Full Length Research Paper

Implications and challenges of Nigerian universities as learning organizations

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The purpose of this paper was to highlight the implications and challenges of Universities as learning organizations in Nigeria. 'Learning organization' is a concept that is becoming an increasingly widespread philosophy in our contemporary society. It has a strong humanistic orientation and it is a place where people continually expand their capacity to produce results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and where people are continually learning how to learn together. In order to implement learning organization techniques, the Universities tackled some disciplines which are essential to a learning organization. Such techniques were team learning, shared vision and system thinking. As a result of this, the paper was confined on how Nigerian Universities are committed to creating continuous learning opportunities, encouraging collaboration and team learning, establishing systems to capture and share learning, and connecting the university organization to its environment. It also proposed the need for radical rethinking of the core functions of the Universities in Nigeria.

Key words: Challenges, learning organizations, Nigerian Universities.

INTRODUCTION

University education as a learning organization started in Europe in the eleventh century, and one of the first universities in Africa was the one in Timbuktu. Fafunwa (1991) has indicated that the 1945 reports of the commission on Higher Education in the colonies have shown that since the world wars, Nigerians have always demonstrated an unsuppressible desire for higher education because it was seen as an important weapon against the colonial masters in the quest for emancipation and national development. As early as 1944 therefore, there were already about 10 Nigerians who were studying in Sierra Leone at the Fourah Bay College of the university of Durham, about the same time educational historians have reported that there were as many as 150 Nigerians studying for various first degrees in the United Kingdom.

In a bid to develop learning for natural development in the learning organization, the Nigerian Government resorted to opening universities across the country and increasing access into these institutions.

There are ninety- three (93) University Organizations in Nigeria, comprising twenty-five (25) Federal Universities, thirty (30) State Universities, thirty-one (31) Private Universities, and seven (7) other Degree-Awarding Tertiary Institutions. The universities are complex social organizations occupying a strategic position in the education ladder of Nigeria. They are made up of people with differ-rent backgrounds in terms of need, skills, talents, status, competencies, knowledge, behavioural styles, interest and perceptions. (Nakpodia, 2003). In fact, the high level manpower needed for the national growth and develop-ment are produced by the universities which are seen as learning organizations. According to the National Policy on Education (NPE, 2004), universities as learning orga-nizations, are centres of excellence, teaching, research and store houses of knowledge. The aims of university education are:

- The acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value orientation for the survival of the individual and the society.
- The development of the intellectual capacities of individual to understand and appreciate their environment.
- The acquisition of both physical and intellectual skill, which will enable individual to develop into useful members of the community.
- The acquisition for an objective view of the local and external environs.

Putting forward some well-articulated aims does not bring success to any organization unless such aims are married with good management and effective teaching and learning atmosphere.

Learning organizations such as the universities, at one time or the other passes through challenges; hence, it is necessary to systematically analyze them. While schools are familiar objects to us all, and colleges to many, our ability to explain and generalize issues about how they work in any degree of depth is still severely limited by the shortcomings of organizational analysis itself and by the paucity of worthwhile empirical studies within education. The conceptual, theoretical, empirical and even ideological obstacles to organizational studies in education are, therefore, real though not greater than those existing in other areas.

The Nigeria University sector being an important contributor to the nation's industrial, political, technological, and economic growth, calls for a conducive learning atmosphere which permits management and staff to function in order to achieve set goals and objectives.

The concept of learning organizations

Universities are learning organizations at the higher level. One of the cardinal aims of the university education is to provide skilled, higher level manpower, which is vital to economic and national development. The necessary re-sources to bring about more skilled university graduates will not be achieved without a fundamental recommend-dation of the proper role of university education as learning organization. Regrettably, the emphasis of more university places in Nigeria constitutes an initiative, which is superficial and fails to the examine the actual pro-blems, which are seriously inhibiting the task of univer-sities. Clark and Remesay (1990) pointed out that for universities as learning organization to successful, both in their studies and in the world of work, another pre-requisite is a need to bridge the all – too- frequent gulfs between educational research and education or profess-sional practice. Schon (1987) suggested a more success-ful university teaching, which provides a closer link between undergraduate experiences and real life practice. These goals seem to be part of the government prospect in Nigeria but lack proper implementation. There is therefore the need for proper implementation programmes if the aim of producing high level manpower will be achieved in the learning organizations.

Organization is a system skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and also modifying people's behaviours to reflect new knowledge and insights. Learning organization is the one that turns new ideas into improved performance. Learning Organization is defined as an organization which facilitates the learning of all its members, and continuously transforms itself.

Learning organizations are organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. Learning Company is a vision of what might be possible. It can only brought about simply by training individual; it can only happen as a result of learning at the whole organization level. A learning company is an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself (Peddler et al. 1991).

Learning organizations are characterized by total employee involvement in a process of collaboratively conducted, collectively accountable change directed towards shared values or principles (Watkins and Marsick, 1992). According to Kerka (1995) most concep-tualizations of the learning organization seem to work on the assumption that "learning is valuable, continuous, and most effective when shared and that every experience is an opportunity to learn" (Kerka, 1995). The following characteristics appear in some form in the more popular conceptions. Learning organization:

- Provide continuous learning opportunities.
- Use learning to reach their goals.
- Link individual performance with organizational performance.
- Foster inquiry and dialogue, making it safe for people to share openly and take risks.
- Embrace creative tension as a source of energy and renewal.
- Are continuously aware of and interact with their environment (Kerka, 1995).

The emergence of the idea of the "learning organization" is wrapped up with notions such as "the learning society". He provided a theoretical framework linking the experience of living in a situation of an increasing change with the need for learning.

Characteristics of a learning organization

The following are the characteristics of learning organizations:

A learning culture: This refers to an organizational climate that nurtures learning. There is a strong similarity with those characteristics associated with innovation. A learning culture implies: Future and external orientation.

These organizations develop understanding of their environment and senior teams take time out to think about the future for widespread use of external sources and advisors.

Free exchange and flow of information: Systems which are in place to ensure that expertise is available

where it is needed through individual network and crossing organizational boundaries to develop their knowledge and expertise.

Commitment to learning and personal development: This implies support from top management and people at all levels are encouraged to learn.

Valuing people: This implies that ideas, creatively and "imaginative capabilities" are stimulated, by making use of and developing diversities which are recognized as strength.

Climate of openness and trust: Whereby individuals are encouraged to develop ideas, to speak out and to challenge actions.

Learning from experience: This implies that learning from mistakes is often more powerful than learning from success. Failure is tolerated, provided lessons are learnt.

Learning organizations and universities

Organizational learning refers to processes or activities by which an organization learns while a learning organization is the organizational from defined by the capacity to learn and outcomes of learning. As initially conceived, the learning organization has a strongly humanist orienttation, being a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured and where people are continually learning how to learn together.

The learning organization makes "intentional use of learning processes at individual, group and system level to transform the organization in way that are increasingly satisfying to its stakeholder' (Dixon, 1994). A learning organization is underpinned by some fundamental disciplines, each of which contributes to his improvement of life within an organization and the capacity of an organization to learn.

Team learning: Dialogue leading to creative thought and recognition of patterns and undermine learning. Virtually all important decisions occur in groups. Teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning units. Unless a team can learn, the organization cannot learn. Team learning focuses on the leaning ability of the group. Adult learns best from each other, by reflecting on how they are addressing problems, questioning assumptions, and receiving feedback from their team and from their results. With team learning, the learning ability of the group becomes greater than the learning ability of any individual in the group.

Building a shared vision: Leadership that develops commitment through shared "pictures of the future". To create a shared vision, large numbers of people within the organization must draft it, empowering them to create a single image of the future. All members of the organization must understand, share and contribute to the vision for it to become reality. With a shared vision, people will do things because they want to, not because they have to.

Awareness of mental models: Assumptions and generalizations that affect ways of seeing and interacting with "the world'. Each individual has an internal image of the world, with deeply ingrained assumptions. Individuals will act according to the true mental model that they subconsciously hold, not according to the theories which they claim to believe. If team members can constructively challenge each others' ideas and assumptions, they can begin to perceive their mental models, and to change these to create a shared mental model for the team. This is important as the individual's mental model will control what they think can or cannot be done.

Alternative pictures of leaning organizations

Watkins and Marsick (1993) provide a practice- practice-orientated, people- focused sketch of the learning organization. In their view, the learning organization is defined by and dependent upon structures and processes that:

- Create continuous learning opportunities.
- Promote inquiry and dialogue.
- Encourage collaboration and team learning.
- Establish systems to capture and share learning empower people toward a collective vision and connect the organization to its environment.

Development of a learning organization

Various approaches are taken in developing learning organization such as

- Leaders who model calculated risk taking and experimentation.
- Decentralized decision and employee employment.
- Skill inventories for sharing learning and using it.
- Rewards and structures for employee initiatives.
- Consideration for Longman-term consequences and impact on the work of others.
- Frequent use of cross-functional on a daily basis.
- Opportunities to learn experience on a daily basis.

Dixon (1994, 1998), who eschews use of the team "learning organization' and refers instead to "an organization that is learning, takes a similarly people-focused approach to the learning organization, emphasizing the need for dialogue, continuous and collaborative learning and involvement in organizational governance processes.

To the discussion on how to promote learning in organizations she adds the concept of an organizational learning cycle, which may be used as a process tool for development or evaluation purposes.

Argyris and Schon's (1978) original conception of organizational learning, however, focused primarily on the quality of learning and learning outcomes in an organization. They argued not for a single cyclical learning process, but for the existence of three levels of learning: single loop learning, characterized by correction of errors but no fundamental change to the underlying system; double loop learning, characterized by questioning of the assumptions that gave rise to the error and subsequent change to the system, and deuteron double loop learning, which relates to metacognition or learning how to learn (Argyris and Schon, 1978).

Universities as learning organizations

Within the universities context as learning organizations, there is, a prima facie, fertile group for the development of the individual. University education is the culmination of a long process of human development which started formally from the elementary level, running through primary and secondary school organizations in Nigeria. Indeed, it is a very long drawn process, spanning chronologically and sequentially through several years of studies in all kinds of knowledge and skills.

The successful completion of one level leads ultimately to the next level. Under normal circumstances, a learner in any of the organization required to have completed five to six years of primary education, followed by a five to six years of secondary education before one commences the search for a university place for further studies in the academic or learning organizations. Between the secondary school level and the university are a member or requirements to be met before being considered for admission into any Nigerian University (Nakpodia, 2006).

A university is both explicitly and implicitly built on notions relating to the importance of learning sat an individual level and the idea of learning as the basis for and driver of development is well recognized within universities. Unlike concepts such as knowledge management which pose an implicit threat to intellectual property rights and academic autonomy, the idea of organizational learning to produce a learning organization is likely to be one which sits easily with staff within a university. Given that for many academics the attractiveness of their chosen profession lies in the opportunity to explore new territory and to learn from these explorations, it seems likely that involvement in organizational learning would act as a significant motivator and satisfier within the work-place. Within the wider organization context, the learning organization concept and organization learning processes are also like to be attractive because, in their indeterminateness, they offer the possibility of context-sensitive permutations of both processes and desired outcomes.

Constraints to learning by and within organizations

Fragmentation, reactiveness and competition: Reflecting on the impediments to learning by organization and within organizations, there are factors which are argued also from the basis of learning disabilities in a society as a whole, namely:

- Fragmentation, resulting from linear thinking, specialization, independent, warring fiefdoms.
- Reactiveness, reflecting a fixation on problem-solving, rather than creation and innovation.
- Competition, creating an environment in which looking good is more important than being good, measurable, short-term gains counts more than long-term achievement, and problems are solved by individuals in isolation.

In addition to the impact of societal characteristics such as fragmentation, reactiveness and competition upon learning capacity, within universities, as within other organizations, issues of power, politics and time also fundamentally determine the amount and nature of learning that can take place. In an organization under stress, challenge to find new directions and respond to frequently changing environmental pressures as well as increased scrutiny, will likely be spent on 'fire fighting' and 'window dressing'.

The literature on the learning organization and organizational learning consistently cannot be complete without its leadership, which identifies appropriate structures and culture as keys to unlocking the possibility of ongoing learning (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Within the scope of structure, recurring themes are the need for teamwork (Watkins and Marsick, 1993), work across traditional functional and other boundaries, a systems approach, and organizational structures that encourage openness and bottom-up as well as top-down flows of information (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Within the scope of culture, recurring themes are the need for involved leadership and openness, a risk taking and action learning approach, awareness of existing mind-sets, empowerment and continuing education (Watkins and Marsick, 1993). Across the university, leadership, human resource development and knowledge management strategies act as systematic keys able to open the door to organizational learning.

Leadership in learning organization

Absolutely critical to the development of a university as a learning organization is the Vice-Chancellor's commitment to providing the time, support and role modeling

necessary for organizational learning as well as his/her commitment to 'servant leadership' - democratic behaviour, competence and concern for the well being of those being led. (Nakpodia, 2003).

Good leadership, while essential at the top, needs also to be seeded throughout the organization. Thus, leadership training and team building activities, focusing on enhancing interpersonal communication, conflict resolution and problem- solving skills must involve people from the highest to the lowest levels of staffing if an institution-wide learning potential is to be created. Teams need to be established with reference what is known about the enabling factors associated with effective, self- managing teams - namely, clear goals, decision-making authority, accountability and responsibility, effective leadership, training and development, resources, and organizational support. Many university staff is used to wording in research teams or on committees but if teamwork is to be used successfully to develop to learning organization, training for effective teamwork must be supported by the conscious development of teamwork strategies in each new teamwork context. Rewards and performance management strategies must also be tied to effective teamwork, especially in the initial phases of any attempt to change work patters, and it is probably helpful to ensure that enthusiast for teamwork undertake the initial teamwork projects.

Conclusion

A review of an existing field of knowledge ought always to show a positive and generous face. There is certainly too much of value in the available variety of organizational approaches for them to be dismissed as useless or trivial. It is therefore concluded that there is a need to develop a true management system of an organization evolving learning capacity. As a result this can be achieved through defining indicators of learning (individual and collective) and by connecting them to other indicators. In our view, organizational learning is just a means in order to achieve strategic objectives. But creating a learning organization is also a goal, since the ability permanently and collectively to learn is necessary precondition for thriving in the new context.

Therefore, the capacity of an organization to learn, that is, to function like a learning organization, needs to be made more concrete and institutionalized, so that the management of such learning can be made more effective. Such an approach offers universities a way of focusing on differences stemming from the relatively unique tasks of organizations or broad types of organization.

The critical challenge of the university is attracting and more importantly retaining senior competent staff highly committed to the future of university leadership development. If we take the importance of these realizations

seriously in our framing of organization questions of the university, then we shall go along way towards a more sensitive, practical and demystified awareness of how much socially organized knowledge is transmitted.

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