The Role of Organizational Culture in Fostering Workforce Spontaneous Learning

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ABSTRACT: Workplace learning has always been a key driver of success for both employees and companies. Employees become more productive and engaged at work when they are given anopportunity for workplace learning. The learning opportunities also breed loyalty and enhance retention of workforce.People are more likely to stay with an organization that invests in continuous learning.Learning opportunities foster loyalty and enhance employee retention. This literature review paper hypothesizes that the culture of an organization affects its learning and knowledge processes. The paper examines the role of a culture's values, norms, attitudes, and assumptions to assess how organizational culture impacts the process of workforcespontaneous learning. It provides a taxonomy of informal on-the-job learning and determines what is individual and what is organizational knowledge. It also explains how social capital facilitates knowledge sharing through workers social interaction.

Keywords: organizational culture, organizational learning, social interactions, social capital, informal learning.

I.   Introduction

Organizational learning and knowledge building is a process of acquiring and transferring knowledge within an organization.Organizational learning is used in assessingorganization growth where an organization improves over time as it gains experience and utilizesthis experience to create knowledgethat could better the organization (Schulz, 2017). Organizations ultimately learn through their individual members where the individual serves as agent of organizational learning. Therefore, organizational learning is dependent on individuals improving their mental models (Friedman, 2002). There are two major approachesto organizational learning. The first isconscious learning that always takes a form of formal training planned and organized by the organization. Formal training and education are the primary means of human development in organizations.Traditionally, individual formal learning in organizations is seen as an outcome of training and development programs.The second is unconscious learningthat always takes a form of spontaneouslearning that is not planned and organized by the organization. The focus of this paper is on the second type—informal learning. According to Marsick and Watkins (1990), most of the learning in organizations occurs through interactions in day-to-day work through informal and incidental learning. Frequently learning is more powerfully shaped by the type of organizational culture in the organization than by more formal attempts to produce learning outcomes.Kim (2009) asserted that all organizations learn whether they consciously choose to or not- it is a fundamental requirement for their success. For organizations, thelearning process is a crucial element of gaining competitive advantage in modern economies. Previous research on organizational learning concluded that to be intentional about organizational learning, especially informal learning, organizations need to focus on enabling the environment to fostermore effective workforce interactions in day-to-day work.Leaders must foster a culture of continuous improvement that values organizational learning (Kim, 2009). The aim of this paper is to assess how different types of organizational culture impact the process of workforce learning. This goal will be achieved through reviewing and synthesizing the existing research of culture impact on organizational learning. Therefore, the paper is of a reviewing character, and the main research method is a synthesis of the conclusions

from the previous literature.In the following sections, the paper discusses the relationship between organizational culture and informal organizational learning. I start with a literature review of three bodies of relevant literature: organizational culture, informal learning, and social capital.

II. Organizational culture

The culture of an organization affects the way in which individuals behave and interact in day-to-day work and must be considered as a contingency factor in any program for developing organizations (Xenikou, 2022). Organizational culture is defined as a system of assumptions, values, norms, and attitudes (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Organizational culture is developed by its top-level leaders and adopted by workforce through mutual experience which helps them determine the meaning of the world around them and how to behave in it(Lam et al., 2021). As such, organizational culture impacts every decision or action in the workplace, and it also impacts how individuals interact and learn (Xenikou, 2022). Thus, organizational culture also conditions the behaviors in an organization which lead to acquiring and utilizing knowledge and skills (Friedman, 2002).

The definition of the organizational culture refers to abstractions such as values and norms that pervade the organization and can have a significant influence on workforce behavior. Other scholars define organizational culture as a system of informal rules that spells out how people are to behave most of the time (Deal & Kennedy,2008). The culture of an organization refers to the unique configuration of norms, values, beliefs, and ways of behaving that characterize the way groups and individuals get things done (Eldridge & Crombie, 2013).According to Schein (1996), culture is defined as a pattern of basic assumptions that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and interact. Furthermore, Furnham and Gunter (1993) contend that organizational culture is the way we do things at work and defined culture as the commonly held beliefs, attitudes and values that exist in an organization. These definitions of organizational culture indicate that if cultural values and norms do not support activities and actions that lead the organization members towards learning and acquiring and using knowledge in the organization, then learning will simply not happen, or it will be ineffective (Lam et al., 2021).

