DEVELOPING A LEARNING FRAMEWORK: THE SYSTEMIC “LEARNING BY SHARING” DIAMOND

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Abstract: Purpose – The main aim of the paper is to assess and design an innovative model based on systemic model of learning by sharing through a dynamic framework of four strengths of an organization (cooperation, competency, competition, knowledge) in order to enhance a collaborative knowledge sharing culture. Design/methodology/approach – Based on literature review it is developed a theoretical framework for understanding the key concept related to learning and integration of knowledge sharing, competence development and learning process in such a way that collaborative knowledge sharing becomes a part of the work culture and overcome the barriers to knowledge sharing. Findings – The sustainability of the processes undertaken in the novel conceptual framework of this research should ensure that organizational and individual knowledge are the subject to continue innovation. By integration of the four strengths of an organization, individuals can improve their intelligence and competences by acquiring useful knowledge and understanding, which is the learning process. Originality/value – Although knowledge management literature is very widespread, the concept of learning by sharing is quite less approached. This paper contributes through designing of a model based on learning strategy to enhance organizational knowledge sharing. Keywords – learning by sharing, collaborative knowledge, collaborative learning, strengths of an organization.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the emergence of knowledge-based economy, the initial focus was mainly on knowledge management methodologies and roadmaps. Nowadays, the main emphasis shifted to human factors, or human-centered knowledge management. In the same time, the notion emerged from learning organization to competencies creation that lead to competitive advantage and agility. Therefore, the main concentration is put on people viewed as unique knowledge holders, and the exchanges between them. In this sense, knowledge networks are considered as support for collaboration, cooperation in order to enhance knowledge creations and innovations.

For a long time the need for cooperation was showed. In the last period, within the modern organizations a strong interest was raised towards human cooperation in order to achieve synergistic effects so that collective efforts can lead to an superior potentially outcome of individual effort. Cooperation between early human resources from the first organizations can be considered relatively simple, according to current standards. For example, the information and knowledge flow within and between organizations was fairly stable, predictable and usually unidirectional. However, the limitation of the approach on knowledge sharing began to be seen as a limitation for the potential for cooperation in development of new types of organizations that promoted new types of cooperation (Sandberg si Targama, 2007).

In this way, it can be said that the possibility to share knowledge is perceived as one of the greatest advantages of cooperation and collaboration of human resource. Furthermore, this process is seen as a key factor for improving organizational resources, capacity for innovation, achieving and maintaining competitive advantage (Porter, 2000). Nevertheless, there is a dark side of the things that should not be neglected. Thus, Koulikov (2011) states that organizations tend to perceive knowledge sharing as a waste of time and cost consuming. At the same time, it is noted that the results of knowledge sharing cannot lead to rapid tangible effects, therefore is quite difficult to recognize the importance of knowledge sharing (Koulikov, 2011).

The increasing intensity and the dynamism of competition have forced organizations to focus their strategies on long term on resources and capabilities. In this sense, intellectual capital is one of the critical resources of the organizations, and the ability to build and to exploit intellectual capital has become the most significant strategic capability of the organization. Thus, it is clear that human capital serves as a collective term for the organization’s core competences, skills and knowledge on which organization is based in order to remain competitive in the market. Therefore, any attempt to exploit intellectual capital for sustaining competitive advantage must be based on proper understanding of organization approach on acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge.

The main goal of this article is to summarize some recent views about organizational learning as an enabler of knowledge sharing, prioritizing the relationship between human aspects and organization strengths, and putting the focus on learning by sharing by developing a systemic “learning by sharing” model.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE SHARING

2.1 Short approaches on organizational learning and knowledge sharing

The process of learning is conducted individually and once employees accumulate new competencies, the next critical question is how the organization can proceed in order to incorporate these competencies in procedures and assets. In other words, in order to become effective for organization, individual learning must be transformed into organizational learning. Organizational learning occurs when the organization addresses a particular problem or group of problems faced.

Subsequently, the problem is solved taking into account those lessons learned and the assimilated competencies which represent the collective learning of past, present and future employees. Organizational learning is described as how
organizations build, supplement and organize knowledge and routines around the business, and how they are adopted and develop organizational efficiency by improving the abilities of using the workforce. Regarded from another perspective, learning organization allow people to adopt and grow at work influencing them in terms of creativity, innovative thinking, causing them to become more confident and competent. As well, organizations can be seen as learning systems based on number of processes involved in creating new knowledge or in modification of the current knowledge. In this sense, the first process of this system is encoding-organization learn by encoding influences from experiences into organizational routines. The next process is the exploration which comprises experimentation, risk taking, discovery and innovation. The final process is based on exploitation, which captures refinement, choice, production efficiency, selection, implement action and execution (Davenport and Prusak, 1998).

Nowadays, it is already known that knowledge is one of the most important intangible assets held by individuals. In contrast with finite resources as land, capital and labor, knowledge is an infinite resource that can generate increasing returns through its systematic use and application. Yet, it worth to mention that knowledge can be valuable when is used and shared.

By definition, knowledge represent a fluid-mix of framed experiences, values, contextual information and expert insights that provide a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. The origin and the application take place in the mind of knower. In term of organization points of view, knowledge is embedded not just in documents or repositories, but also in organizational routines, practices, and norms (Gray, 1989).

The main activity of knowledge management is knowledge sharing, presented in three types: knowledge retrieval, knowledge sharing, and knowledge creating. From a conceptual point of view, there are various approaches to knowledge sharing. In essences, knowledge sharing is a process that takes place between individuals, through which knowledge is transformed into a form so that can be understood, acquired and used by other individuals. As mentioned before, the base of the knowledge sharing there are two parts: knowledge seekers – those who are in search of knowledge and the knowledge sources – those who have to ability to offer knowledge or who can reveal others sources of knowledge to the seekers. Therefore, knowledge sharing occurs when proper connections are erected between these parties. However, knowledge sharing is a complex process and face cognitive and motivational limitations.

2.2 Link between organizational learning and knowledge sharing

According to the literature, knowledge must be first created (learning organization) in order to be then, shared (knowledge sharing). Thus, knowledge sharing arises once the learning takes place. Normally, the extraction and creation of new knowledge involves learning, and knowledge sharing involves the acquisition and application of new knowledge. Taking into consideration this, every aspect of knowing have is correspondent activity in learning process. As a final result, the literature revealed that both knowledge sharing and organizational learning represent key factors on organizational performance and innovation.

Theories on organizational learning offer rich perspectives and tend to constantly change the organizational processes involved in organizational knowledge. Knowledge sharing provide a basis for organizational learning, therefore, to enhance learning there is a necessity of a model of knowledge sharing meant to be interactive and collaborative.

Collaboration is a process through which individuals who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible (Tiwana, 2000). The only way to allow knowledge sharing is to put individuals together through collaboration. Therefore, the development of individual and group competencies through learning may be the key to a process of an efficient knowledge sharing.

Organizational learning and knowledge management may seem to be complementary, on one hand knowledge are created through the management of organizational learning processes, and by other hand the results are managed through knowledge management processes (Spender, 2008).  

2.3 The necessity of a new integration model of learning and knowledge

As individuals build organizations, they are the ones who determine the standards, processes and relationships that enable organizational learning. Yet, organizational learning represent more than the sum of individual learning. For instance, due the human movement there is a high need for an effective knowledge management that allows the organization to keep its corporate knowledge, namely knowledge that resides in experiences, cooperation and collaboration among its employees.

Within an organization where understanding and ability to undertake effective actions are the main challenges, knowledge sharing and organizational learning are critical factors in long-term survival. In fact, these two concepts are so important that they must become embedded in the organizational culture and philosophy.

