

BUILDING LEARNING ORGANISATIONS : AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article offers an overview on building learning organisations by looking at various definitions of a learning organisation and describing the attributes of one. It goes on to suggest approaches to facilitate learning in organisations, proposing that there should be a change from the traditional approach of formal training to the support of learning on the job and learning outside of jobs and shifting from teaching to learning and from learning to development. Also detailed out is a three dimensional approach to establish a learning organisation; continuous inter-action and integration in the domains between the individuals, team and organisational learning. Finally, the article also enlightens the readers on the pre-requisites, enhancing and inhibiting factors as well as the function of leadership in establishing a learning organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Importance and Virtues of Learning

“Learning” is an ancient word which means the accumulation of, reflection upon, and use of the complex attitudes, knowledge and skills by which an individual or group acquires the ability to actively adapt to their changing environment. In the more modern world, learning is considered as the undertaking of activities, consciously and unconsciously by individuals, groups and organisations that results in relative permanent changes in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals, in work process and in organisational cultures and structures of groups and organisations (Simons, Germans & Ruijters, 2003).

The importance of learning was first put forward by a Chinese philosopher, Confucius (551 - 479 BC). His quotation “without learning, the wise become foolish; by learning, the foolish become wise” indicates his belief that everyone should benefit from learning. Islam too, not only stresses on the importance of learning, but demonstrates how all the factors necessary to progress in learning have been provided by God. The Qur’an repeatedly asks us to observe the earth and heavens to instill into man the desire to learn natural science and the first word of its first verse was ‘Iqra’ which means, ‘read’, signifying the utmost importance of learning. All the books of hadith too have a chapter on knowledge (ilm), stressing on the virtues of one who acquires ilm (learning) and imparts it to others (Wahiduddin, undated).

Thus, learning is significant for the individual and society to survive and thrive. Learning is the basis of an individual’s interactions with others and allows for the acquisition and transfer of knowledge. The accomplishments of human civilisations are also fully realised and utilised through learning and as cited by Gredler (2001), “learning makes possible new discoveries and inventions by subsequent generations that build on past developments”. Without learning, there would be no cumulative knowledge - each generation would have to ‘start afresh’, without the benefit of the past generation’s experience.

As today’s economy moves away from the industrial age to the knowledge age at a fast pace, it is information and new ideas acquired through learning that will propel the performance of an organisation and the economy. Senge (1990) for example, linked learning with “excellence”, a concept enthusiastically embraced by employers and managers from the largest multinationals to the smallest ventures as a means of securing competitive advantage in a turbulent environment.

Learning therefore has been recognised as the key to the success of any organisation – for each of the individuals, as well as for the organisation as a whole. Business enterprises whatever their size and business orientation depend on the knowledge, skills and expertise of their employees to ensure that their products and services are delivered in the most efficient and competitive way possible.

As advocated by Garret (2001), organisations can only become simultaneously effective and efficient if there is conscious and continuous learning between the three distinct groups in the organisation – the leaders and managers who direct the enterprise, the staff who deliver the product or service, and the customers or consumers. Inability to inculcate the practice of continuous learning and to learn as quickly as the changes in the environment will threaten the entity from having an ongoing and viable business, finally affecting their ability to compete, generate profits and survive as a business unit.

Likewise, co-operative societies today face the challenge to compete with commercial firms and large-scale enterprises, to build their competitive advantages while retaining their relevance in the face of changing needs of members. Inability to take up learning successfully and adapt to changes would result in poor business performance and management, rendering the societies inefficient and uncompetitive, and a burden on both members and the broader society.

‘Learning’ in a Knowledge Economy

In the knowledge economy described by Drucker (1996), as a dynamic and competitive environment, familiar certainties and old ways of doing things are disappearing. Jobs are changing and with them the skills needed for the world of tomorrow. In response to the challenges, organisations and business enterprises have embarked upon a plethora of ideas and initiatives such as Quality Control (QC), Total Quality Management (TQM) and Business Process Reengineering (BPR) to improve existing products and services and formulate breakthrough strategies.

