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A Strategic Approach For Learning Organizations: Mental Models

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Abstract

Mental models which is figured by Senge in his book “The Fifth Discipline” published in 1990 was mentioned as a proper way of thinking for the learning organizations in every step of the management. In this study the generation of mental model configuration process is deeply defined and dimensions of the model is explained. The relation between Argyris’ left column, facing with reality and learning organization has been stated in this study and the variables of these theories and their connections within organizations increased the quality of forming mental models as a result.

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1. Introduction

Developing an organization’s working capacity through mental models requires both learning new skills and implementation of organizational innovations which allows these skills to be used in daily practice. Mental (Intellectual) models affect our thinking style, understanding system and actions through assumptions and generalizations which are stereotyped, strongly imprinted and deeply rooted in our minds. Mental models are used for the purpose of providing discipline and allowing people to get rid of these patterns and assumptions. In order to become learning organizations, organizations firstly need to change their thinking models; in other words, learn how to think (Yazıcı, 2011: 162). In the process of learning, mental models carry a great importance. According to Chris Argyris, who is an administrative scientist, our mental models actively influence the decisions we take in our lives. The purpose of organizations is to exist to follow a common path to reach goals that a person cannot achieve by himself and when these mental models are used in a manner to support leaning within the organizational structure, they will have positive

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effects (Taştan, 2006). Work discipline in mental models begins by turning the mirror inwards. It requires to learn about the horizons and visions that we have inside and to analyze them correctly. At this point, the skill of making learning speeches which balance questioning and justification is important. In these speeches, people effectively present their own thoughts and open their thoughts to other's influences (Çam, 2002: 73).

2. The Definition and Importance Of The Mental Model

Organizations do not have brains; they are system constructors and experts (Shafritz and Steve, 1991: 47). Individuals can change their personalities, beliefs and mental models; new individuals either join to the organizations or leave the organizations. However, organizational memory, permanent behaviors, mental maps, norms and values are fixed (Fiol and Lyles, 1985: 55). Senge defines mental models as assumptions, generalizations, pictures and images which are deeply-rooted in our minds and have the ability to influence how we understand the world and our actions. Arygris defines mental model using a different term as theories in use. In fact, the term mental models is a concept which is contemporary, does not have boundaries and involves continuous changeability; because as problems or the situations which come across, increase or get complicated, that the need to create mental models will increase as well in direct proportion to these. Prior to forming mental models, individuals need to have a purpose. An optimal mental model needs to be constructed while dealing with the purpose in question.

Knowing the variables in our environment and that these variables partly or fully change or are updated, understanding the problem, being knowledgeable about the variables which make up the problem and as a consequence creating a channel between the problem and the mental model we create and choosing a suitable mental model for the problem through strengthening the channel with correlations should be the basis. Thus, it becomes inevitable to solve the problems in a shorter time with lower costs. The main problem here is unknowing how and in which situations or conditions the mental model will be created, because however knowing the numerous variables speeds up our process of forming mental models, it may also take us to erroneous analyses. This may create the wrong solution variable in terms of the solution variable. Forming mental models and more importantly, implementing them is valid, not only for administrators, but also for ordinary people who face problems in daily life as well. The use of mental models on the basis of contingency approach both during the learning process of learning organizations in particular and their learning, is used as a tool in solving problems.

3. The Process Of Forming Mental Models

To be able to form a mental model, firstly there should be a reason for creating a mental model. These reasons in general emerge as problems in learning organizations. In order to be able to form mental models, the problem needs to be understood correctly. Therefore, the variables which make up the problem and the roles, these variables play within the problem and in addition the fact that the problem variables in questions will change should not be forgotten. The formation of mental models takes place progressively. Different definitions have been made for the concepts of system thought and formation of mental models system. In general, it is a whole which consists of units which regularly influence every element of the system that are connected to each other, different parts and is formed in accordance with a general plan and directed to a goal with the purpose of reaching a specific process. Systems emerge as a result of the operation of a systematic series made up of parts as a whole, towards the general goal of the sum. According to Ackoff, system is a whole made up of variables which have a relationship with each other, act towards a specific goal and are related to each other. In addition, system is a grouped and inseparable totality which consists of two or more variables which have interactions between them and have a specific limit in terms of their functions and characteristics and is a product of objects or beings that have a relationship with the external environment. It is also the mechanism that puts forward the theses which are created during the adjustment process of the parts that makes up this whole with linking one to another. The hypotheses of mental models are used to reveal truths, whereas system focuses on the result by taking the rational aspect among the outputs of the mental model. Thus, forming mental models becomes the reason for integrating the skills related to system thought. Therefore, as Senge states, "A majority of our research at MIT focuses on the issue of helping administrators in the integration of the skills of forming mental models and system thought" (Senge, 2011: 225).

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