Chapter 3
An Analysis of Hospitality and Tourism Research: Learning Organization’s (LO) Influence on Sustainability Practices

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ABSTRACT

Learning organizations (LOs) have been identified as an innovative practice essential for global businesses to not only effectively compete in today’s dynamic environment but also to achieve and maintain a sustainable competitive advantage and increase overall firm performance. The objective of this chapter is to examine the current body of knowledge on LOs and their impact on sustainability practices in an effort to identify what is being done by organizations, where knowledge is applied, and, how systems are created to influence sustainability practices. In the context of hospitality and tourism businesses, the literature examining LOs is limited though a wealth of studies have been conducted in the mainstream. Using a qualitative approach, a content analysis was conducted to investigate its impact on sustainability practices in hospitality and tourism organizations. The results indicate that destinations in particular have adopted this approach to compete globally and to address triple-bottom line sustainability.

INTRODUCTION

Increased competition and globalization of the hospitality and tourism industries have forced operators to become more efficient through the practice of environmental sustainability in their organizations (Dunlap, Gallup, & Gallup, 1993; Smith 2003; & Salzmann, O., Ionescu-Somers, A., & Steger, U. 2005). Sustainability is viewed as transitional and a continuous learning process (Farrell & Twining-Ward, 2005), as well as treated as a dynamic goal (Lee, 2001). Organizational leaders have viewed learning as
a key element in developing and maintaining a competitive advantage (Armstrong & Foley, 2003) but more importantly, achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. This view shared by Nevis, DiBella and Gould (1995) and Jashapara (2003) is considered vital for organizations to thrive in the global business arena and is dependent upon their capacity to learn and react to emergent forces driving change. Given the dynamic nature of today’s hospitality and tourism industry where mergers, acquisitions, and competition for market share are top strategic priorities, practitioners are seeking new knowledge to enable them to be more competitive.

One innovative approach that could be used to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage is that of a Learning Organization (LO), a concept proposed by Peter Senge in 1990 where organizations learn quickly from, and adapt to, changes taking place in their internal and external micro- and macro-environments. What emerges is a hospitality company or tourism destination with new skills and capabilities to compete in a constantly changing business environment. Such an organization would be driven by individuals who would also embrace the concept of continuous learning and it would foster or enhance the ability for its employees to adapt as a necessary ingredient for organizational success. With these new skills and capabilities the hospitality company or tourism destination is able to compete in the new business environment. In this environment, the organization is able to create its own future by using various techniques, systems, and approaches to achieve sustainable results.

The objective of this chapter is to examine the current body of knowledge on learning organizations and their impact on sustainability practices in an effort to identify what is being done by organizations, where knowledge is applied, and, how systems are created to influence sustainability practices. To achieve this objective, a content analysis of prior literature based on LO was conducted to investigate its impact on sustainability practices. While not a new approach, content analysis has been used liberally by researchers such as Jogaratnam, McCleary, Mena, and Yoo (2005), Rivera and Upchurch (2008), Law, Leung, and Cheung (2012) among others to analyze prior hospitality and tourism research in an effort to enhance the current body of knowledge and inform readers about general issues and emerging trends in hospitality and tourism. On the basis of the evaluation of prior studies, several important factors were identified. These factors that will be discussed are definitions and dimensions of LO, theoretical approaches to LO, LO and the tourism and hospitality industry, LO and sustainable competitive advantage, and LO and innovation.

BACKGROUND

Definitions and Dimensions of Learning Organizations

There are many definitions of LOs. However, the most frequently used definition is that of Senge’s (1990, p. 3) who defines the term as “organizations where people continually 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.” This definition highlights a systems approach to LOs that incorporates five disciplines (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004, pp 6) namely: