Supportive Learning Environment: A Comparison between Private and Public Sector Organizations of Pakistan

Qamar Ali (Corresponding Author)
Lecturer
Department of Business Administration
Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan
E mail: qamarwaince@gmail.com, Phone: +92-41-9201167

Sami Ullah Bajwa
Assistant Manager
Knowledge Management Cell
Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority, Government of Pakistan.
Visiting Faculty Member
Superior University, Pakistan.
Email: samibajwa@hotmail.com, Phone: +92-321-5001213

Khuram Shahzad
Lecturer/PhD Scholar
University of Management and Technology
Lahore, Pakistan
E-mail: Khurram.shahzad@umt.edu.pk, Phone: 923334361678

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine the most important factors influencing supportive learning environment in public and private sector organizations on the one hand and to compare the levels of supportive learning environment between private and public sectors, on the other. Since, supportive learning environment is a building block of learning organization, the study, in other words, intends to compare the levels of learning in both sectors. Variables are factor analysed to carry out the most important ones and the sum of the Means of all the variable is taken as total score of supportive learning environment and is compared mutually. Results of the study suggest that the important variables of supportive learning environment for both types of organizations are same—psychological safety and time for reflection— but there is a considerable disparity between the total scores gained by two organizations, with private organization at higher side. It can be derived, then, that the extent of supportive learning environment is greater in private organizations than public ones.

Key Words: Building block, learning organization, public organization, private organization, psychological safety, supportive learning environment, time for reflection.

Introduction

Organizations today are facing with an environment in which knowledge creation and change is taking place at an unprecedented rate. Consequently, many past management practices and principles—created for a world that was more stable and predictable—no longer apply. Twenty first century organizations need to be capable of learning and responding quicker than ever. These organizations, beyond doubt, will be led by managers who can dare to challenge the established truths, manage the organization's knowledge base, and make necessary changes. These organizations will need to be able to develop the capacity of continuous learning, adaptability, and change. These organizations, as a matter of fact, will need to be the learning organizations.

The idea of learning organization is not new to the world as Fortune Magazine in late twentieth century advised its readers "Forget your old, tired ideas about leadership. A learning organization is going to be the most successful corporation in of late twentieth and twenty first century. The concept, primarily, was given by Peter M. Senge in his book, the fifth discipline, published in 1992. Senge believes that the epistemological understanding that the world is made up of distinctive and independent components is the major impediment in the way of a learning organization and once we leave this misconception we become able to construct a true learning organization. In these organizions workers will increasingly enhance their capability of creating outputs, modern and innovative models of thinking will be pioneered, collective wisdom will be welcomed and most importantly human beings will   better than ever learn the art of learning (Senge 1994) Organizations, worldwide, have embraced the idea of learning organization. Even Pakistani organizations are no exception in this regard.

Both, Private as well as Public sector organizations in Pakistan, have been trying to work on the lines of learning organizations. The concept of creation and management of knowledge is widespread in contemporary Pakistani organizations. But there prevails a gulf between the practices of pubic and private sector organizations. The environment of Public-sector organizations is widely considered as unsupportive for learning. But this is merely an image which has been developed over the years, no significant research work has been conducted in this area to accept or reject the longstanding perception as yet. The focus of this study is to determine the important factors contributing to a supportive learning environment in public and private sector organizations on one hand and to study the comparison of the extent of supportive learning environment between the two on the other.

One organization from each sector, private and public, is taken as a sample of this study. Both of the organizations are development agencies. Both organizations permitted for the survey on the condition of anonymity, to maintain which the names of the organizations are not being disclosed. A portion of the tool kit developed by David A. Garvin et al (Harvard Business Review, March 2008) used in their article titled 'Is Yours a Learning Organization?' is being used to test the hypothesis. Results of the analysis show that almost same variables are being considered as the important determinants of a supportive learning environment in different sectors and there used to be a considerable disproportion in the levels of supportive learning environment between the two sectors.

