Chapter 7
Changes in Organizational Learning and Leadership Influenced by Technology

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decades, organizational learning and leadership have undergone significant changes as individual areas of study, as inextricably intertwined disciplines, and areas that have been significantly influenced by emerging technologies. This chapter investigates and provides examples of these individual areas, their intersections, and the impact of technology on their past and future.

INTRODUCTION

While learning and leadership are often considered to be individual activities, when one considers the development of organizational learning and the learning organization, leadership plays a key role. Originally, the traditional theories of management influenced how organizations functioned. These later evolved into theories of leadership and to discussions about the similarities and differences between the two. In the process of this evolution, numerous inventories have been developed to assess learning styles and leadership styles and suggest ways of utilizing this new self-knowledge to enhance learning and leading in organizations. This chapter will include an investigation of the impact of technology on learning and leadership within organizations in the areas of basic communication and information technologies as well as today’s Web 2.0 technologies. Both the theoretical and practical aspects will be considered.

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BACKGROUND

Learning and the Culture of Organizations

The term organization is often used in a broad context and can evoke different images in the mind of individuals. While it could be a business organization or a non-profit that is very structured, it could also refer to one that is informal in its operation. Universally, an organization is 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 will develop 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 originally created by Argyris and Schon in the 1960’s and 1970s. Argyris and Schon (1996) attribute their early work on organizational learning as being rooted in the systems modeling discipline that was first developed by Jay Forrester in the 1960s. It was based on “servomechanism and control theory – applied in grand sequence first to industry then to cities and finally to the world” (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 ‘learning organizations’ or as ‘organic’ and noticing that people exhibit self-organizing ca-