The definitions also refer to problems with the concept, as indicated by Furnham and Gunter, which include how to categorize culture or what terminology to use; when and why organizational culture should be changed and how this takes place; and what is the healthiest, most optimal or desirable culture. This in return shedslight on the different types of organizational culture. There are four culture types: adhocracy culture, clanculture, hierarchyculture, and marketculture (Gonget al., 2022). Although organizational culture is considered one of the most important internal dimensions of an organization's effectiveness criteria, the choice of any of these different types of organizational culture is motivated by the organization's strategic position and its attemptto cope with its external environment. Nevertheless, the choice of a culture is also crucial to create internal unity by bringing members of an organization together, so they work more cohesively to achieve common goals (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). Empirical research continues examining the relationship between the four subcultures—adhocracy culture, clanculture, hierarchy culture, and marketculture. Incorporating the theory and research related to relevant variables described in organizational learning expands our understanding of these four subcultures. For example, recent work on organizational learning has contributed to our understanding of the role of these subcultures andtheir impact on workforce learning (Lam et al., 2021; Xenikou, 2022). A framework developed by Cameron and Quinn (1999) to examine how an organizational culture influences how people learn and behave within an organization is offered in the Competing Values Framework andcited by Gonget al. (2022).
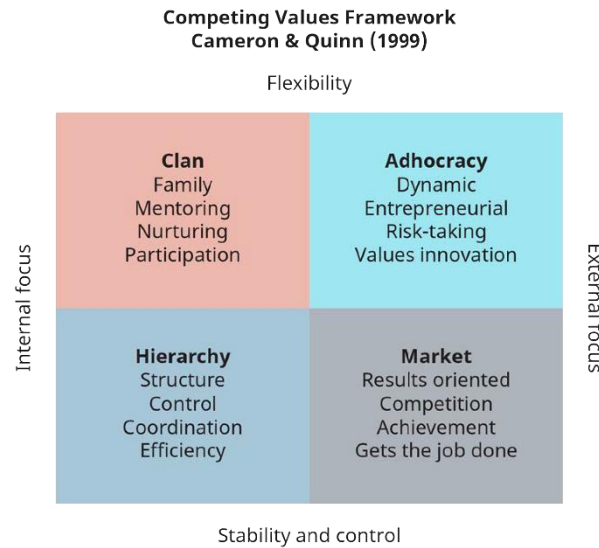
Figure 1: The Competing Values Framework Source: Adapted from K. Cameron and R. Quinn, 1999. Diagnosing and Changing Organizational Culture, Addison-Wesley, p. 22.

The Competing Values Framework is the most tested model for diagnosing an organization's cultural effectiveness and examining its role in influencing workforce behavior. The framework, depicted in Exhibit 1, shows how an organization can emphasize particular values to promote particular behavior among its workforce. The horizontal axis in the framework, external focus versus internal focus, indicates whether the organization's culture is externally or internally oriented. The vertical axis, flexibility versus stability and control, determines whether a culture functions better in a stable, controlled environment or a flexible, fast-paced environment.

On one hand, organizations like Netflix, Facebook, and Google lean towards adopting adhocracy culture to emphasize creativity, innovating, visioning the future, managing change, risk-taking, rule-breaking, experimentation, entrepreneurship, and uncertainty. Similarly, companies adopting clan culture are focusing on relationships, team building, commitment, empowering human development, engagement, mentoring, and coaching (Hastings & Meyer, 2020). These two types of organization culture encourage social interactions between workforce and fit organizations that focus on human development, team building, and mentoring. Such social interactions generate social capital, and this social capital facilitates sharing knowledge and skills among the workforce as I elaborate more in the following sections.

On the other hand, organizations like the Federal Express, U.S. Postal Service, the military, and other similar types of government agencies thatemphasize efficiency, careful decision-making, elimination of errors, process and cost control, organizational improvement, technical expertise, precision, problem solving, logical, cautious, and conservative operationare leaning towards adopting hierarchy culture. Similarly, companies adopting market culture that are focusing on marketing and sales and are more result-oriented are more likely to adopt a market culture. Suchculture helps companies that attempt to deliver value, competing, delivering shareholder value, goal achievement, and getting things done (Gonget al., 2022). Contrary to companies that encourage teamwork and self-learning, such bureaucratic and structured organizational environment of the hierarchy and market cultures discourage social interactions among its employees and leave no room for input and creativity from individuals.