Literature Review

Learning can be defined as a process of permanent changes in behaviour that result from environmental interactions (Dulbecco and Garrouste 1999; Lazaric 2000). For the examination of different experiences and to learn from experiences and to use the knowledge and learning gained form the experiences of the others as well as their own, executives are enjoined (Senge 1990). The world of experience and the researchers and academicians in the field of strategic management have discovered the concept of learning (Levinthal and March 1993). Researchers believe the consistency and persistence of differences in firm performance critical in the face of ever adaptive business environment. The ability to learn is viewed by many a scholars to be a significant, in some cases unique, root and source of a competitive advantage which is sustainable indeed (Senge 1990; Brugelmann 1999).

Continuing epistemological development in our age of the knowledge worker has led to the conclusion that the knowledge necessary to perform useful work cannot be a body of information to be learned, and learned at once (Raelin 1997). Rather work-based learning is acquired in the midst of action and is dedicated to the task at hand (Dretske 1981). Further it sees knowledge as a collective activity wherein learning becomes everyone's responsibility. Finally its users demonstrate a learning to learn aptitude in order to stay abreast with changes in the field and to invent new tools with the assistance of others to solve new problems (Drucker 1994; Nonaka 1994). So it is the organizational, and not merely the individual learning, which makes the difference. Although, organizations learn only through individuals who learn but individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. Albeit without it no organizational learning occurs, says Peter Senge. Learning is often enhanced not just by bringing people together, but by moving them around to confront different sorts of clues, gather different kinds of data, use different kinds of tools, and experience different pressures relevant to a given problem (Tyre and Von Hippel 1997) Organizations are required to be able to learn more and more than they has ever done so due these increasingly growing pressures of rapidly changing environment they are confronting with. Organizations have to meet the requirements to be able to fall as learning organizations to survive in this competitive environment.

The concept of learning organization is an already established one and not a new in the field of management sciences. Inspired by Peter M. Senge's book 'The Fifth Discipline' and innumerable other research articles, publications, and online resources, it prospered in the 1990s,. As a result it proved to be a convincing image of an organization consisting of a workforce expert at producing, obtaining, and conveying knowledge which ultimately make an organization a learning organization (Garvin, Edmondson et al. 2008). Over a period of time researchers in the field of organizational studies has pointed out three major features that are noteworthy for organizational learning and transformation; supporting learning surroundings, tangible facilitating processes and practices, and management and leadership actions that provide back up (Garvin, Edmondson et al. 2008). These are the basic constructing parameters of an organization which is best suitable to be called a learning organization. These constructing blocks can be studied in isolation and independently and their distinctive subparts can also be studied independently (Garvin, Edmondson et al. 2008). Public sector in Pakistan has been expanding since the formation of Pakistan. In the Bhutto regime the nationalization of major institutions contributed substantially towards the expansion of public organizations. Over the years, private sector has been getting its pace towards development.

Major steps have been taken for the nourishment of private sector in recent years. The power motives of private sector firms create incentives to set wages commensurate with worker productivity. These motives are generally absent from the public sector and pay rewards are generally made on other criteria (Hyder and Reilly 2006)

Research Methodology

Target population of this study required to be the organizations from both, public as well as private, sectors as the objective of study was to compare and analyse the supportive learning environment of the two. To serve that purpose one organization from each sector is selected on the basis of convenient sampling. Interestingly both organizations appear to be the development agencies. Since the focal point of both organizations is the development of their respective sectors, they are found to be involved in enhancing the learning cultures inside their organizations too. Employees at all levels of management—top-level, middle-level, and frontline— are considered the frame of sample, from both organizations. The total number of surveyed population is 70.

Questionnaire developed by David A. Garvin et al is used as the instrument of research. Originally the toolkit contained three parts covering all three building blocks, which included behaviour of leadership and processes of learning along with the environmental component, but only the part consisting the questions about supportive learning environment is taken for the conduct of this research. This kind of customization is allowed from the developer of the scale. Supportive learning environment portion is further divided into four parts; psychological safety; appreciation of differences; openness to new ideas; time for reflection. Mostly, respondents were reluctant to respond negatively asked questions. All the questionnaires are filled in the presence of the researcher and queries from the respondents are entertained politely. Moreover some secondary data is used to elucidate the overall disparities between public-sector and private-sector in Pakistan.

