is useless and if they always disagree, then both are useless. While too much "closeness" leads to copycat attitude, too much "distance" among the team members results in incompatibility. Creating teams in which the members experience "optimum distance" is not easy.

In this backdrop, we have identified certain gaps in the contemporary organizational learning theories and developed conceptual constructs and conditions that are likely to cause optimum distance in teams.

BACKGROUND

Organizational learning (OL) gained currency when interpreting market information ahead of competitors was seen as a source of competitive advantage (DeGeus, 1988). Organizations increasingly realize the need to maintain a right degree of balance between exploiting the existing and exploring new knowledge base (Cox, 1993; Jackson et al., 1995). Concepts such as double loop learning (Argyris, 1977) and generative learning (Senge, 1990) have underlined the need for innovation and creativity in learning processes.

Research in organizational networks has primarily focused on knowledge creation at organizational levels (Nonaka et al., 1994). Almost all the analyses of networks have focused on inter-organizational groupings (Van De Ven & Walker, 1984). Andersen et al. (1994) define a business network as a set of two or more inter-connected business relationships and claim that the parties in networks have traditionally been shown to come from the same industry.

MAIN THRUST OF THE ARTICLE

In spite of pioneering attempts to conceptualize OL, lately, the researchers have expressed concerns. Ritcher (1998) remarks that the current literature does not adequately explore the dynamics of learning process. Nonaka et al. (1995) claim that "There is very little research on how knowledge is actually created *and hence there is a need to understand the dynamics of knowledge creation*" (italics added).

Alter and Hage (1993) have argued that new theories should be developed to encompass knowledge creation as a result of inter-firm collaboration. Macdonald (1995) claims that the current theories have neglected external-to-firm factors. The aim of OL should be to enhance innovation and not learning merely for the sake of it (Nonaka et al., 1994). D'Aveni (1995) argues that businesses need breakthrough innovations through industry-oriented learning processes and adequately respond to the dynamic external environment.

We now summarize the critical overview of the OL literature presented previously:

- Absence of external-to-firm factors in OL processes.
- Unclear conceptualization of optimum distance in teams.

WHAT IS OPTIMUM DISTANCE?

We delve deeper into OL processes by understanding the factors that constitute perceived distance among the team members by defining the relevant concepts.

Member Distance (MD)

Inkpen (1988) argues that in inter-organizational teams, distrust among members from the participating firms (who perceive each other as competitors) inhibits learning. We believe that this distrust among the team members is the result of the so-called "member distance". Member distance (or MD) reflects overall differences among the members due to objective factors (e.g., members' experience and education) and subjective factors (e.g., members' behavior, values and personality).

Extending Inkpen's (1988) classification of inter-organizational teams, we propose three team compositions comprising managers from:

- Different departments within the same firm (cross-functional teams).

- Same industry-sector but different firms (forums comprising partners).
- Different industries, but similar department (e.g., co-ordination forums for inter-sector policies or standards body, etc.).

Knowledge Distance (KD)

Managers in different industries need to know some basic industry-specific issues. For example, in the banking sector, managers need the knowledge of payment systems, customer support, and so forth, while in the telecommunication sector, managers need the knowledge of communication networks, mobile devices and so on. Knowledge distance (KD) conceptualizes industry-specific knowledge differences among managers from different sectors.

Professional Distance (PD)

Prolonged working and dedicated experiences within a specific department can influence managers' behavior at the workplace. Zuboff (1988) cites several examples (showing the impact of automation on employees' behavior). We refer to job-specific behavioral differences among managers as professional distance. Stated formally, professional distance (PD) comprises intuitive and often subjective personality differences among managers from different departments.

We now summarize some important observations on KD and PD:

- KD captures dissimilarities among managers due to external-to-firm and knowledge specific factors. PD conceptualizes department-specific, behavioral differences among managers.
- KD represents the member-distance at a macro (inter-sector or firm) level. PD represents subjective and more complex personality-based differences at a micro (or department) level.
- Since PD depends on the department dynamics (which impact managers' behavior at the workplace), PD will be low between managers of similar departments even if they come from different industries. KD in a team will be low only when the managers come from firms within the same industry.
- The unit of analyses of learning processes in an individual (manager).

Since the large firms usually have a number of specialized departments, we may conceptualize such departments as micro-level "professional personality domains" and firms as "macro-level knowledge domains". KD and PD can then be used to conceptualize different team compositions as shown in Figure 1.

It is evident that the traditional networks occur when both KD and PD are low. These are the internal-department teams and found in all organizations. We refer to them as the "traditional networks".

When integrating knowledge from different departments is needed (in projects, for example), cross-functional teams are often created. In such teams, members have different behavioral approaches to problem solving (hence, high PD). However, their behavioral approaches are often complementary as well given their respective dedicated experience in different functional areas (as technology, business, finance and so on). However, as the managers in cross-functional teams come from the same firm, they share similar broad-based knowledge on industry-level issues (hence, low KD). In addition to low KD, the managers also

Figure 1. Balancing member distance for effective learning in various teams