III. Informal learning

Informal learning is a very broadly defined phenomenon, with no one widely accepted characterization (Wolfe, 2021). Much of the literature on the informal learning of organizational learning focuses on the on-the-job training and searches for ways to improve learning by increasing the quality, quantity, and distribution of information for better decision making (Hussein, 2022). This article examines an underappreciated influence on learning: the culture of the organization. While most organizations have educational and training programs, the focus of the article is on the type of organizational learning that happens spontaneously among individuals without the intentional interference of the organization. There are four levels of organizational learning and knowledge creation within organizations i.e., individual,team,organizational, and inter-organizational levels(Marsick& Watkins, 2001).As contended by Friedman(2002), organizational learning is a process that can be fully understood only at the group level. In the following section, therefore, I examine the informal learning of the individual within workgroup gatherings.

The concept of informal learning can be intertwined with several other understandings of learning. For example, theorists have used different terms to refer to informal learning such as incidental learning (Marsick& Watkins, 2001), spontaneous learning (Williams, 2007), experiential learning (Dewey, 1938), transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000), tacit learning (Polanyi, 1967), informal learning (Wolfe, 2021). While these and other scholars address the concept of informal learning across different contexts and disciplines, they tend to agree that it can be defined as "any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies" (Livingstone, 1999, p. 51). Informal learning is a distinct process than formal and non-formal education. In informal learning, Wolfe (2021) asserts, there is no activity that is deliberately set aside specifically to educate members of an organization, rather it is based on their ability to interact within social gatherings to acquire basic skills, values, and attitudes on their own. Informal learning is often used interchangeably with non-formal education. Non-formal education, however, is not a synonym for informal learning. Non-formal education refers to educational activities that also take place outside school but usually in an organized intended manner (Wolfe, 2021). Unlike formal learning where individual learning in organizations is seen as an outcome of training and development program, informal learning occurs through interaction in day-to-day work through informal and incidental learning. Informal learning represents most of the organizational learning and may include internal types that distinguish it from formal and non-formal education such as self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization (Schugurensky, 2008).

Employees learn about organization informally through their social interactions as they converse and interact in their unstructured workplace gatherings. Research explained that employees learn about the organization and their task not only from their interactions within their unstructured workplace gatherings, but also through their action and reflection (Mohamed, 2017). This learning process does not imitate the linear structure of traditional teaching of content, nor does it rely on its three main components (i.e., curriculum, teacher, student; Rubin, 1969); rather, it is a social process through which individuals construct their own knowledge and learn through interaction and experience.

Research suggests that experience and conversation are central to individual and group learning where they create meaning and construct knowledge from the real activities of their everyday experience (Hussein& Mukherjee,2018). From this perspective, employees' unstructured gatherings might be understood as places of relationships and interactions, and as such, are avenues of authentic and spontaneous learning. Traditional theories of learning posit that knowledge emerges from abstract and out-of-context experiences; however, employees' unstructured gatherings, as specific, contextualized spaces, are places where employees can tap into their prior knowledge and experiences to acquire additional job-related knowledge and skills. Literature reveals that, the informal learning that occurs through spontaneous discussions as employees interact when they meet in their unstructured gatherings differs from the formal top-down trainings provided by organizations (Hussein & Mukherjee, 2018; Schugurensky, 2008). It is also known as incidental learning and defined byMarsick and

Watkins (1990) as a 'byproduct of some other activity such as task accomplishment, interpersonal interaction, sensing the organizational culture or trial and error experimentation' (p. 7). An important distinction is that the informal learning generated through spontaneous discussions among employees fostersteamspirit in the workplace,breeds loyalty and increases job satisfaction and enhance retention (Friedman, 2002; Mahler, 1997). However, this spontaneous learning process is contingent to the willingness of employees and the existence of a mechanism to share their knowledge, skills, and experience with their peers within their unstructured gatherings; and this is known as the social capital that is embodied in the friendship ties among workers.

IV. Social capital

Research in the fields of organizational behavior and the social psychology of organizingreveals that the existence of social ties between co-workers affect many aspects of firm and worker behaviorsuch as peer learning, fostering loyalty and enhancing employee retention (Bandiera et.al.,2008; Helliwell&Huang,2010; Lucas& Kline,2008).

