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560

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

# Character-based leadership and tacit knowledge for learning and resilience

#### Introduction

Researchers and practitioners are always on the lookout for factors that could stimulate learning and transform knowledge into a value creation process based on organizational learning. In this issue, we continue to explore the importance of several such factors. In this regard, Orth and Schuldis (2021) investigated the effect of learning on organizational resilience, as well as the importance of unlearning in difficult situations. They examined such effects in the context of disruptions caused by the declared COVID-19 pandemic, when many firms were no longer allowed to create and/or deliver value in the usual way, and resorted to improvisation and learning to maintain their viability by strengthening their organizational resilience.

Mishra and Reddy (2021) interviewed Mary M. Crossan to elucidate further concepts of learning organization and organizational learning. Crossen is well-known for presenting the 4I framework for organizational learning (Crossan *et al.*, 1999). She also emphasized the importance of strategic agility at the individual, group and organizational levels, which could be strengthened by good leadership. In this regard, Crossan (Mishra and Reddy, 2021) identifies *character* or *leadership character* as a factor that could unite all elements of a learning organization and stimulate organizational transformation based on organizational learning. Therefore, she suggests character-based leadership for learning organizations.

Researchers and practitioners often put more emphasis on explicit knowledge because it is easier to measure, transfer and use. However, less attention seems to be paid to tacit knowledge, especially in some professions that rely on interpersonal relationships, such as therapy, negotiation, customer service, etc. In this issue, Asher and Popper (2021) addressed this problem. Tacit knowledge might best be described by "we know more than we know we know." It refers to skills that are not easily transferable, but also to unconscious beliefs, awareness or mental models that drive certain actions in a certain way, and that could not be easily expressed to others. Therefore, it is important to develop methods to discover and extract this knowledge.

In this issue, Reese (2021) presents the review of Zabiegalski's (2019) book *The Rise of the Ambidextrous Organization: The Secret Revolution Happening Right Under Your Nose.* Under conditions of constant change, ambiguity and confusion, organizations must exploit the existing knowledge quickly, efficiently and effectively, while working to discover new knowledge through knowledge exploration. This is called ambidexterity, and it seems to be one of the biggest challenges for organizations. That is why only the ambidextrous organization can be identified as a true learning organization.



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In this issue, Hoe (2021) presented the book titled *Information Technology and Organizational Learning – Managing Behavioral Change In The Digital Age* by Arthur M. Langer. Disruptions caused by the declared pandemic, as well as attempts to reduce costs by increasing operating leverage, stimulate organizations to implement information technology and robotics. The human and behavioral element in such transformations is often not considered. However, the human factor is key in both the implementation and use of information technology. For that reason, management, IT department and users need to consider such plans together to ensure efficient and effective implementation and usage.

#### Learning for organizational resilience

In this issue, Orth and Schuldis (2021) examined the effect of learning on organizational resilience and the importance of unlearning in difficult situations. Organizations today face numerous challenges that prevent them from planning further ahead. Therefore, organizations need to strengthen their resilience, which could be understood as the ability of an organization to maintain its viability based on continuous learning, adaptation and transformation. In this way, organizational learning could be considered as one of the most important organizational capabilities that could ensure continuous organizational resilience. While single-loop learning could help the system to adapt in case of minor problems that could be solved by using the knowledge from the organizational repository, double-loop organizational learning could help the organization to transform when threatened by major disruptions from the environment.

Orth and Schuldis (2021) used the disruption caused by the declared COVID-19 pandemic to conduct research in this regard. However, disruption usually requires major changes, so unlearning is also used to weather the situation and implement necessary changes. Unlearning is different from forgetting (Klammer and Gueldenberg, 2019). While forgetting is unintentional and happens over time, unlearning is intentional and based on specific decision to produce specific outcomes by changing behavioral routines, systems and processes. However, unlearning should not always be followed by change because sometimes some knowledge is simply no longer applicable and should be intentionally forgotten or unlearned. Unlearning is generally very difficult because it requires people to evaluate and change mental models, develop a new vision of their desired reality and design new patterns of behavior that might fit the new circumstances. However, if this process is done too quickly or without systems analysis, changes can be counterproductive. In any case, learning and unlearning are at the foundation of organizational strategic resilience (Morais-Storz and Nguyen, 2017).