Moreover, the processes and actions supported by these two concepts must be continuous, widespread and invisible. Thus, they must be reflected in customs norms and expectation of the workforce, managers and leader within the organization. The extent in which such ideal can be achieved, knowledge sharing and organizational learning will be interdependent and inseparable, but no identical. In order to achieve this ideal, there should exist a knowledge network between individuals, managers and leaders supported by infrastructure and processes, as well as organizational structure that supports collaboration between teams and culture of learning and sharing. Such combination could significantly improve the ability or organizations to change their learning styles. The main purpose would be to provide an internal adjustment and ability to cope with external environmental influence.

Taking into account the dynamism of the learning and knowledge as a process and the complexity of the environment, there is a need of a framework meant to promote and to sustain a constant development of individual and organizational development. Moreover, due the financial and timing cost, involved in knowledge sharing and learning process, it can be said that a framework need to be created so that the results are the effects of synergistic process.

Therefore, the systemic “knowledge by sharing” diamond can be likened to a collaborative knowledge sharing and may play a critical role in bringing together knowledge, experiences and competences that can contribute to organizational development and can be more efficient that knowledge sharing in his general sense.
3. THE SYSTEMIC “LEARNING BY SHARING” DIAMOND

Based on theory analysis of communities of practice of Duguid (2005) and economic theory sustained by Porter (1993), with those 5 forces involved in competitiveness of an organization, a dynamic model centred on learning by sharing is developed. Through this model it is shown the complexity of external forces combined with the dynamism of the internal forces. Thus, unlike other models and framework founded in the literature, the proposed model reveals the level of complexity reached by the activities of organization from knowledge-based economy. In knowledge-based economy, organizations must be based on both competition and cooperation.

In current economy, dynamics and complexity creates a great challenge hard to be faced by organization, therefore in order to become more adaptable and to respond more quickly to market changes, there is a request for a faster and higher learning. Such adaptability and changes do not involve only learning and knowledge creation, but also the creation of new connections between these components.

On other hand, as mentioned before, due the continuous movement of individuals within the organization, learning and knowledge sharing it is very dynamic. The purpose of learning and knowledge sharing leads to competencies development, namely acquiring or maintaining competitive advantage. Therefore, the proposed model aims to achieve a synergy between two processes: learning and knowledge sharing. Yet, the most important characteristics of this model is the fact that it promotes learning by knowledge sharing taking in consideration the four strengths of an organization, namely cooperation strengths, knowledge strengths, competency strengths, and competition strengths. The addition of these strengths was made by combining the Porter’s five forces with the competencies development within organizations. Therefore, the combination of forces involved purpose to be a powerful tool for a better understanding where power of learning by sharing lies in a business situation. This is useful, due the strength of the current competitive position of the organizations and the strength of a position where the organization considering to move in. Moreover, those strengths involved in the systemic “learning by sharing” diamond aims to propel a strategic long term view by putting accent on the learning by sharing processes. Combined with the Porter’s forces, from description and argumentation of communities of practice made by Duguid (2005), “knowing that” and “knowing how” ontologies was added to this framework. Moreover, this approach was made due the fact that there are two types of emerged knowing, namely one that reflect in a more practical point of view – knowing how, and another one that reflect in a more theoretical point of view – knowing that. As well, these two types of knowing also reflect different understandings of learning.

The systemic “learning by sharing” diamond, as it is developed in this article incorporates cooperation and collaboration between those four strengths involved at a high level on learning by sharing. In following paragraphs those four strengths involved in proposed model are presented.