However, it appears that these initiatives by themselves often do not work. The success and failure of these initiatives has been recognised to be highly dependent on the human factors such as skills, attitudes and behaviours of individuals and groups above and beyond the culture, systems and structure in the organisation (Sambrook & Stewart, 2000). This means, in order to be able to cope, prosper and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in the knowledge economy, enhancing the potential of the “human asset” and enhancing the organisational systems and structure are inextricably linked and demand equal attention (Porter, 1990; Senge, 1990).

In other words, organisations should not only encourage learning and promote exchange of information between employees to create a well-educated and more knowledgeable workforce but are also required to make use of knowledge efficiently to achieve permanent progress. Organisations should also facilitate employees to continuously learn together, expand their capacity to create results and contribute positively towards the organisation in a collaborative team culture. The structure and design of an organisation should also encourage people to accept and adapt to new ideas and change through shared vision. As put forward by Stata (1996), the rate at which individuals and organisations learn may become the only sustainable competitive advantage, especially in knowledge-intensive industries.

In a nutshell, learning and knowledge has become the fundamental power and capital, the primary power enlightening and guiding all stages of social life and is no longer considered as an objective but a means to compete, survive and thrive in the new economy. Any organisation that is committed to future success must become a learning organisation, adopting a holistic approach to learning whereby not only all the employees learn but the organisations do so too.

THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Concept and Definition of a Learning Organisation

The 'learning organisation' is a concept that has become an increasingly widespread philosophy in modern organisations. Although the idea has evolved since the early 1970's, the concept of the learning organisation is relatively new and has only become popular following the writings of Peter Senge - one of the modern day management gurus in his book, "The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation" in 1990.

The idea behind the concept was based on Senge's 'Systems Thinking', which takes a holistic approach to learning and managing. 'Systems Thinking' contends that not only do all the employees in the organisation have to learn but so does the organisation. Here, it was stressed that enterprises need to be aware of both the company as a whole as well as individuals within the company as it is believed that the essential properties of a system are not determined by the sum of its parts but by the process of interactions between those parts. Therefore, it is claimed that a learning organisation can be measured in terms of the total sum of accumulated individual and collective learning (Hyland & Matlay, 1997).

A learning organisation is therefore defined by Peter Senge as one where "people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together".

Senge also suggests that while individuals may learn themselves, unless this learning is shared and acted upon, and unless the organisation as a whole can change, then there is no learning organisation. (Senge, 1990). A similar definition is given by Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991), where according to them, a learning company is an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself. A learning organisation should therefore consciously and intentionally devote itself to the facilitation of individual learning in order to continuously transform the entire organisation and its context.

In addition, Agaoglu and Oktaylar (2003) view a learning organisation as one which supports knowledge transfer, encourages learning, makes use of knowledge, provides support for its staff and creates an environment suitable for permanent development, encourages staff

with personal development responsibility to unite their potential powers and to use this power for the permanent development of the organisation.

Summing up these definitions, a learning organisation is not about simply the collectivity of individual learning processes, but involves interaction between individuals in the organisation and interaction between organisations as an entity, dedicated to improve the learning context and strategically to strengthen the organisation's competency. This also means that the people forming the organisation should be able to change and learn quickly in the direction of existing and possible changes required by their customers and the environment, both individually and collectively as a team.

Attributes of a Learning Organisation

Senge considers that a learning organisation should not only aspire to, but also achieve five ideal types of discipline (**Table 1**). However other researchers note that this would require a super-human effort and therefore offer more practical guidance which does not contradict Senge, but is less conceptual, more descriptive and pragmatic. For example, Skyrme (2000) identified a number of attributes (**Table 1**) while Iles & Sutherland (2001) categorize the five principal features of a learning organisation as:

Organisational structure

Learning organisations have managerial hierarchies that enhance opportunities for employee career and service user involvement in the organisation. All are empowered to make relevant decisions and the organisational structure supports teamwork and strong lateral relations (not just vertical).

Organisational culture

Learning organisations have strong cultures that promote openness, creativity, and experimentation among members. They encourage members to acquire, process and share information, nurture innovation and provide the freedom to try new things, to risk failure and to learn from mistakes.

Information systems

Learning organisations have information systems that improve and support practice and that move beyond those used in traditional organisations where information is generally used for control purposes. 'Transformational change' requires more sophisticated information systems that facilitate rapid acquisition, processing and sharing of rich, complex information which enables effective knowledge management.