Questionnaire is adopted because of the repute and goodwill of the journal it was presented in originally and because of the high level of acceptance of it, in the corporate world, as a toolkit used to measure the learning level in the organizations. High efforts are made to ensure the accuracy, using SPSS 15 for all types of numerical and graphical analysis of the data.

Variables and Analysis

This study takes supportive learning environment, the most important learning element, to be considered for comparison in public and private sector organizations of Pakistan. Despite of their importance, other two building blocks—processes of learning and practices and behaviour of leadership that provide underpinning— are being omitted from the study. The reason of omitting these two building blocks is to refrain the study from being too ambiguous and putting the entire focuses on the supportive learning environment exclusively.

The survey contains the following elements to measure the level of supportive learning environment in any organization.
- Psychological safety
- Appreciation of differences
- Openness to new ideas
- Time for reflection

All the above elements of a supportive learning environment can be measured through different variables used in the survey. The data is collected using a total number of eighteen Items covering above mentioned four areas of supportive learning environment. Speaking power, mistakes handling, problem sharing, information sharing, and cards hiding are the variables used to measure the psychological safety. The variables like; opinion handling, differences handling, alternatives etc. are used to measure the appreciation of differences. New ideas, untried approaches, better ways etc. are the variables used to measure openness to experience. While, time for reflection is measured using the variables like; stress level, time to review, schedule pressure, time for improvement etc. Some variables like the gender differences, the level of qualification and experiences among different employees, the age of the organization etc. are deliberately omitted from the analysis to avoid too much ambiguity

All the variables are factor analysed using SPSS 15.0 to extract an analysable number of variables in decreasing order of importance. Variables are extracted through factor analysis at three different levels of analysis. Firstly, important variables are extracted from the whole data to see the commonly important factors in public and private organizations. At the second level of analysis, important variables are extracted exclusively from the public organization data and at the last level of analysis important variables are extracted only from the private organization data.

Last two extractions are made by splitting the data on the basis of public and private sector organizations. Bartlett's test of sphericity is applied to judge the appropriateness of the factor model, which has tested the null hypothesis that the variables are uncorrelated in the population. Moreover, the magnitudes of observed correlation coefficients to the magnitudes of the partial correlation coefficients are measured with the help of KMO (Kaiser, Meyer, and Olkin) index. A KMO index greater than 0.5, is always desirable. Both of the tests in Table 1, given in Appendix A, are rendering the factor model appropriate for data.

Results & Commentary on Results

The results of factor analysis applied at all three levels of analysis show that a common pool of variables considered being important in both public and private organizations. Before splitting the data on the basis of organization type, component matrix in table 2, given in Appendix B, extracted the following four most important factors in decreasing order of importance; 1)Time to review 2) Cards hiding 3) Mistakes handling and 4) Stress. While, the most important factors extracted, after splitting the data on the basis of organization type, by component matrix in table 3, belonging to the public sector organization are given in Appendix D, in decreasing order of importance; 1)Time to review 2)Cards hiding 3)Mistakes handling and 4)Time to reflect. At the third level of analysis the most important factors for private sector organization are extracted with the help of factor analysis. These factors (component matrix, table 4) are given in Appendix C, in decreasing order of importance; 1) Time to reflect 2) Cards hiding 3) Mistakes handling 4) Time for improvement.

Factor Interpretations

Factor 1 Time to review means despite the workload people in the organization find enough time to review how the work is going. It is the leading factor, with highest factor loadings, in the supportive learning environment of a public sector organization. Despite of being highest important factor in supportive learning environment of public sector organization, it is, however, nowhere in the four most important factors in supportive learning environment of private sector organizations.

Factor 2 Cards hiding mean keeping your cards close to your chest is the best way to get ahead in this organization. It is found to be the second most important factor in supportive learning environment of private as well as public sector organizations. However the higher factor loading value in private organization suggests that the factor is more important in the supportive learning environment of private organizations than that of Public organizations.

Factor 3 Mistakes handling means if you make a mistake in this organization it is often held against you. It is the third most important factor in the supportive learning environment of both, public and private organizations. Factor loading values, however, suggest that the level of importance in public sector organizations is higher than that of private sector organization.

