Learning and Unlearning in Organizations: Exploring the New-age Critical Insights in a Global Context

Abhilash Acharya

Assistant Professor, Army Institute of Management, Kolkata

Email: acharya.abhilash@aim.ac.in

ABSTRACT

This article essentially attempts to explore the sub-domain based critical insights as available in the current era – that would revolve around the learning and unlearning efforts in organizations. Celebrated scholars of management discuss and share their perspectives on learning and unlearning within organizations, and how the same organizations can eventually cope up with such processes. Different characteristics and best practices – which include capacity building, independent thinking, and crystallization of opinions amongst many – become crucial towards the continued development of organizational learning, supplemented adequately by unlearning in progressive organizations. This paper also traces the existing body of scholarly works surrounding organizational learning and unlearning, and eventually, place forth certain focused inputs from academic and managerial stalwarts for a greater debate further. The author conducted numerous short interviews and held discussions with thought leaders and researchers across the world, who had chosen to pursue learning and unlearning theories and techniques as a part of their careers. Describing the notional evolution of learning and unlearning and their associated ideas as explained by various greats from the given field, this paper explains several viewpoints held by academic investigators as well as a few practitioners on both theoretical and practical aspects of learning and unlearning in organizations of all sizes and forms.

Keywords: Learning, Unlearning, Organization, Shared Mental Models

A. Introduction

This article essentially attempts to unravel certain outlooks held by the scholars of management, with a perspective on learning and unlearning within organizations. Capacity building, independent thinking, and crystallization of opinions and insights are crucial towards the continued development of organizational learning, supplemented adequately by unlearning.

This paper will trace the extant literature and related works surrounding organizational learning and unlearning, and eventually place forth certain focused inputs from different stalwarts for a greater debate. The same is being facilitated through interviews of and discussions with thought leaders and researchers across the world, from the aforementioned domains of work.

Describing the notional evolution of learning and unlearning and their associated ideas as explained by various greats from the given field, this paper can carefully unravel several viewpoints held by academic investigators on both theoretical and practical aspects of learning and unlearning in organization.

It has been observed that definitions, concepts and theories that surround learning and unlearning in organizations have varying overtones and explanations, allowing a lot of subjective findings by the respective proposers. Interplay with their experiences will temper the course of direction for such learning organizations, according to them (Kelley, Blackman & Hurst, 2007).

The author approached academics and professionals for their research and/or experience-based perspectives on learning and unlearning in organizations of today's era. They have been prolific contributors in this domain through many years now, and have enumerated the importance of shared mental models, shared purpose, shared understanding, personal mastery, contextual dimensions, high-performance setups, innovation and governance structures in the realm of learning organizations pertaining to current times.

Although there is no strict interview protocol, as could have been borrowed from Sidani and Reese (2018a, 2018b) and Reese (2020), the online/offline interactions with academic achievers and corporate leaders were more of a free-flowing discussion (albeit time-bound) with each and everyone separately. The questions asked were intended at obtaining in-depth insights about the theory and the practice involved in identifying and developing learning organizations, both in different organizational setups.

Everyone's rich experience triggered the author's interest to initiate conversations with them individually. The brief coverage of the interviews/discussions and all related descriptions follow from hereon.

B. Defining how organizations 'learn' and tracing the path of evolution

The experts usually reminisced about their old research days from when they were trying to identify the core differences between learning organizations and non-learning organizations, as well as the processes of learning and unlearning, and mostly going by what the people were saying. In effect, the evolution was linked to the respondents' collective perspective in research.

The respondents believed that an organization could learn or unlearn and another probably could not because of the reasons that they mentally held were strong enough to justify their position. We accept that organizations are able to build new meanings tacitly into the organization and change behaviours to 'learn or unlearn'. Therefore, it is implied from this that organizations do engage in 'tacit learning', where there is greater weight attributed to institutionalized knowledge,

experiences and assumption behaviours which are shared by the employees (Blackman & Henderson, 2005). Researchers can prioritize the usefulness of tacit learning in an organization where the employees have a shared purpose and act accordingly.

While being engrossed in an exceptional intellectual milieu, the author could draw references and interpret from the seminal works of March and Simon (1958), Argyris and Schon (1974), Weick (1991) and Senge (1996) and enticed the professionals to explain the importance of an integrated approach of learning through focused cognition, meaningful interpretations and relevant shared mental models, and unlearning in a similar way. However, it is close to impossible to develop a standardized framework to describe 'shared mental models' that may guide the aforesaid processes.