Human resource practices

Human resource management in a learning organisation focuses on provision and support of individual learning. Appraisal and reward systems are concerned with the measurement of long-term performance and to promote the acquisition and sharing of new skills and knowledge.

Leadership

Leaders in learning organisations demonstrate the openness, risk-taking and reflection necessary for learning. They should also communicate a compelling vision of the learning organisation, providing the empathy, support and personal advocacy needed to lead others towards it. They ensure that organisations and work groups have the capacity to learn, change and develop.

Table 1: Different Perspectives on the Attributes of a Learning Organisation

Senge (1990)	Skyrme (2000)
<p>Personal mastery Learning organisations require people with a high level of personal mastery, who live in a continual learning mode, continually clarifying and deepening their personal vision.</p> <p>Mental models Every individual should through positive, constructive criticism, challenge each others' ideas and assumptions to create a shared mental model.</p> <p>Building shared Vision Organisations must create a shared vision whereby a large number of people within the organisation must draft it, empowering them to create a single image of the future.</p> <p>Team learning People need to be able to act together as the learning ability of the group becomes greater than the learning ability of any individual in the group.</p> <p>Systems thinking This is the ability to see the bigger picture, to look at the interrelationships of a system as opposed to simple cause-effect chains.</p>	<p>Learning Culture In a learning organisation, an organisational climate that nurtures learning should prevail. Everyone should be involved in learning and there must be a strong connection with innovation.</p> <p>Processes Learning is unlikely to take place in a 'traditional', heavily-hierarchical organisation in which the line structure is seen as the only vehicle for communication and control. Thus infrastructure and processes must encourage interaction across boundaries.</p> <p>Tools and techniques Methods that aid individual and group learning, such as creativity and problem solving techniques should be present.</p> <p>Skills and Motivation Environment that stimulates employees to learn and adapt.</p>

BUILDING A LEARNING ORGANISATION

Facilitating Learning in Organisations

A learning organisation is not about 'more training'. While training does help develop certain types of skills, a learning organisation involves the development of higher levels of knowledge and skill (Skyrme, 2000). People can no longer learn all that they have to learn through courses and in training programs.

There is instead so much to learn from outside courses and jobs, in environments where they can work, solve problems and learn together. This means that the approach is to help people in organisations to learn in different kinds of environments. This also means that there should be a change from the traditional approach of formal training to the support of learning on the job and learning outside of jobs and courses. There should be a shift from teaching to learning and from learning to development.

Therefore organisations intending to become a learning organisation, or termed as "learning oriented organisation" say Leys et al. (1992), should deliberately :

- create opportunities for informal employee learning, both "on the job" and "off the job"; and
- stimulate employees not only to attain new knowledge and skills, but also to acquire skills in the field of learning and problem solving and thus develop their capacity for future learning, or "learning to learn" (Tjepkema & Scheerens, 1998).

A learning oriented organisation seeking to become a learning organisation should consequently support individual lifelong learning, whether formal or informal, and encourage the sharing of this learning so that all members of the organisation can learn, change and improve performance.

Establishing a Learning Organisation

Learning in an organisation generally involves three levels: individual learning, group learning and organisational learning. Although traditionally educationalists focused on individual learning through training, learning at the group and organisational level were revealed to ultimately make an organisation a learning one.

According to Simons et al. (2003), there is no organisational learning without individual learning. Group learning on the other hand stimulates learning among individual members, helping each other to integrate learning skills into work. Group learning should be viewed as a collective learning, more than the sum of all individual learning, resulting in changes in group norms or group performance.

Correspondingly, individual and team learning needs organisational assistance to provide opportunities for them to be effective. It is the combination and co-ordination of the three

kinds of learning that ultimately makes an organisation a learning one. Learning should not be encouraged only at the individual level but should encompass team and organisational levels. The idea is that when more people and teams learn, a community of learning would be developed.

In relation to this, Kelleher (1996) suggested a three dimensional approach to establish a learning organisation; continuous inter-action and integration of strategies in the domains between the individuals, team and organisational learning.