Factor 4 Time to reflect means the extent to which people have time for reflection in this organization. It is the leading factor in supportive learning environment of private sector organizations, with highest factor loadings. And it is the fourth most important factor in the supportive learning environment of public sector organizations, with least factor loadings out of four most important factors.

Factor 5 Time for improvement means the extent to which people can invest their time in improving the ways of doing things. It is the fourth most important factor in supportive learning environment of private sector organizations. This factor, however, is not there in the four most important factors involved in supportive learning environment of public sector organizations.

It can be seen from the above factors that only two elements of supportive learning environment out of four elements are considered to be important in both sectors. One is 'psychological safety' and the other is 'time for reflection'. Both, cards hiding and mistakes handling, are the variables to measure 'psychological safety' and the other three factors i.e. time to review, time to reflect and time for improvement, measure 'the time for reflection'. So, psychological safety and time for reflection are considered the most important elements of supportive learning environment, commonly, by private and public sector organizations. Moreover, to achieve the second objective of the study, the Means of all the variables are summed up, to calculate overall score in supportive learning environment of each organization.   The figures shown in table 5 depict the learning environment of private sector organizations more supportive than that of public sector organizations. Because of the unavailability of a bench mark score of supportive learning environment in Pakistan, the level of supportive learning environment can not be interpreted exclusively but it can only be compared mutually between private and public organizations. And results clearly show a huge disparity between the two environments as private sector has achieved substantially higher scores than public sector as shown in table 5 given in Appendix E. Public organization with a total score of 60 is well behind private organization which has achieved a total score of 81.25

Conclusion & Recommendations for Further Research

It has been a long standing debate that which one of the public and private sectors is more friendly and supportive to a learning working environment? The current study in that respect is a major contribution in the research literature as it tries to numerically calculate the magnitudes of supportiveness for learning in private as well as in public settings. The study does not, however, reinforces the already established concept, of being unsupportive to learning, about public sector organization. Since there is no established bench mark of scores of a supportive learning environment to compare with, it can not be concluded that the public sector is unsupportive for learning, even if it is lacking behind private sector in total scores. One can not conclude, thus, that despite of the recognition of the most important factors influencing supportive learning environment of an organization, public organizations have not, yet, been able to develop a learning environment comparable to that of private organizations. On the other hand, it can be easily concluded from this study that the important determinants of supportive learning environment are same in private and public organizations.The further research can be conducted in different areas of a learning organization as the current study has compared only one building block out of three commonly known building blocks of a learning organization. A study can be conducted on the comparison of leadership behaviour that reinforces learning in private and public sector organizations. The doors for further research are open even in the area of discrete learning practices. Again the public and the private sectors can be compared for that purpose.

References

1. Brugelmann, H. (1999). "From invention to convention children's different routes to literacy." Learning to read: An integrated view from research and practice: 315–341.
2. Dretske, F. (1981). "The pragmatic dimension of knowledge." Philosophical Studies **40**(3): 363-378.
3. Drucker, P. (1994). Post-capitalist society, Harper Paperbacks.
4. Dulbecco, P. and P. Garrouste (1999). "Towards an Austrian theory of the firm." The Review of Austrian Economics **12**(1): 43-64.
5. Garvin, D., A. Edmondson, et al. (2008). "Is yours a learning organization?" Harvard Business Review **86**(3): 109.
6. Hyder, A. and B. Reilly (2006). "The public sector pay gap in Pakistan: a quantile regression analysis." Pakistan Development Review.
7. Lazaric, N. (2000). "The role of routines, rules and habits in collective learning: some epistemological and ontological considerations." European Journal of Economic and Social Systems **14**(2): 157-171.
8. Levinthal, D. and J. March (1993). "The myopia of learning." Strategic management journal **14**(S2): 95-112.
9. Nonaka, I. (1994). "A dynamic theory of organizational knowledge creation." Organization Science **5**(1): 14-37.
10. Raelin, J. (1997). "A model of work-based learning." Organization Science **8**(6): 563-578.
11. Senge, P. (1990). "The fifth discipline: Mastering the five practices of the learning organization." New York.
12. Senge, P. (1994). The fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization, Broadway Business.
13. Tyre, M. and E. Von Hippel (1997). "The situated nature of adaptive learning in organizations." Organization Science **8**(1): 71-83.