C. Differences between the current and previous positions related to "learning or unlearning" in organizations

Organizations constantly strive to seek information, but they may end up seeking information which was mapped to whatever they thought or felt was necessary. So, this encouraged them to take a route which was somewhat pre-identified as 'positive' and 'effective' as far as learning or unlearning is concerned. Shared vision still remains an inevitable ingredient of learning organizations. In order to achieve a shared mental model, the employees' group in the organization must have consciously or unconsciously passed a stage where they all had a shared vision. Unfortunately, the whole idea of a 'shared vision' could be rare in organizations. Therefore, even though there is no structured definition of a 'learning organization'. However, a decision to learn or unlearn may be accepted or rejected based on the organization's requirement and not simply because the shared-mental-model has changed – as every change may not guarantee growth or progress for that organization

D. Academic and professional experience-related understanding about 'learning or unlearning' and its impact on organizations

Learning or unlearning for that matter is like flow while knowledge is like a storyboard and so, learning has to happen emphatically in case knowledge has to be created within the organization! Our primary concern was about the fact that if an organization behaved like a closed system, then it would be quite difficult to transform it into a 'learning organization', in case it was not already one. Large corporations and small companies, both in the private as well as the public sector, and those were primarily self-declared learning organizations were making heavy investments (given their capacity to do so) in order to effect

positive changes in the organization through learning and learning-oriented activities.

The author then pondered for a short while and stressed on the need to unlearn and become a better version of the organization itself. It was declared that most of the organizations would unlearn during times of crises and be open to ideas which otherwise they would not have accepted. Only a shared purpose to drive positive change can uniquely motivate the people (employees) to unlearn and go beyond a specific zone of professional existence.

E. Can the works reflect on various aspects like organizational learning (OL), individual learning (IL), organizational unlearning (OU), individual unlearning (IU) and link these concepts to learning organization (LO)?

These four concepts (OL, OU, IL and IU) are about learning at the individual and organizational levels. Unlearning at the organizational level requires unlearning at the individual level as well, just like OL happens when sharing of Individual learning takes place across an organization. Thus, learning and unlearning at the individual level is a prerequisite for the corresponding learning and unlearning at the organizational level. When both processes happen, that may lead an organization to become a Learning Organization.

F. How can we describe or define OL/LO vis-à-vis other thought leaders?

Revision of an organizational routine (OR) gives rise to organizational learning. Changes in OR should be driven by shared work experiences of employees in an organization. Some definitions of OL are somewhat different, such as Fiol and Lyles's (1985: 803) definition: "Organizational learning means the process of improving actions through better knowledge and understanding." Their definition applies equally to both IL and OL.

G. How has the integrated definition evolved over time from the earliest definitions of LO/OL/OU?

The routine-based definition of OL was initially borrowed as elements from Levitt and March's (1988: 320) concept of organizational routines, which included the forms, rules, procedures, conventions, strategies, and technologies around which organizations are constructed and through which they operate. However, this concept is too broad to be useful (in all kinds of specifics-driven research).

Later on, we noticed that Feldman and Pentland (2003) had reconceptualized routines and so, immediately, we adopted their version of routines in the general definition of OL and further in the definition of OU as well.

The author was intrigued by the flow of these discussions and enquired on various aspects of OL, IL, OU, IU and whether it will be possible to structurally link all of these concepts to LO. It was agreed that these four concepts are relevant and about learning and unlearning at the individual and organizational levels. It is not always that the organization's learning or unlearning needs to be viewed as the sum total of individual members' learning or unlearning activities. At times, the net effect of individual contributions could be reflected on to the organizational levels; the overall learning and unlearning outcomes for any learning organization can either be more or less than whatever similar engagements happen at individual levels.

Hence, learning or unlearning at the individual level is a prerequisite for the corresponding learning or unlearning at the organizational level. This implies that a LO has to be good at learning and unlearning at both levels to perform well enough for sustenance.

H. The existence and future of these concepts

All concepts like LO, OL and OU will exist in management and related research domains for a very long time to come, as evidenced by empirical studies based on these concepts completed by researchers in various disciplines in recent years. It was clear in the end that emphasizing on the idea that these concepts not only have theoretical importance but also practical implications in the real world.

I. Conclusion

Through the course of these interviews, the interviewer managed to ask pertinent questions to the experts. They were fairly interested in the gamut of things surrounding shared mental models and innovation for learning organizations – which happen to be significant contributions in this field. Drawing from the description above, it was evident that even academic and professional experiences of working with these concepts were indeed fascinating.

