

GROUPS AND TEAMS AS BUILDING BLOCKS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to define and analyze the groups and teams within organization as most adequate framework that enable the collective learning. In addition the organizational learning process is presented, whose role is to identify possible changes at the organization level to become learning organization. The need to understand how the organizations learn and how they accelerate their learning process is greater today than ever. It is said that in the future, the only competitive advantage of a company will remain the ability to learn faster than its competitors. In a world where the only constant is change, organizations must adapt rapidly, renew continuously, and constantly reinvent themselves. Complex problems faced are effects of several causes. People need to learn to solve these problems on their own, to be aware that many answers depend on their ability to learn, to develop unique and particular capacities. Both groups, as traditional structures, as well as teams, as modern structures for organizing the work, are most appropriate frameworks which favors cooperation and exchange of information and knowledge between employees with major consequences on organizational overall performance. We are moving towards an era of human freedom, responsibility and intelligence, moving from a pyramidal management to a dynamic, shared management, of teamwork, of horizontal organizations.

Key words: group work, team work, organizational learning, learning organization, team learning

JEL classification: M19

INTRODUCTION

Tough competition imposed by globalization of markets requires new approaches from companies to cope with the new challenges. First of all, they focus on what differentiates them fundamentally, namely, *human resource* and how is valorized to generate superior performance.

The way in which employees' work is organized is very important as they are provided with the best conditions to give maximum results. Such a structuring of labor refers to groups and teams as privileged environments where employees meet their social and interrelation needs as they performs their tasks, and at the same time, through collective learning processes, they can achieve ambitious goals, turning into competitive advantages.

Thus, the need to understand how the organizations learn and how they accelerate their learning process is greater today than ever. It is said that in the future, the only competitive advantage of a company will remain the ability to learn faster than its competitors. In a world where the only constant is *change*, organizations must adapt rapidly, renew continuously, and constantly reinvent themselves.

GROUPS AND TEAMS IN ORGANIZATIONS

A *group* represents a number of people who (1) interact with one another, (2) are psychologically aware of the other group members and (3) perceive themselves as being a group. (Schein, 1965)

Studying groups is important for managers since the common factor of all organizations is represented by people, and the most common technique of performing the job is to divide it into groups. Since groups are characterized by frequent communication between their members, each influences and is influenced by all other group members.

In one of the most comprehensive papers on organizational behavior, Huczynski and Buchanan define organizational groups as a combination of at least two, maximum 30 people interacting through a communication network and on the basis of a structure of roles and rules in order to achieve a higher-level purpose and, as a result of these interactions, develop a common identity. (Huczynski, Buchanan, 2007)

From a psychological perspective, there are two processes that define a group: social identification and social representation. (Hayes, 1997) Social identification refers to the recognition that a group is separated from others. It is about creating a faith of „us versus them”. Identification is both a cognitive process (classification "world" in categories) and emotional process (considering own group as better than others). Social representation refers to beliefs, ideas and values that people have when considering the world. Over time, group membership changes the ways its members perceive the world. The group develops a common vision of the world through their interactions with each member. (Levi, 2001)

In a more detailed analysis, and since the initial stage of formation of any team is the group, we mention that from the psychosocial perspective, any association of persons, in order to be or become a small group, must meet five conditions (Levi, 2001):

- 1) to have a certain number of members;
- 2) between them to be established a minimal interaction, relations between them being directly, therefore the face to face type;
- 3) the interaction of members is centered on achieving common goals or activities;
- 4) to exist a minimal articulation between statuses and roles of members, therefore a psychosocial structure;
- 5) to exist a certain composition derived from the characteristics of the members.

In essence, a *team* consists of a number of two or more individuals who have complementary skills, which they use to achieve common tasks that have been assigned or they have assumed voluntarily and for which completion they are jointly responsible. (Preda, 2006)

TEAM VERSUS GROUP IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

The concept of group work is frequently used by psychologists, having its origin in the research on the structure, processes and groups dynamics of undertaken by social psychology, while the team work is common in business environments. Thus, if for sociologists and psychologists both terms are interchangeable and can be used in place of one another, in terms of modern management, team work is seen as integral unit of organization functioning and the interest for team work has increased over time: many organizations resort to organize work in teams, because they are seen as solutions to many organizational issues, including those relating to productivity.