In the past few decades, the concept of social capital has been applied by an increasingly large number of scholars in various fields to explain outcomes such as educational attainment, health status, economic prosperity, and organizational learning. Social capital represents one approach to understanding the effects of unstructured workplace gatherings through the patterns of interdependence and social interactions. The conceptualization of social capital by the American sociologist Coleman (1988) is widely used in the literature of education, political science, and sociology since early 1980s. Coleman's conceptualization of social capital in the creation of human capital becomes one of the most salient concepts used in education and social sciences, and it generally refers to the norms that social structures e.g., unstructured workplace gatheringsdevelop to facilitate cooperation and to provide resources for members that help achieve certain goals. Coleman argues that there is a relationship between the level of social capital and educational outcomes where social capital can be used as a determining factor of educational outcomes. Using family as an example of social structure, Coleman adds that the strong the network relations the less the disparity in educational outcomes where young people with strong family ties and more stable family do better than their counterparts with less family ties where parents may be divorced. Coleman's assertion describes the networks as resources where personal networks serve as a means of production of better conditions of life for their members. Similarly, Putnam (2000) defines social capital as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit" (p. 67). This definition illustrates the three main components of social capital: trust, social norms, and social networks. Coleman notes that all social relations facilitate some form of social capital, especially in certain kinds of social structures (e.g., employees' unstructured workplace gatherings).

Social capital can be seen as an intangible asset to an organization. If an organization is organized to utilize the social capital it can capitalize on the shared knowledge to increase organizational learning andenhance its innovative performance (Birasnav et.al., 2019). In addition, research reveals a direct connection between social capital and organization's efficiency in areas like lower turnover, lower exchange cost, and increased productivity and innovation (Kaasa, 2019).

Much of the literature on the social capital concept of organizational culture and organizational learning assumes that the composition of the individual that constitutes the workforce of an organization is homogeneous culture. This may be a problematic assumption given the global nature of today's organizations. Through case study research to examine the influence of group dynamics on organizational learning, Lucas and Kline (2008) found that differing occupational cultures is a major emerging theme influencing organizational learning. An important culture model to understand and examine the influence of culture differences is Hofstede six-dimension model. Themultidimensional model developed by Hofstede (2002)offers insights into the complex intercultural in workplace. Utilizing the dimensions of power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term versus short-term orientation, Hofstede compared attitudes and values held by

116,000 employees of IBM in 50 countries and three regions.The study found a relationship between culture and individual behavior in the workplace.

V.   Discussion and conclusion

The literature unequivocally reveals a relationship between organizational culture and organizational learning. Organizational culture is the central element of the context in which organizational learning occurs. It reinforces learning by providing incentives for learning behaviors and by measuring results of learning. Research in the field of organizational culture and organizational learning has produced some concrete explanations of the impact of culture on learning and useful ways of how culture guides learning and whether it fosters or blocks it. While some types of organization culture may affect the capacity of the workforce to learn and may influence what it learns and how it learns, other types of organizational culture have most often been seen as a source of resistance or source of defensive routines to learning and change(Mahler, 1997). A culture with less stability and control that focuses on the wellbeing of individuals and promotes human development, team building, family

atmosphere,and mentoringtends to encouragesocial interactions among the workforces. Social interactions, as stipulated by Coleman (1988),generate social capital for members of the workforce within the organization as depicted in Figure 2. The generated social capital works as a mechanism for the workforce to share their knowledge, skills, and experience within the friendlyunstructured gatherings. This unique mechanism—social capital,facilitates sharing knowledge and skills among those individuals where they learn spontaneouslythrough everyday interactions as conceptualized above by Marsick and Watkins (1990). Although most of the learning is incidental and individuals may not be conscious about it in the beginning, the positive impact of the knowledge and skills, either on their everyday lives or on their increased productivity,helps them to realize that they have learned from their at-work-interactions. Once they build this realization of what they have learned, they begin to appreciate the type of organizational culture that provided them with the friendly atmosphere to interact and learn. Then these individuals start to intentionally seek new knowledge by increasing their social interactions where the workplace learning becomes an intentional process.Furthermore, the literature answered an important question posed by Mahler (1997) and bears on theories of organizational learning aboutwho learns. Since the organization is an abstraction and does not have a mind that can be changed, organization learning typically is viewed as dependent onindividual learning.

Figure 2: conceptualization of the link between organizational culture and informal learning.