A few of the previous works and perspectives on organizational learning or unlearning connected certain dots during the interview and those lay greater emphasis on organizational adaptation to dynamic business environments, development of knowledge-based action-outcome relationships within the learning organization, shared mental models of purposeful activities, and institutionalization of tacit learning and experiences.

Researchers had already expected the 'learning organization' to have transformed by leaps and bounds. However, they should rather treat 'learning or unlearning' like an independent sub-system that becomes an identifiable trait of a high-performing organization. Therefore, it is encouraged that students ask questions about how an organization can become different, lead from the front to drive positive change and continuously learn or unlearn for betterment so as to be called innovative. Leaders can always set the tone for learning or unlearning in an organization as they are the ones who create governance structures that may favour systemic working. Emerging organizations can be benefitted by their presence, where learning will be invigourated across the structure.

In general, it shows how high-impact seminal works evolved over a period of time and the take on the research models with regard to organizational routines and build the future scope of research plans related to unlearning at individual and organizational levels .

The author has successfully tried to bridge the pre-existing conspicuous gaps between the insights from organizational learning, organizational unlearning, individual learning, individual unlearning and learning organization by drawing in the discourse as well as applications of "organizational routines" into the realm of OL and/or LO research. It is rather an understatement to proclaim that because of the experts' many contributions in the given field of research, both academicians and practitioners can utilize such established concepts to combat business complexities and other regular challenges in any LO.

References

Argyris, C. and Schon, D.A. (1974), Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness, Jossey-Bass.

Blackman, D. and Henderson, S. (2001). Does a learning organisation facilitate knowledge acquisition and transfer?. *Electronic Journal of Radical Organization Theory, 7*(1), 1-19.

Blackman, D. and Henderson, S. (2005). Why learning organisations do not transform. *The Learning Organization, 12*(1), 42-56.

Blackman, D. and Sadler-Smith, E. (2009), "The silent and the silenced in organizational knowing and learning", *ManagementLearning, 40*(5), 569-585.

Crossan, M. M., Lane, H. W. and White, R. E. (1999). An organizational learning framework: From intuition to institution. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*, 522-537.

Easterby-Smith, M. (1997). Disciplines of organizational learning: Contributions and critiques. *Human Relations, 50*(9), 1085-1113.

Feldman, M. S. and Pentland, B. T. (2003). Reconceptualizing organizational routines as a source of flexibility and change. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 48*(1), 94-118.

Fiol, C. M. and Lyles, M. A. (1985). Organizational learning. *Academy of Management Review, 10*(4), 803-813.

Howells, J. and Scholderer, J. (2016), Forget unlearning? How an empirically unwarranted concept from psychology was imported to flourish in management and organisation studies. *Management Learning,47*(4), 443-463.

Lee-Kelley, L., Blackman, D. A. and Hurst, J. P. (2007), An exploration of the relationship between learning organisations and the retention of knowledge workers. *TheLearningOrganization, 14*(3),204-221.

Levitt, B. and March, J. G. 1988. Organizational learning. *Annual Review of Sociology,14*, 319-340.

March, J.C. and Simon, H.A. (1958), Organizations, Wiley, New York, NY.

Murray, P., & Blackman, D. (2006). Managing innovation through social architecture, learning, and competencies: a new conceptual approach. *Knowledgeand Process Management, 13*(3), 132-143.

Reese, S. (2020), Taking the learning organization mainstream and beyond the organizational level: an interview with Peter Senge, *TheLearningOrganization, 27*(1), 6-16.

Senge, Peter M. (1996), Leading learning organizations. *Training&Development, 50*(12), 36-37.

Sidani, Y. and Reese, S. (2018a), "A journey of collaborative learning organization research: interview with Victoria Marsick and Karen Watkins", *TheLearningOrganization, 25*(3), 199-209.

Sidani, Y. and Reese, S. (2018b), "A view of the learning organization from a corporate governance perspective: interview with Bob Garratt", *TheLearningOrganization 25*(6), 434-442.

Starbuck, W. H. (1996). Unlearning ineffective or obsolete technologies. *International Journal of Technology Management, 11*, 725-737.

Tsang, E. W. K. (1997). Organizational learning and the learning organization: A dichotomy between descriptive and prescriptive research. *Human Relations, 50*(1), 73-89.

Tsang, E. W. K. (2017). How the concept of organizational unlearning contributes to studies of learning organizations: A personal reflection. *The Learning Organization,24*(1), 39-48.

Tsang, E. W. K. and Zahra, S. (2008). Organizational unlearning. *Human Relations, 61*(10), 1435-1462.

Weick, K.E. (1991), "The non-traditional quality of organizational learning", *OrganizationScience, 2*(1), 116-124.