Most definitions of team consider *team as a special kind of group*. For some theorists, the distinction between groups and teams is diffuse; teams are just groups (Parks, Sanna, 1999) and even more, „an efficient team can be described as any group of people who interrelates significantly in order to meet common objectives”. (Thomas, Jaques, Adams, Kihneman-Wooten, 2008)

Other theorists focus on how team's behavior differs from other types of groups. Thus, teams were defined as structured groups of people working on common well defined goals that require coordinated interactions to perform certain tasks. (Forsyth, 2010) This definition emphasizes one of the key features of team namely that their members work together in a joint project for the achievement of which all of them are responsible.

„*The transition from a group to a team* – said Huczynski and Buchanan – is the result of a *learning process*”, a process of structuring and closeness between their members over the time, of formation of some characteristics such as cooperation, coordination, cohesion, team spirit, team-

player attribute, beliefs and values to which they constantly relate to. (Huczynski, D. Buchanan, 2001)

Regardless the approach of team working issues as a particular type of group, the vast majority of authors agree that all teams are groups but not all work groups are teams. Team work is a particular type of small group, along with committees, task forces, departments and councils. The team is a group, the reciprocity not being true. (McShane, Von Glinow, 2000) A group consists of people who work together, but they can work without each other. A team is a group of people who can not work, at least not effectively without the other members of their team (Spector, 2003), and the team members are held together by their interdependence and their need to collaborate in order to achieve common goals.

There is an extensive literature on the characteristics that differentiates an effective team against a certain group, regarding teamwork, team management tools, types of teams and ways to implement a system that make a team functioning. However, in pragmatic terms, *every organization needs to „build” their own teams, each manager has to „learn” over time along with those whom they lead.* (Burciu, 2008)

TEAM COMPOSITION AND THE IMPORTANCE OF TEAM LEARNING

A team requires three different types of skills from members in order for them to perform their tasks efficiently. It requires:

- people with technical expertise;
- people with problem-solving skills, capable to identify problems, generate alternatives, evaluate these alternative and make competent choices;
- people with decision making skills, with good listening skills, which use feedback, possess skills in conflict resolution and other interpersonal skills.

In team should be represented all three types of skills and the right „blending” is crucial. However, it is not need to be available all three types of complementary skills since early stage of team development because team members can take responsibility to learn the skills that are missing in team and this will help to reach its full potential. (Robbins, 2001)

Group composition is a characteristic defined on the homogeneity-heterogeneity continuum. (Curşeu, 2007) A group is homogeneous if its members are similar in respect of one or more issues - gender, personality traits, education, skills and abilities, ethnicity, preoccupations etc. - and it is considered heterogeneous if its members are different in terms of one or more aspects of those mentioned. (Horwitz, 2005)

Therefore, considering the task that team has to accomplished, there are two observations to be noted:

- team homogeneity can lead to productivity if the task is simple or sequential: cooperation is needed to achieve it, and people with similar attributes will be more efficient since conflicts and differences of opinion are rare;
- team heterogeneity leads to productivity if the the task involves the processing of complex information and requires a collective endeavor: are needed people with dissimilar attributes, especially when tasks require a high degree of creativity and must not be performed under time pressure .

Factors such as the nature of the task, the level of education, the longer or shorter existence of the team, can lead to significant differences in terms of task completion regardless how homogeneous or heterogeneous team is. (Vanderheyden, Lommelen, Cools, 2010) For example, heterogeneous teams can finish faster the task they have to perform, although we may think that divergent opinions of members delay task completion. The explanation is that homogeneous teams can „lock” in a certain problem and the diversity of views is just what they lack and makes them not achieve on time the team task. (Horwitz, 2005)

However, teams composed of flexible individuals are an asset because team members can complete each other's tasks if they are trained in several areas of expertise. Finally, when team

members are selected it should be taken into consideration both individual preferences and abilities, and their personalities and skills.

Therefore, high performance teams are likely to be composed of people who enjoy working as part of a group (Robbins, 2001), constantly learning from each other. *Team members, unlike those of groups, learn together to acquire new skills necessary for team task and explore new ways of achieving common task.* At the same time, they learn to cultivate interpersonal relationships and to adjust their behavior depending on the nature common task, but also on the characteristics and temperaments of each team member.

ALIGNING INDIVIDUAL, TEAM AND ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING

Organizational learning theory describes how learning takes place in organizations. Although it refers to collective learning, it takes into account also the statement of Argyris (1992) who consider that organizations take action to ensure the learning, but the members are the ones who facilitate learning. The organization also has its role of creating the right environment and conditions to facilitate learning. Thus, research aimed especially understanding and explanation of what is actually happening in organizations.

