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
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