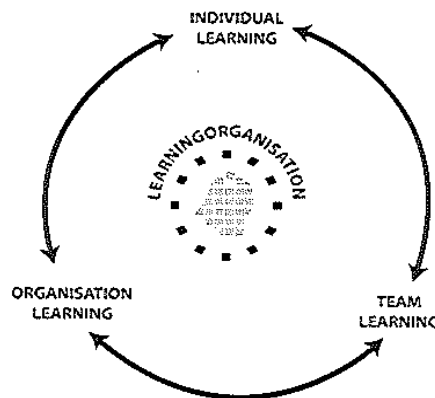


Figure 1: Kelleher's three dimensional model of a learning organization

Individual Learning

It is essential that all organisations aspiring to become learning organisations must support and sustain the learning of all its employees. Personal development plans, traditional education and training programmes and informal learning, especially those that are integrated into work tasks and responsibilities often play an important part in the individual learning dimension.

Team Learning

As more and more working situations are organised through teams, team learning has become an important factor in organisational development. Thus, pooling of knowledge, sharing of possible solutions to any given problems and the transfer of learning experiences between team members and also between other teams is an important factor to create the ideal environment for effective team/group learning.

Organisational Learning

Four components; the new systems and structures, new processes, new values and new roles were identified to be significant to the establishment of a learning organisation. New systems and structures should be implemented which allow for free and lateral communication flows in order to enhance learning at all levels in the organisation. Building

an organisational memory through the use of information technology systems or captured in traditional paper formats, books and reports is also useful in order not to lose the learning of individuals and team learning and to formalise the tacit knowledge inherent in them.

Correspondingly, identifying how learning has taken place and supporting individuals and teams to understand how they have learned new tasks and responsibilities will be vital. This involves the assessment of good practices and processes, understanding and becoming alert to market and other economic factors that may impact on the organisation.

Another important issue in learning organisations is the values to adopt in order to maximise learning opportunities. Organisations should view mistakes as a key learning experience and try to end or prevent 'blame cultures'. There is also the need to create environments in which risk taking and experimentation are seen as healthy and a necessary element for organisational growth. In line with this there also needs to be a shift from control mechanisms to empowerment and this will require managers and team leaders to develop new roles and skills.

With respect to this, Guns (1997), has identified the following types of learning that should be acquired by individuals and teams:

- *Task Learning*
How to perform and enhance the performance of specific tasks.
- *Systemic Learning*
Understanding the organisation's basic systems and processes, how they're developed and implemented, and how they can be improved.
- *Cultural Learning*
The values, beliefs, and attitudes that provide the foundation for working productively.
- *Leadership Learning*
How to lead and manage individuals, groups, teams, and organisational units.
- *Team Learning*
How to function effectively in a team and foster learning, growth and maturity.
- *Strategic Learning*
The organisation's basic business strategy, how it's developed and implemented and how it can be improved.
- *Entrepreneurial Learning*
Concerns the basics of entrepreneurship and how to run teams as micro-businesses.

- *Reflective Learning*
Questioning and analysing organisational assumptions, models, and paradigms.
- *Transformational Learning*
How to make significant organisational change.

According to Skyrme (2001) and colleagues who developed a 4-level model of learning, organisations that achieve learning to Level 4 will “reinvent not just their organisation but their industry”.