Learning and the ability to choose are linking the past and present and allow the passage from *what we do not know* to *what we know*. Learning for the future is offering the possibility for sustainable development, gives us a clear vision and values and behavior we need in achieving objectives.

According to Honey (1998) *learning* has some specific features described in „A declaration of learning”:

- Learning is complex and varied, covering a wide range of elements such as knowledge, skills, ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes and skills.
- Learning can be individual or collective, generated within groups and organizations.
- Learning can be triggered by any experience - success, failure, or any other situation between these two extremes.
- Learning is both a process and a consequence.
- Learning can be incremental or transformational.
- Learning can be conscious or unconscious.
- Learning can be planned or unplanned.
- Learning consequences can be desirable or undesirable.
- There can be no learning without change.
- Learning can be both cause and consequence of change.
- Learning is a moral dimension.

There is no unique way of learning, because the learning opportunities and (preferred) learning styles must be harmonized. Although learning is an internal and individual process, its explanation and sharing with other members of the organization gives additional value. On the other hand, in addition, if organizational identity is more than the sum of individual identities (Corley, 2000), by extending this hypothesis we can say that organizational learning is more than the sum of individual learning. In 1991, Weick argues in support of this claim, stating that the learning theories related to *individual* learning do not adequately describe the organizational learning process. The rationale is simple: organizations are entities other than individuals, so that they interact with the environment differently than individuals do. To place on the same level organizational learning with individual learning means taking a micro-centric vision which does not respects the macro nature of the *organizational learning* concept. Scientists Weick and Westley (1999) agree with this view. *Learning* becomes a *macro concept* not only it refers to groups or organizations seen as the sum of individuals. It is a macro concept as it relates to actions and social interactions.

In any form, the effectiveness of the individual learning and group learning can be improved. Individually or collectively, in groups, teams and within organizations, one can learn:

- √ To analyze how to learn;
- √ To adopt methods and mechanisms to improve the way to learn;

- √ To experiment and develop new ways of learning;
- √ To learn from the others;
- √ To transpose learning in new situations and new circumstances.

The most important lesson is *to learn* how to learn. In addition, when learning is autonomous, it becomes more effective and satisfactory. According to Armstrong (2003) autonomous learning (also called self-driven learning) requires the individual to take responsibility for meeting his/her own learning needs in order to secure the fulfillment of professional aspirations. Autonomous learning is based on processes that allow the individual to identify his/her own needs to learn, reflecting on their own experience and discussing what to know in order to progress. Autonomous learning means self-development.

Organizational learning can be characterized as a complex process in three stages, which consists in *acquisition, dissemination* and *sharing* of new knowledge (Dale, 1994). Knowledge can be acquired through direct experience, the experience of others or through organizational memory. (Armstrong, 2003)

Can organizations learn or just individuals are able to learn? The answer to this question depends on the definition of learning. If we consider the following definition, "learning means relatively permanent change in behavior or behavioral provisions that can be attributed to activities or learning processes" (Boekaerts and Simons, 1993), then we can say that the organization can learn only in a metaphorical sense. Organisation learns only when changes the organizational behavior or organizational provisions and undertake learning activities. However, this definition is not comprehensive enough. Thus, in addition, we mention the contribution of other authors who have proposed a definition outlining individual learning, team learning and organizational learning. Thus, learning was defined as: *activities initiated by individuals (consciously and unconsciously), groups and organizations that result in relatively permanent change in knowledge, skills and attitudes of individuals, work processes, within the organizational culture and structure of groups and organizations*. At all learning levels we distinguish four key components of activities / learning arrangements: learning objectives, learning strategies, learning measurement and feedback.

Regarding the individual learning within the organization the literature is relatively rich and the practice provides quite satisfactory results. *Organizational learning* has, however, a deeper meaning than it, reflected by the research carried out by Steiner (1998) on barriers to organizational learning. Steiner believes that there are *three levels of learning*, such as: *the individual, the team* and the *organizational learning* (Chivu, 2009). Each level is more complex than the previous one, and double or triple loop learning occurs at the team and organizational level, but, however, when transfer the knowledge from one level to another, some barriers occurs. Empirical research conducted by Elkjaer (2001), confirms that, in the absence of some factors that catalyze the transfer of knowledge beyond these barriers, learning at the individual level will not result in organizational learning.