Authors have addressed the concept of resilience in their previous work. For example, Burnard and Bhamra (2011) identified that to be resilient, organizations should first correctly identify the threat, then respond to it and develop capabilities to adapt and continue organizational learning in the future. To detect threats and opportunities properly, organizations should continuously monitor their internal and external environment and develop contingency plans. In any case, maintaining resilience is a process (Duchek, 2014) that requires adaptive capabilities. However, practitioners should keep in mind that reflection after actions of change is necessary to learn, build organizational memory for future use and maintain momentum for change (Duchek, 2019). It could be concluded that learning and knowledge are both inputs and outcomes of organizational resilience (Sutcliffe and Vogus, 2003) based on individual and organizational learning.

Crises are the true test for many organizations to prove their resilience. During crisis situations, organizations must experiment, learn and gain insight and deeper understanding while keeping an eye on their costs. Intentional forgetting or unlearning could be very

helpful in this process of implementing change effectively and efficiently. As the effect of unlearning on learning and organizational resilience in times of crisis has not been empirically examined, Orth and Schuldis (2021) used the declared COVID-19 pandemic situation to serve in this regard. They used the questionnaire to examine organizational learning, which encompasses learning from the individual to the organizational level and includes managerial commitment, systems perspective, openness and experimentation and knowledge transfer and integration. Organizational resilience was measured by using two dimensions: planning and adaptive capacity. Their sample included for-profit organizations.

Orth and Schuldis (2021) found that organizational learning has a positive impact on organizational resilience. In particular, learning was found to influence organizational adaptive capacity, leading to greater organizational resilience. However, they did not find that unlearning moderates the relationship between organizational learning and organizational resilience. It could be that in times of crisis, new skills and routines are needed to complement those already implemented to adapt to change and create and deliver value. Therefore, it is suggested that practitioners strengthen their learning culture and implement the systems perspective during prosperity to be able to engage in additional experimentation and learning in times of crisis to strengthen their adaptive capacity and introduce new behaviors that the situation requires. However, this process might or might not be accompanied by unlearning.

#### Character-based leadership for learning organizations

Mishra and Reddy (2021) interviewed Mary M. Crossan to further elucidate concepts of learning organization and organizational learning. Crossen is a well-known researcher in the field of organizational learning, strategy and leadership. She has also extended her work to management practice through numerous case studies that have subsequently been published. She is known for presenting the 4I organizational learning framework in the paper that she coauthored for the *Academy of Management Review* in 1999 (Crossan *et al.*, 1999).

This paper was based on her dissertation in which she showed the transition of ideas from the individual to the group and then to the organizational level through 4I processes: intuiting (by individuals), interpreting (by individuals and within a group), integrating (by groups and the organization) and institutionalizing (by the organization). She used this model to examine the process of organizational strategic renewal in which she especially identified the tension between two seemingly opposing processes: exploration (which is forward-looking) and exploitation (which is based on feedback from the past).

She put a lot of emphasis on the process of improvisation, in which learning takes place in a cocreated way with other participants, often under conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity and under time pressure. Therefore, strategic agility is of particular importance at both the individual and group or organizational levels. In this process, good leadership is of great importance. In her studies with other scholars, Crossan identified that "character" emerges as an important trait, although it is debatable what character is and how it can be built or developed. According to Crossan (Mishra and Reddy, 2021), "character" consists of several traits such as:

- accountability, which enables one to take responsibility, accept consequences and be conscientious;
- courage, which enables one to be confident and determined, tenacious and resilient;
- drive, which enables one to be goal- and result-oriented, proactive and passionate;

- transcendence, which enables one to be purposeful, inspired, forward-looking, yet appreciative;
- · collaboration, which enables one to be cooperative, flexible and open-minded;
- justice, which enables one to be fair, equitable and socially responsive;
- humanity, which enables one to be empathetic, considerate and compassionate;
- humility, which enables one to be respectful, grateful, yet curious and learningoriented;
- · temperance, which enables one to be composed, calm, patient and prudent; and
- integrity, which enables one to be authentic, principled and consistent.

Practitioners should note that all of these qualities make up a character leader because a principled person could easily become dogmatic and courageous, but without focus, thus reckless and a failure. All of these qualities are necessary for good and balanced judgement that is both insightful and situationally aware, analytical yet pragmatic, decisive yet adaptable.

Crossan (Mishra and Reddy, 2021) is aware that a definition of a learning organization is mostly describitive, describing what an ideal learning organization looks like and how it evolves. However, Crossan (Mishra and Reddy, 2021) also identifies *character* or *leadership character* as a unifying factor that could unite all the desired elements of a learning organization and lead to an emerging outcome of organizational transformation based on organizational learning. It should be noted that character should not be related only to the CEO or key managers. Everyone in an organization should exhibit a set of "character traits" and lead whenever an opportunity arises that matches the individual's skills, aspirations and context.

Everyone who exhibits "character traits" also enables the development of trust, which is the foundation for good internal and external social capital, which in turn serves as the cohesive element that holds organizations and ecosystems together to grow and thrive. "Character traits" have the power of transcendence, both at the individual and organizational level. Experimentation and risk-taking could be an important link in this process. In other words: If a group is made up of people of character, they would build strong social bonds based on respect and trust, which would allow everyone to experiment more, try different avenues and test what works and what does not, based on a shared consensus about the desired development path. In such an environment, failures would be seen as a common pool of learning opportunities that would be shared and from which new ideas would emerge.

#### Importance of tacit knowledge in interpersonal interactions

The importance of tacit knowledge in interpersonal interactions and in some professions that rely on interpersonal relationships, such as negotiation and therapy, seems to be neglected. Asher and Popper (2021) addressed this issue. Tacit knowledge is knowledge that is not or could not be fully expressed so that it could be independently transmitted. It could best be described by the saying "we know more than we know we know." It refers to skills that are not easily transferable, but also to unconscious beliefs, awareness or mental models that drive certain actions in a certain way and that cannot be easily expressed to others. It could be described as the knowledge of the masters. To make matters "worse", tacit or personal knowledge is highly contextual, making it even more difficult to express (Gascoigne and Thornton, 2013). Furthermore, a person might not be aware that they could

affectively apply such knowledge in other situations or contexts. Although tacit knowledge is difficult to express and communicate, efforts are made to make it more explicit and reveal its content so that it can be shared to promote learning, innovation and performance at the individual and organizational levels.

Practitioners could especially benefit from learning about methods of disclosing tacit knowledge. Such knowledge might best be revealed through interviews with experts or masters of particular skills. Regarding interviews, practitioners could use scenario-based interviews and story analysis or critical incident techniques (Jaziri-Bouagina and Jamil, 2017). In scenario-based interviews, experts share their stories that enable scenario building. Then, these scenarios are presented to novices. For example, when confronted with a situation, an expert presents a solution on how to do something, but also shares their experience regarding possible mishaps, problems (if-then) or shortcuts on how to recognize the situation and solve the problem.

Reflection is key when it comes to learning tacit knowledge, both for the expert and for the recipients. Recipients should be invited to make sense of their own knowledge, awareness and behavior to be able to absorb new skills, knowledge and insights and master them with practice. Experts could also be asked to describe their actions performed at different times and in different circumstances, so contextual variations can be identified. A detailed description of the situation or context is beneficial in terms of storytelling so that recipients could distinguish between different circumstances and learn how particular problems were solved or situations addressed. It is important that tacit knowledge or insights, ideas and feelings flow freely to enable thorough understanding.

In this issue, Asher and Popper (2021) have explored tacit knowledge in more detail by trying to answer the following questions:

- Q1. How can tacit knowledge be elicited from interpersonal interactions?
- Q2. How can elicited tacit knowledge be classified to enable deeper tacit knowledge?

Asher and Popper (2021) used the symbolic interaction approach to answer the first question and the "onion" model to answer the second question. Symbolic interaction refers to the fact that people also exchange symbols and their meanings during their interactions (Nofha et al., 2017). In other words, people try to make sense of their situation by creating symbols to which they ascribe meaning. Therefore, it is first important to define the situation and its context well and to understand what is expected and/or required in that situation. The expert should then describe the role they had in the situation. Different roles require different actions. The expert should also describe their background so that we understand their previous education, work experience and experience in similar situations. It is useful for the expert to describe which approach they took in terms of clothing, posture, body language, etc.

This approach should be supported by the "onion" model. According to the "onion" model, tacit knowledge may have many layers that could be difficult to reveal. Asher and Popper (2021) explained that layers of tacit knowledge could be as follows: hidden practical knowledge, which refers to techniques of how to do something; reflective tacit knowledge, which consists of rules of thumb, designed by the expert and usually less conscious; and demonstrated tacit knowledge, which is expressed and demonstrated but difficult to explain.

