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Learning Organization and its Cultural Manifestations: Evidence from a Global White Goods Manufacturer

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Abstract

Being a leader is critical and difficult to sustain in today's highly competitive business world. In present study, a leader company in white goods sector is examined to explore its core cultural competency. The critical characteristic of the company is found as its being a learning organization. Various cultural manifestations of the company are analyzed according to Senge's five disciplines. Exploratory case study technique is used in order to understand a complex phenomenon of being a learning organization.

Keywords: Learning organization, organizational culture, artifacts, espoused values, case study

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1. Introduction

Businesses competing in dynamic and turbulent environments should pursue the processes of learning, behavior change, and performance improvement (Slater and Narver, 1995). According to findings in various researches, organizational learning provides competitive advantage for companies through fostering innovation (Jiménez-Jimenez, 2008). In the present study, culture of a leader global white goods manufacturer (hereafter ABC Company) is examined through exploratory case study method via in-depth interviews, observations and documentaries provided by the organization. Studying learning organizations can bring new insights for strategists, since learning organizations are able to meet and shape the demands of their markets.

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2. Literature Review

2.1. Organizational Culture

Culture involves three basic human activities: what people think, what people do, and what people makes. Its common properties are: culture is shared, learned, transmitted cross generationally, symbolic, adaptive, and integrated (Tharp, 2009). Culture's levels of analysis include nation, society, industry, organization and organizational subculture. It is not easy to separate organizational culture from larger levels of culture associated within the organization's environment, however organizational theorists believe that is necessary to do (Hatch,1997).

Semiotic (symbolic or language based) notion of culture gained great popularity in 1980's (Tharp, 2009). This can be considered as a movement of organization theorists who wanted to strike out new directions, since they were frustrated by modernist theories and methods (Hatch, 1997). Schein's study on organizational culture can be considered as one of the most influential studies.

Schein (1992, p.18) defines organizational culture as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, 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 feel in relation to those problems." Schein argues that culture is both a "here and now" dynamic phenomenon which is constantly reenacted and created by our interactions with others (1992, p.3). According to him, organizational culture can be analyzed at several different levels. The term 'level' means the degree to which the cultural phenomenon is visible to the observer. The author categorized the organizational culture into three levels: observable artifacts, espoused beliefs and values, and basic underlying assumptions.

Artifacts include all the phenomena can be seen, heard, and felt when a new group with an unfamiliar culture is encountered (Schein, 1992, p.23). Examples for the artifacts are the architecture and physical surroundings; its products; its technologies; its style (clothing, art, publications, etc.); its published values and mission statement; its language, gossip, jargon, and humor; its myths and stories; and its practices, rituals, ceremonies, and taboos (Schein, 1992, p.23; Tharp, 2009). According to Schein, climate of the organization is not the same thing with the culture of the organization but it is the product of some underlying assumptions (Schein 1992, p.24). Artifacts are easy to be observed but difficult to be deciphered unless the observer lives in the group long enough. Otherwise the observer should talk to the insiders to understand day to day operating principles that guide the behavior of the group (Schein, 1992, p.25). Dewey (1934) argues that culture is embodied in material artifacts (including identity claims as well as other identity artifacts such as logo, name, etc.) that can be used as symbols to express who or what the organization is (as cited in Hatch, 2002). Orlikowski(2007) states that materiality has been ignored in organizational theory : "It should be quickly evident that a considerable amount of materiality is entailed in every aspect of organizing, from the visible forms — such as bodies, clothes, rooms, desks, chairs, tables, buildings, vehicles, phones, computers, books, documents, pens, and utensils — to the less visible flows — such as data and voice networks, water and sewage infrastructures, electricity, and air systems." In the next level of organizational culture, there are espoused values and beliefs which refer ideals, goals, aspirations, rationalizations. Espoused values and beliefs may and may not be in parallel with behavior and other artifacts (Schein, 1992, p. 24). Espoused values are those championed by a company's leadership and management whereas enacted values refer employees' actual behavior. Values that gain long-term acceptance often become taken-for-granted that individuals are usually unaware of them. Thus, in the third level, there are basic assumptions which refer underlying, often unconscious, determinants of an organization's attitudes, thought processes, and actions (Tharp, 2009). This process is related with social validation which means that 'certain beliefs and values are confirmed only by the shared social experience of a group' (Schein, 1992, p.26). According to Argyris and Schon (1996), if the beliefs and values are not congruent with effective performance, it is observed that in many organizations espoused values reflect the desired behavior but are not reflected in observed behavior. For example in

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