On the vertical side of the systemic “learning by sharing” diamond is presented cooperation strengths among with competition strengths. Cooperation strengths reefer to co-learning, more specifically to the process of mutual validation of knowledge acquired. Unlike individual learning, people involved in co-learning harness the resources and the competencies of each other. Specifically, co-learning is based on the fact that knowledge can be created within an organization in which its members actively interact by sharing experiences and take asymmetric roles. By other side, the competition strengths, is based on co-opetition, more specifically a dynamic mix of cooperation and competition. In essence, co-opetition describes both competition and cooperation. This concept describes the fact that in current business environment, in order to be competitive, organizations must collaborate with other organizations from same field. Thus, competitors can come together to enjoy a common edge through a temporary or long term partnership agreement on knowledge sharing. But, the dark side of this concept is the fact that is very important to follow the aspects, such as what, to whom, when and under what conditions the knowledge is shared.
On the horizontal side, is presented two forces that have a direct connection with individuals within organizations, namely knowledge strengths and competency strengths through two complementary aspects of knowing, “knowing that” and “knowing how”. However, these aspects are not substitutable, “knowing how” does not lead to “knowing that”.

Knowledge strength is produced, mediated and contested through social interaction which takes place within organization. By definition, knowledge generation represent a dynamic process of interaction between endowed partners. Organization could be considered as a knowledge system in a strong sense, therefore the organizational knowledge cannot be surveyed as a whole; it is not self-contained; it is inherently continually reconfiguring and based on interactive generation of knowledge. As was mentioned before, knowledge strength comprises the theoretical aspect of the act of knowing, by the aspect of knowing that. Thus, this process can be viewed as the first step in competencies development and co-innovation, due the fact that includes more explicit knowledge, and less tacit knowledge. Therefore, without a high power of knowledge sharing, organizations are less susceptible to face one of the greatest challenges, namely continuous development of competency strength.

By other side, competency strength refers to the practical sense of act of knowing, namely knowing how. In contrast with knowledge strength, competency strength is constructed mostly on tacit knowledge. Due the fact that knowing how makes knowing that actionable, competency strength can be viewed as the second step in competencies development and, therefore, the result of co-management. In this regard, co-management can be considered as a knowledge partnership, as well as a problem solving process (rather than a static arrangement), and comprises both knowledge generation and joint learning. In order to achieve this co-management there is a need for an effective knowledge management application. It is already mention that the main basis of knowledge management is the process of knowledge sharing, yet in the proposed systemic “learning by sharing” diamond, the knowledge sharing must take place by taking in consideration the cooperation and competition strength. In classical point of view, knowledge sharing is concentrated mostly on process that take place within organization.

These two forces are very important because the generation of knowledge contributes into building mutual competencies, intelligent actions and thus, an availability to achieve or maintain competitive advantage.

4. CONCLUSION

In current knowledge-based economy, the ability to think creatively, to solve problems and to take decisions as a team becomes the paramount in achieving and maintaining the competitive advantage. Therefore, developing and enhancing competencies achieved by a synergy between learning process and sharing process may represent the main goal of the organization.

This article contributes to organizational learning and knowledge sharing theory. Knowledge creation and sharing is already seen as supporters of competitive advantage. Yet, a small part of the theory or empirical research focused on analysing the relationship between learning and sharing, and more than that small emphasis is placed on learning by sharing. Most of the founded studies from the literature are focused primarily on education-academic point of view, and less on practical-economical point of view. However, these studies can be useful in order to be adapted according to the organizational context. Therefore, competencies development of the students can be associated with the competencies development of the employees.

From a practical point of view, the systematic “learning by sharing” aims to encourage managers to offer support and to foster learning by sharing by taking in consideration of those four strengths presented. Moreover, the competencies development of the employees must be linked according to the organizational business core strategy in order to be more adaptable and capable on long term in order to face the external environment characterized by constant changes. Within an organization, focusing on processes of learning by sharing will help workers to develop as a team and learn constantly from each other.

Given the increasing uncertainty and complexity from current and future situation from the market, organizational learning among with strong processes based on knowledge sharing, provides the best capability for an organization in order to face the changes and to adapt according to the context in a way that is performance can increase over time. By combining the power of organizational learning and knowledge sharing, organization can create procedures, cultures, and structures that allow scanning, evaluating, anticipating and taking concrete actions on unexpected threats or opportunities.

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6. REFERENCES