Asher and Popper (2021) demonstrated these techniques using 20 experts who are involved in negotiations on a daily basis. For example, when one expert was asked how she defines the situation at the beginning of the interaction, she indicated that she recognizes the most important signals in terms of tone of voice and hand movements, as well as the level of arousal reflected in the speed of speech and response, hand movements and body language (e.g. hand movement). While less experienced individuals might place more emphasis on organizational aspects in terms

**Implications** 

of the meeting place design, dress etc., more experienced individuals tend to relate more with the person with whom they are negotiating. In this way, they could better assess their focus as well as how they react (impatiently, suspiciously, hesitantly, enthusiastically, etc.).

Regarding self-presentation, some individuals place more emphasis on creating an atmosphere of confidence and positivity, whereas others remain strictly professional. Nevertheless, for most, bringing knowledge to solve the problem is usually key to add value to the meeting, even though timing is also very important. In this way, some negotiators take on different roles, switching between roles as friends, mothers, parents, children, teachers, advisors or mediators, supported by different gestures, modes of communication and phrasing, including bringing gifts, resorting to quick responses to phone calls to show commitment and bringing important books to signal expertise.

In this way, Asher and Popper (2021) showed that despite the fact that some generalizations can be made, tacit knowledge is primarily personal and usually based on rules of thumb. Nevertheless, such knowledge should be explored, preferably through case studies and interviews, to extract its content and share it with other organizational members to stimulate organizational learning. However, practitioners should not apply the extracted knowledge uncritically. All knowledge is contextual so recipients should apply a high level of critical thinking, sense making, reflection and reasoning to use the extracted tacit knowledge and apply it effectively in their own specific situations.

#### Tacit knowledge through the eyes of Deborah Blackman

In this issue, Mishra and Abhilash (2021) interviewed Professor Deborah Blackman about her views regarding learning organizations and organizational learning. Her previous contributions are related to personal mastery, shared purpose and understanding and shared mental models, contextual learning and innovation and structures for learning and innovation. Her interests are especially related to identification and development of learning organizations in different organizational forms. For that matter, she was particularly interested in finding out how learning organizations differ from non-learning organizations.

Blackman Mishra and Abhilash (2021) particularly highlights the role of tacit knowledge in building learning organizations. Based on their context, desires and requirements, people in organizations build their knowledge, especially tacit knowledge and develop new meanings in relation to its potential use, which drives them to change their behavior and achieve certain goals. Tacit knowledge, especially experiences, assumptions and behaviors, is shared among employees and inspires them to take action. Organizational members often use it unconsciously or are not fully aware of its existence. In every action and learning activity, tacit knowledge is built and developed. However, it is often difficult to determine exactly which knowledge was used, in what combinations and how.

It is interesting to note that in some learning activities, individuals may not learn what was intended. Instead, they may end up learning something else that was not anticipated or even desired. This happens because individuals use their prior knowledge as well as their personality traits and background in different ways, resulting in different insights, ideas and knowledge. Therefore, it should be noted that interpretation and learning are always subjective and can be formalized only to a certain extent. In organizations in which individuals are highly empowered, the organizational path could not be precisely determined, as individual behavior may take an unforeseen turn and lead to different outcomes than expected.

Tacit knowledge is, therefore, very important, yet hardly manageable. However, some measures could be taken to ensure the desired implementation of individual knowledge. For instance, efforts could be made to develop a shared vision. However, a shared vision is difficult to achieve if there is no consensus regarding the mission or shared purpose.

Therefore, there should be collective learning through collective cognition, shared and meaningful interpretation leading to shared mental models and a shared purpose and vision. Any outcome is always a synergistic act of individual actions based on individual competences that result in a collective action and outcome.

In her work, Blackman (Mishra and Abhilash, 2021) also emphasized the importance of context. The context for action and learning differs depending on the goals that the company wants to achieve, such as market share, profitability or intensive research and development. The context is also related to the industry dynamics. In some industries, change is rapid, so companies need to learn and experiment more. A shared understanding leading to a shared purpose and vision is also very important and context dependent. Moreover, learning is more pronounced in times of crisis, often preceded by unlearning so that new learning can take place and be translated into new behavior. In general, and especially in times of crisis, individuals with great knowledge and personal mastery might take the lead and influence others to take some actions, thus directing organizational development in a particular direction.

It is difficult to create a learning organization. However, if shared mission, vision and mental models are created, individuals could take actions that result in the synergistic and desired outcome. In this process, it is crucial to provide good leadership in the sense of transformational leadership that guides the process; ensures quality dialogue, reflection and learning; and leads to routines that produce the desired outcome.