We can not talk about organizational learning without individual learning and individual learning needs providing the learning environment and a particular organizational context for organizational learning to be effective. We can say that learning organizations focus on organizational learning, others focus on team learning and some on organizational learning. But in the end it seems that only coordinating and combining the three types of learning leads an organization to become fully a *learning organization*. A learning organization is the organization that is able to change quickly. This means that people who are part of the organization are able to change and learn quickly, both collectively and individually. Bomers (1989) defined learning organizations as „organizations aimed at expanding continuously their learning capability at all levels, in order to optimize their efficiency.”

Team learning is very important in the organization. Team learning is more than the sum of all individual learning activities. Team learning means collective learning, leading to changes in rules and norms of a group or, in other words, in the group memory. Thus, there are two levels of collectivity: collective learning processes and team collective learning outcomes. Both can be both implicit and explicit results in four types of team learning: implicit processes and implicit

outcomes, implicit processes with explicit results, explicit processes with implicit outcomes and explicit processes with explicit results.

The collective results obtained through team learning can be: collective implicit knowledge, collective explicit knowledge, collective ideas (theories arising from practice), collective competence, collective critical reflection, action plans and collective actions, collective publications. Team learning objectives include: changes in the group functioning or new collective skills. Also, one can get feedback from team learning.

Team learning means also good communication between team members. For the most part, small teams, multi-functional, autonomous, works in a way that people can learn from each other, taking and learning each other's work flexibility.

The following table illustrates the elements of individual learning and organizational learning (table no 1):

Table no 1. Differences between individual learning and organisational learning

Individual learning paradigm	Organisational learning paradigm
<i>Basic knowledge</i>	Other than basic knowledge
<i>Knowledge guided by trainers</i>	Continuous knowledge (re) created by the group
<i>Needs organization and control</i>	Needs tension: order/disorder
<i>Learning is imposed, barriers are removed</i>	Learning is stated in organisational culture
<i>Organizational learning is the sum of individual learning</i>	Organisational learning is inscribed in language, artefacts and practices
<i>Learning is taking place by removing obstacles</i>	Learning occurs through interaction
<i>Manager's and trainer's authority</i>	Authority should be offered and accepted
<i>Managers are sending employees to trainings</i>	Managers are building the proper environment in which knowledge is (re) constructed
<i>Managerii are responsible for implementing learning</i>	All involved are responsible for implementing learning
<i>Setting goals, improving quality, reducing variance are important aspects</i>	Re-learning, review, rethink, play and exploration are important
<i>The emphasis is on learning content</i>	The emphasis is on learning process
<i>Gratification is immediate</i>	Gratification means harmony, maturity, surviving
<i>Is reduced to action and cognition</i>	Involves action, acognition, reflection, meaning body, emotion and „spirit”
<i>Leads to expertise</i>	Leads to wisdom

Source: Gălăveanu V. - *Organizațiile care învață*, in Avram E, Cooper L., *Psihologie Organizațional – Managerială - Tendințe actuale*, Editura Polirom, 2008, p. 883

Measuring success in learning process is very important at all three levels, because this reflects if organization, group and individuals are continuously learning. In addition, it creates the conditions of performing benchmarking: comparing the results with other companies, groups and individuals in terms of efficiency, which leads to a search for possible causes of differences / discrepancies in activities and strategies. Moreover, a feedback is obtained on the objectives and activities achieved and become possible the reward of the successes resulted from learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Groups are the organizational structures at which level takes place most often the formal learning through training and development programs, job rotation and enrichment of jobs with new exciting and stimulating activities for employees.

Teams, on the other hand, is a special type of organizational structure at which modern organizations increasingly resort to and constitute, par excellence, the informal environment most suitable for acquiring and storing tacit knowledge through permanent interrelation and constant collaboration between members.

Both groups, as traditional structures, as well as teams, as modern structures for organizing the work, are most appropriate frameworks which favors cooperation and exchange of information and knowledge between employees with major consequences on organizational overall performance.

Thus, learning and improvement are leading to innovation, to varied and creative solutions and preparing early response to stimulus. Einstein's statement - "curiosity is more important than knowledge" - is indicative for the spirit shown by this new approach. Organizations that fail to create a culture of generative learning will not adapt fast enough, they will not be able to face the evolving environment where they operate. Complex problems faced are effects of several causes. People need to learn to solve these problems on their own, to be aware that many answers depend on their ability to learn, to develop unique and particular capacities. We are moving towards an era of human freedom, responsibility and intelligence, moving from a pyramidal management to a dynamic, shared management, of teamwork, of horizontal organizations. The joy of learning and the capacity of learning must be rediscovered and revived for all members. It is necessary for learning to become the background for change.

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