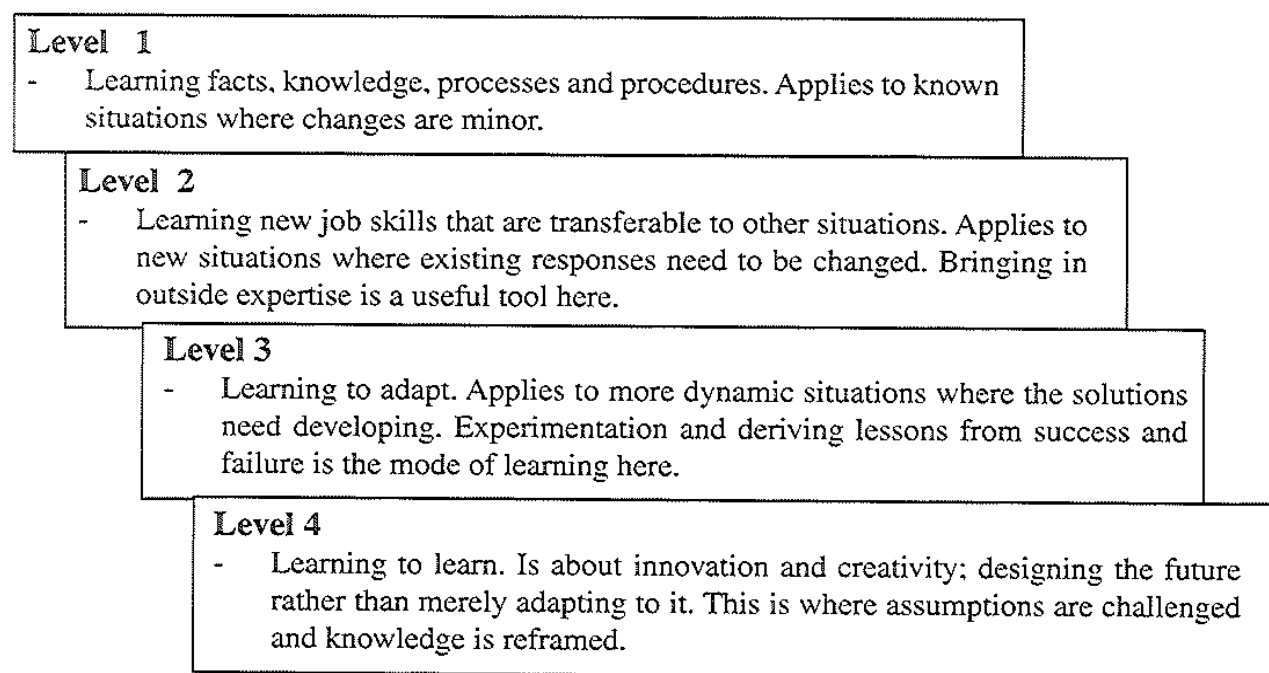


Figure 2: Skyrme's 4-level model of learning

Laying the foundation

Before a learning organisation can be achieved, a solid base has to be in place in every organisation. This can be done through the following efforts as recommended by Senge (1990).

Creating Awareness

Learning in an organisation is not something done for the outside world. The core value of learning originates in an organisation and it will have to be supported and nurtured by management. Change should start and be supported from top management and this 'new' culture should be manifested in the commitment to learning. For individual or small group learning to be integrated into the learning of the organisation, awareness of the benefits of a learning organisation must permeate to all levels and the attitudes and the actions of management are crucial. A learning culture must be fostered among the employees

that “survival of the fittest” depends on having a knowledgeable workforce, personal development of the individual as well as valuing people and their divergent views.

Conducive Environment

The right environment must be in place so that learning can take place. Organic structures with a flat organisational chart, instead of a centralised, mechanistic one will be in a better position to develop into a learning organisation. An organic structure places less emphasis on giving and taking orders and more on encouraging managers and subordinates to work together in teams and to communicate openly with each other.

Right Leadership Style

Managers must adopt ‘open communication’ management styles so that employees will be able to question and come forward with ideas. Managers must understand mistakes and errors are part of this process and therefore employees should not be in fear of reprimands. Managers must also provide commitment for long-term learning in the form of resources (money, personnel and time).

Empowerment

Employees should be empowered to take decisions and actions. Let them own the process whilst monitoring all that is happening. Only through motivation and innovation will the employees grow and learn. Equal participation should be encouraged so that employees can learn from each other simultaneously.

Opportunities for learning

Company-wide training for continuous learning and multi-skilling opportunities should be made available to employees.

LEADING THE LEARNING ORGANISATION

Senge (1990) argues that learning organisations require a new view of leadership. He argues that the traditional view of leaders as special people who set the direction, make key decisions and energise the troops as inadequate to support a learning organisation. A learning organisation calls for leaders who can function as designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organisations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision, and improve shared mental models.

Leader as Designer

A leader is responsible for the key area of design; the organisation’s policies, strategies and ‘systems’. In essence, the leader’s task is designing the learning processes whereby people throughout the organisation can deal productively with the critical issues they face.

