

Chapter 45

The Impact of Technology on Organizational Learning and Leadership

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ABSTRACT

While the idea of organizational culture and organizational learning have emerged and developed over the past decades, views of leadership have changed significantly as well. In addition to the already complex connection between these ideas, they have all been influenced by emerging technologies. This chapter will investigate and provide examples of these individual ideas, their intersections and the impact of technology on their past and future.

INTRODUCTION

Learning and leadership are often considered to be individual activities, however when one considers the development of organizational learning and the learning organization, leadership plays a key role. Traditional theories of management evolved into theories of leadership and to discussions about the similarities and differences of the two. Numerous

inventories were developed to assess learning styles and leadership styles and suggest ways of utilizing this new self-knowledge to enhance learning and leading. This chapter will include an investigation of the impact of technology on learning and leadership within organizations. Basic communication and information technologies as well as today's Web 2.0 technologies' will be addressed at both the theoretical and practical level.

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BACKGROUND

The Organizational Culture and Organizational Learning

Depending on the context, the term organization can evoke different images in the mind of the individual. It could be a business organization or a non-profit that is very structured or informal in its operation. However, it is universally considered to be a collection of individuals with a common purpose. Therefore, it should not be surprising that those individuals and therefore the organization itself develops its own culture. While the term culture was originally used to describe national culture, Hofstede and Schein, among others, began to investigate organizational cultures. Since the ideas and practices of a culture reflect the values of its members, if learning is promoted and supported as an organizational value, the result is a learning culture.

Schein (2010) provides a comprehensive picture of such a learning culture. He demands that “a learning culture must assume that the appropriate way for humans to behave in relationship to their environment is to be proactive problem solvers and learners. The learning culture must have in its DNA a ‘learning gene’ in the sense that members must hold the shared assumption that learning is a good thing worth investing in and that learning to learn is itself a skill to be mastered (p. 366). He continues to list shared assumptions of a learning culture. A learning culture must

- Have an environment that is to some degree manageable.
- Believe that solutions to problems derive from a deep belief in inquiry and a pragmatic search for ‘truth’.
- Demonstrate that communication and information are central to organizational well-being

- Have leaders and members that believe that analyzing and reflecting on their culture is a necessary part of the learning process.

Much of the vocabulary of this learning culture was created by Argyris and Schon in the 1970s with its roots in the 1960s. Argyris and Schon (1996) provide a glimpse of this historical foundation when they note that “the systems modeling discipline first developed by Jay Forrester in the 1960s on the basis of servomechanism and control theory—applied in grand sequence first to industry then to cities and finally to the world—has turned in recent years to organization learning” (p. 183). They continue to acknowledge that Peter Senge, one of Forrester’s followers, has published *The Fifth Discipline* (1993) subtitled ‘the Art and Practice of Organizational Learning’ which united systems thinking with organizational adaptation and a focus on human potential. Looking back on their own involvement in the development of these ideas, Argyris and Schon (1996) recalled that “as late as 1978 when our *Organizational Learning* was first published, such well-respected scholars as Tom Burns and Geoffrey Vickers found the idea confusing and, in some ways, repugnant. Now in the mid-1990’s, it is conventional wisdom that business firms, governments, nongovernmental organizations, schools, health care systems, regions, even whole nations and supranational institutions need to adapt to changing environments, draw lessons from past successes and failures, detect and correct the errors of the past, anticipate and respond to impending threats, conduct experiments, engage in continuing innovations, build and realize images of a desirable future. There is virtual consensus that we are all subject to a ‘learning imperative,’ and in the academic as well as the practical world, organizational learning has become an idea in good currency” (p. xvii). Wheatley (1999) adds her support to this systems theory. “We are beginning to recognize organizations as whole systems, construing them as ‘learn-

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