Appendix A

KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.834
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	485.150
	df	153
	Sig.	.000

Table 1: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Appendix B

Component Matrixᵃ

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
speaking power	.794	-.139	-.092	.141
mistakes handling	-.213	.386	.747	.269
problems sharing	.778	-.316	-.212	.039
information sharing	.722	-.264	.033	.242
cards hiding	.511	.708	-.234	.064
differences handling	.794	-.289	.245	-.032
opnions handling	.700	.230	-.110	.262
differences in opinion	.707	-.239	.247	-.174
alternatives	.688	-.307	-.100	-.298
new ideas	.795	-.216	.251	.222
old ideas	.374	.686	-.012	-.061
better ways	.602	-.425	.049	-.263
untried approaches	.410	.593	-.325	.015
stress level	.479	.494	.128	-.509
time to review	.840	-.052	-.136	.064
schedule pressure	.635	.202	-.013	.395
time to improve	.698	.120	.093	-.062
time to reflect	.568	.418	.305	-.249

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 4 components extracted.

Table 2: component matrix 1

Appendix C

Component Matrixᵃ,ᵇ

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
speaking power	.420	.704	-.078	-.434
mistakes handling	-.513	.101	.695	.031
problems sharing	.598	.227	-.572	-.038
information sharing	.606	.154	-.144	.328
cards hiding	-.466	.826	.028	.006
differences handling	.685	-.187	.277	.509
opinions handling	.436	.357	.659	-.152
differences of opinions	.155	-.758	.209	-.004
alternatives	.588	.225	.291	.492
new ideas	.570	.614	.278	.204
old ideas	-.696	.264	.203	-.092
better ways	.532	.336	.181	.205
untried approaches	-.595	.552	.023	-.157
stress level	-.654	.083	.335	.305
time to review	.549	.387	.278	-.537
schedule pressure	-.053	.477	-.784	.273
time to improve	-.243	.191	.018	.789
time to reflect	-.698	.334	-.118	.326

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 4 components extracted.

b. organization = private sector

Table 4 components matrix 3

Appendix D

Component Matrix^{a,b}

	Component			
	1	2	3	4
speaking power	.783	-.252	-.046	-.031
mistakes handling	-.147	.183	.839	.057
problems sharing	.701	-.313	-.211	-.208
information sharing	.709	-.272	.154	-.310
cards hiding	.663	.615	-.114	-.082
differences handling	.742	-.290	.249	.082
opinions handling	.671	.526	.014	-.215
differences of opinions	.815	-.265	.141	-.128
alternatives	.654	-.324	-.353	-.113
new ideas	.689	-.261	.424	.015
old ideas	.583	.485	-.105	.201
better ways	.455	-.580	-.154	.342
untried approaches	.438	.524	-.229	.033
stress level	.652	.234	-.136	.001
time to review	.850	.022	-.090	.002
schedule pressure	.697	.225	.385	-.223
time to improve	.697	.073	-.063	.188
time to reflect	.652	.110	.118	.671

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

a. 4 components extracted.

b. organization = public sector

Table 3: components matrix2

Variables	Public organization		Private organization	
	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. dev
Speaking power	4.03	1.896	5.78	1.380
Mistakes handling	3.11	1.448	2.35	1.799
Problem sharing	3.66	1.760	6.04	0.928
Information sharing	3.51	1.895	5.30	1.146
Cards hiding	3.62	1.705	3.75	2.017
Differences handling	3.78	1.807	5.74	1.356
Opinions handling	3.11	1.752	4.18	1.332
Differences of opinions	3.38	1.754	4.40	1.875
Alternatives	3.35	1.672	5.23	1.950
New ideas	3.39	1.839	5.96	0.878
Old ideas	3.45	1.606	2.86	1.699
Better ways	3.13	1.679	5.48	1.729
Untried approaches	3.03	1.732	3.18	1.500
Stress level	3.08	1.836	3.36	2.060
Time to review	3.39	1.911	5.61	1.234
Schedule pressure	3.11	1.629	4.55	1.792
Time to improve	3.00	1.740	4.13	1.766
Time to reflect	2.87	1.663	3.35	1.774
Total	60	-	81.25	-

Table 5: Total Score