Leader as Steward

Leaders should become stewards of the organisation's vision. Their task is to manage it, allow others to be involved and to help develop a vision that is both individual and shared.

Leader as Teacher

"Leader as teacher" is not about "teaching" people how to achieve their vision. It is about fostering learning for everyone. Such leaders help people throughout the organisation to develop systemic understanding.

FACTORS ENHANCING AND INHIBITING LEARNING

The success of transforming into learning organisations is influenced by many factors, and the same factors can be expressed in both a positive (enhancing) and negative manner (inhibiting). A study by Sambrook and Stewart (1999), on 28 case studies (British and European organisations) has identified several factors as enhancing and inhibiting learning, as summarised below:

- Existence of a learning culture
- Senior management and board commitment and support
- Improved managers' skills, role clarity, leadership and management styles.
- Increasing employee confidence, attitudes, and involvement.
- Availability of time for learning, improved training facilities in work environment, dedicated trainers and enhanced working environment.

The following supporting factors were also mentioned in the study: management commitment to, and support of, learning; HRD resources being active, flexible and varied; an active HRD role; and good communications between managers and HRD professionals as well as between managers and employees and the willingness to share good practices. On the other hand, inhibiting factors to learning such as lack of motivation and/or responsibility for learning, was mentioned by two-thirds of the case organisations studied. This lack of motivation can be partly explained by the lack of time, lack of confidence and lack of reward for learning, as well as the lack of enthusiasm in the concept of the learning organisation or training and development in general. Another inhibiting factor identified concerns HRD, including a lack of clarity regarding the new and changing role of HRD professionals, and the new approach to learning and working. A further reason is the lack of practical information regarding the need for learning, on learning processes and on learning opportunities.

The lack of a learning culture was cited as another inhibiting factor in the above study. Respondents talked about the difficulty in developing a learning culture and insufficient knowledge sharing. This would suggest that it is very difficult to motivate employees to share knowledge or engage in learning processes if they are not used to it, or perhaps

even reluctant to do so. This is supported by Jones & Hendry (1992), who found that a learning-oriented culture enhances successful learning, whereas it is very difficult to create learning situations in companies with cultures characterised by bureaucracy and inter-functional rivalries and politics.

The difficulty in changing existing cultures was also cited in the case study, including fear of and resistance to change as a barrier to developing a learning orientation. Other factors included inappropriate organisational structures and work pressure. Work pressure is sometimes so high that it is difficult for employees to find time for learning in their daily work routine, or opportunities for learning (such as courses) are cancelled/postponed to ensure the workload is completed. This compounds the problem of lack of motivation and contributes to the lack of a learning culture, thus creating a vicious circle: when individuals are working hard to keep up with new developments and changes (reactively), but are too busy to learn and reflect on existing practices, this makes it difficult to (proactively) find solutions which might decrease the work load. Some of the more common obstacles to becoming a learning organisation cited by Skyrme (2000) are :

- Operational /fire fighting preoccupation - not creating time to sit back and think strategically
- too focused on systems and process (e.g. ISO 9000) to the exclusion of other factors
- reluctance to train (or invest in training) other than for obvious immediate needs
- too many hidden personal agendas
- too top-down driven, over tight supervision which leads to a lack of real empowerment.

DEVELOPING CO-OPERATIVES INTO LEARNING ORGANISATIONS

The co-operative enterprise which has been extensively used throughout the world as one of the vehicles for organising economic and social activities also face challenges similar to those of the traditional capitalised firms - globalisation, liberalisation and rapid changes in the environment. And though there is evidence from a study that indicate co-operatives can have a higher survival rate than the private enterprise (Study by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry of Canada, 1999), the performance and viability of this form of enterprise can be deeply affected if they fail to successfully learn to adapt to the new economic situation.

As identified by Couture, Faber, Levin and Nippierd (2002), four (4) major interrelated and complementary factors are required to create a favourable climate for co-operatives to develop successfully to meet the new challenges of the market economy. Under these four factors, various aspects are recognised as significant characteristics of a successful co-operative, which is notably aligned to the principal features of a learning organisation identified by Iles & Sutherland (2001) that were mentioned earlier:-

Legal, Policy and Institutional Environment

- Reform co-operative legislation to create conditions that will foster growth and development;
- Provision of a reliable macro-economic environment and other fiscal measures such as taxation, market information and market access for co-operatives by the government;
- Support provided by other local, regional, national or international co-operative societies, unions or councils.

Co-operative Principles and Governance

- leaders of successful co-operatives have common determination and vision, a sound understanding of co-operative values and principles and demonstrate a capacity to raise the interest and commitment of the members and stakeholders involved in co-operatives;
- the adoption of a governance structure that is aimed at strengthening the co-operative's management and increasing member participation and commitment.

Financial and Economic Aspects

- co-operatives diversify and increase their range of products and services, expand and improve their distribution network, focus on their target market and position themselves favourably against their competitors;
- co-operatives take into consideration both the traditional and strategic approaches together with the co-operative's specific character to chart out their business strategies.

Human and Social Aspects

- continuous education and training is designed to change the attitude, skills and competencies of directors, employees and members to foster a motivated, dynamic and innovative, collaborative team to perform in an increasingly competitive environment;
- initiatives are undertaken to raise the sense of ownership of members towards co-operatives and incentives are provided to its members to engage in an active relationship with their co-operative;
- community's support and positive attitude towards co-operatives is promoted via appropriate communication media as well as through good examples and practices.

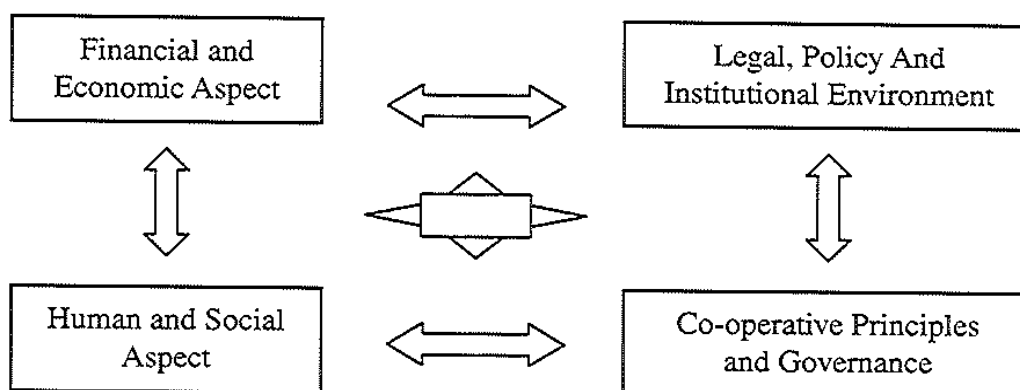


Figure 3: Factors for successful co-operative development

Source: M-F. Couture, D. Faber, M Levin and A-B Nippierd, *Transition to Co-operative Entrepreneurship*, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2000

Summing-up, to remain competitive and successful, co-operatives too need to evolve into learning organisations. Co-operatives need to develop a team of experienced and competent directors, managers and employees who can lead, adapt and manage the enterprise to respond successfully to the new competitive market challenges. A culture of positive entrepreneurship could be promoted through education and training that combine entrepreneurship and management skills with concerns to encourage innovation in researching markets and identifying viable business opportunities. To that end, co-operatives should strive to enhance productivity and competitiveness with the objective to be commercially competitive at the national, regional and where possible, world levels.

CONCLUSION

In the new economy, knowledge is not reserved for people in managerial or professional positions. Every employee will need to be a knowledge worker. However, having an organisation where the majority of employees are knowledge-workers is not sufficient to guarantee success against strong competition. The structure, processes, design and culture has to be right to enable their full contribution, to develop a collaborative team culture in order to transform into learning organisations. Through the learning organisation process people will develop, become more creative and social interactions will improve. Teams and groups will work better through knowledge sharing, becoming more interdependent, increasing responsibility at all levels and developing an entrepreneurial spirit. Despite the presence of a bureaucratic nature of traditional organisations and the uphill task of transforming into learning entities, if an organisation can harness the collective intelligence and commitment at all levels, constantly identify and provide learning opportunities for individuals and the organisation can share the learning from these, without doubt it can be successful.

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