It became clear from the above review that one can understand organizational learning only by examining the ways in which individual and interpersonal inquiry are linked to organizational culture. The informal spontaneous learning take place at workplace when employees interact informally and includes three types of informal learning i.e., self-directed learning, incidental learning, and tacit learning. The conceptualization by Schugurensky, 2008 describes the differences between these different types of informallearning. The friendly
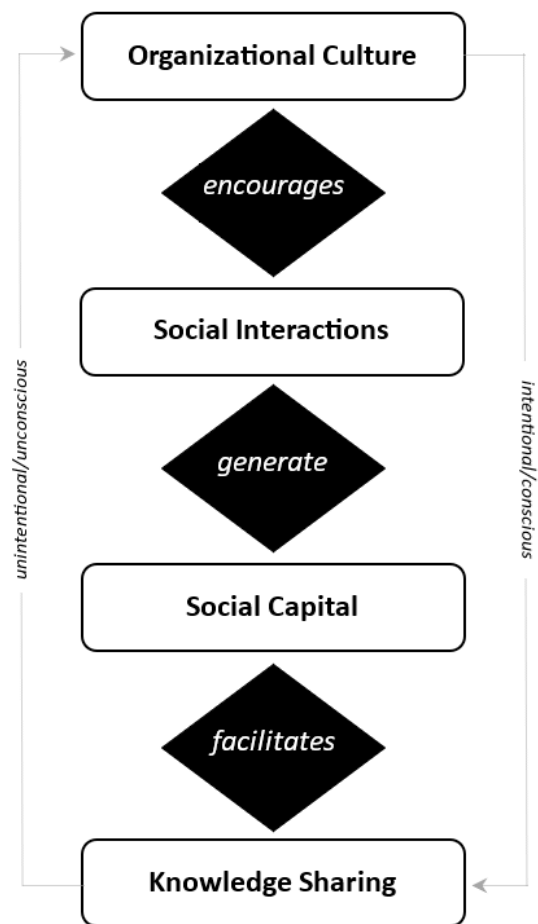
atmosphere that is encouraged by an organizational culture may help an employee to seek knowledge or a skill that he or she wants to learn by asking another work colleague through the informal daily social interactions. Because that employee is conscious about what they want to learn and they take steps to gain that lacked knowledge or skill, this form of the learning is known as self-directed learning. But in many cases the person does not have the intention to seek the knowledge and skill that they are lacking but they learn them spontaneously through their interactions within the workplace informal gathering with other colleagues. This type of informal learning is known as incidental learning. Although the employee did not have the intention to seek such knowledge or skill in this incident, they are aware of what they have learned through the informal interaction with their work colleagues. The last type of informal learning happens through social interactions when the learner does not have the intention to learn, nor they know that they have learned something through the workplace social interaction with their colleagues. This type of learning is known as tacit learning where an employee learns some values, attitudes, or they even start to develop a personal stand on a public concern. This tacit learning is known as socialization.

The review emphasized the relationships between individual and organizational learning, yetindividual learning theory alone is not sufficient to understand learning within an organization. I propose that individuals at any level of the organization are capable of pushing back those barriers to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to increase their productivity and benefit their organization. Top level leaders must carefully adopt an organizational culture that enables social interaction among its members and increase their cognitive capital;culture that supports these unconventional learning mechanisms. Leaders should treat learning of an organization as a social system and design an organization that facilitates collective learning.For the cognitive capital and experience learned by employees become organizational learning that survives over time,leaders must institutionalize such learning outcomes in a variety of formal and informal ways such as rules, routines, standards, or norms. A suitable organizational culture is both the personality and glue that binds an organization. In addition, the previous review shows tendency by seminal theorists in the field of organizational learning to agree that learning begins, and often ends, with the individual where employees act as agents of organizational learning when their inquiry is on behalf of the organization.In sum, leadership style can increase organizational learning by improving social capital of employees through adopting different leadership styles and enable the work environment that fosters self-confidence andcreativity in their group. It is also important that managers develop and apply non-financial performance indicators to measures and evaluate firm's performance to stimulate the generation of social capital and encourage collective learning and creativity of the workers such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover.

Finally, the limitation of this paper is its reviewing and theoretical characterwithout empirical testing of the conclusions. The further direction of the research in this field will be empirical testing of the stated claims.For future studies, it is recommended that this research be investigated through different dimensions of organizational learning in different organizational structures and cultures.

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