## Challenge of the learning organization – the challenge of remaining an ambidextrous organization

In this issue, Reese (2021) presents a review of Zabiegalski's (2019) book titled *The Rise of the Ambidextrous Organization: The Secret Revolution Happening Right Under Your Nose.* Modern organizations need to establish some order and exploit their existing knowledge to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. However, they also need to change very quickly. To do this, they need to explore, learn and experiment with new possibilities. Therefore, modern organizations are in a race between fast and effective exploitation and fast and effective exploration of knowledge. In other words, modern learning organizations face the challenge of being and remaining truly ambidextrous.

Although it is very difficult to determine the desirable balance of the two processes, it is important that both are equally represented. In less dynamic industries or environments, organizations need to place more emphasis on exploiting their knowledge effectively to achieve the goal of greater efficiency. However, many markets are extremely dynamic and volatile, so companies must constantly seek out new knowledge, learn, experiment and effectively apply that knowledge in the value-creation process.

However, there can be a trap that many companies fall into. Many companies focus on exploiting the current situation by using existing knowledge and neglect further exploration and learning. Rather than establishing "a reminder" to explore new knowledge, the solution may be to change individual and collective mental models and fully internalize the idea regarding the need to always keep an open mind, thus cultivating an explorative mindset. The explorative mindset should be, and is, a part of the learning culture. Therefore, organizations that cultivate an explorative mindset tend to be good learning organizations. It is important to note that good leadership is key to this process, as leaders should establish a learning culture to ensure that employees embrace the idea of exploratory thinking and explorative mindset.

However, these ideas should not be viewed mechanistically and with an attempt to force employees to behave in a certain way. It should be understood that exploitation and exploration are two sides of the same coin and a never-ending process that is inherent in human nature. Human beings are naturally curious and always on the lookout for something that will pique

their interest and be of use to them. Therefore, a truly learning organization should let individuals be free and care about their aspirations if they are in line with the shared vision and learning culture. A truly learning organization is one in which people have a high level of patience and respect for others because every idea could potentially have value and merit, even if it is a drive for further idea generation. Organizations should be a reflection of human nature – a living, vibrant, curious and inquisitive environment or ecosystem that is always in the process of transcending itself and allowing something new to emerge and take shape.

Implications for practitioners

#### Organizational learning in the digital age

In this issue, Hoe (2021) presented the book *Information Technology and Organizational Learning – Managing Behavioral Change In The Digital Age* by Arthur M. Langer published in 2018. In the book, the author focuses on the human, i.e. behavioral aspect of organizational change driven by the rapid adoption of information technology. The human element is a key link between information technology and its translation into organizational learning. In recent turbulent times, the pace of information technology adoption has accelerated in all aspects of the value creation and delivery process. However, the process of digital transformation is not always well aligned with the existing value system and organizational culture, which can lead to problems and lack of utilization. In other words, the human aspect in digital initiatives is often neglected, which could lead to serious problems and delays.

For information technology to reach its full potential, the human and technical aspects should be well aligned and coordinated. In practice, however, technical departments are often not included in project and change management meetings and initiatives and are sometimes marginalized. Therefore, they should also be informed about goals and even participate in goal setting, but also be included in the reflection processes when goals and action initiatives are articulated and defined. In other words, IT and organizational goals should be better aligned. In this way, if organizational needs and aspirations on the one hand and technical and technological capabilities on the other are combined and coordinated, the implementation and adoption of information technology could be faster and more fruitful. For this reason, the author of the book emphasizes that individual and group strategic learning is required to transform an organization into a technology-based learning organization. In this way, the new technology could not only contribute to further learning but also enable further organizational change based on organizational learning. This process is very important given the technological dynamics or the fact that technology is evolving rapidly, and organizations need to learn and respond appropriately to these changes, which is possible through the process of organizational learning where a consensus is reached on the benefits of adopting a new technology.

Regardless of the technology introduced, practitioners should keep in mind that it should enable an effective, efficient and smooth value creation process from both the technological and human sides. Information and communication technology introduced to enhance productivity and creativity should enable and even stimulate employee collaboration, teamwork, empowerment, critical thinking, joint reflection, experimentation and knowledge implementation. Therefore, especially managers should place a lot of emphasis on studying employees or human behavior to determine what technology could enable the achievement of these goals. In this way, organizations could develop a strong learning, entrepreneurial and innovative culture, which is also a strongly digital-based or digital culture that could help people collaborate more effectively and strengthen their ability to create new value.

Nataša Rupčić

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