

Contextualizing Team Learning: Implications for Research and Practice

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The problem and the solution. Cultural dimensions such as power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity, and cohesiveness all influence team learning processes, conditions, and outcomes. This creates unique and diverse challenges for human resource development professionals working with teams. These challenges require mindful and creative approaches to interventions to facilitating team learning through the use of metaphors and methods of providing for equivocality and anonymity.

Keywords: *national culture, organization culture, facilitation, team learning*

Team learning has been championed as an important ingredient for organizations striving to maintain competitive advantage through organizational learning in increasingly turbulent task environments. The concept of team learning positions it as the pivotal element linking the individual to the whole. Empirical work on teams by Edmondson (1999) and her associates (Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998) defined team learning in terms of an ongoing process of action and reflection, comprised of behaviors such as asking questions, seeking feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussion of errors. Popper and Lipshitz (1998) focused on similar behaviors in their research in organizational learning mechanisms. Teams or work groups engaging in learning practices such as After Action Reviews would constitute one form of organizational learning mechanism. The team learning model developed by Kasl, Marsick, and Dechant (Dechant, Marsick, & Kasl, 1993; Kasl, Marsick, & Dechant, 1997; Marsick, Dechant, & Kasl, 1993) incorporates similar behaviors into learning processes and places emphasis on problem setting,

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the importance of divergent as well as convergent thinking, and crossing boundaries for organizational learning.

From these empirical works, a profile of team learning characteristics can be discerned. All of this research implies that trust is an important condition for team learning, explicitly in the work of Edmondson (1999) and colleagues (Edmondson et al., 2001; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998) and implicit in the studies by Popper and Lipshitz (1998), as well as by Marsick and colleagues (Dechant et al., 1993; Kasl et al., 1997; Marsick et al., 1993). Popper and Lipshitz argued that continuous learning requires transparency and valid information as two critical values in the normative culture supportive of organizational learning mechanisms. Appreciation of teamwork (defined as openness to hearing and considering others' ideas and acting in ways that help build synergy among members) and individual expression (defined as the opportunity for and feeling comfortable with expressing input and objections during meetings) are critical team learning conditions in the model developed by Marsick and colleagues. All of these researchers assume that collective learning becomes embedded in either the formal operating practices and policies or the informal, culturally based, taken-for-granted behaviors of group members.

The premise of this volume is that models in the social sciences should be referenced to the contexts in which they are produced. Placing models in their cultural context opens new streams of inquiry and raises important implications for practice. In the case of team learning, culture is a critical contextual element that can have an inhibiting effect on the learning process. Because people do not have a culture but inhabit one, they are never free agents, capable of transcending their situation. The three models discussed earlier all describe generic processes, behaviors, and conditions for team learning but present them in a decontextualized manner. Popper and Lipshitz (1998) conducted their research in Israel. The research by Marsick and colleagues (Dechant et al., 1993; Kasl et al., 1997; Marsick et al., 1993) was done in North America. Although it is not clear where Edmondson (1999) and her associates (Edmondson et al., 2001; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998) carried out their research, readers might infer that it has primarily been done in the United States. Collectively, these three bodies of work provide a foundation for understanding team learning.

The contributors to this volume combine findings from the relevant theoretical and research literature and their own experience from conducting cases studies to raise interesting questions regarding cultural effects on team learning. There is a need for better understanding of how cultural factors facilitate or inhibit the behaviors, processes, and conditions described in these theories. In addition, these behaviors and processes might manifest themselves differently in various cultures. Better understanding of both of these issues has implications not only for the challenges of working with rel-

atively homogenous teams within a culture but also for global teams comprised of members from diverse cultural settings.

The teams described in chapters 3, 4, and 5 all function within a given national cultural setting even though their organizations may be multinational in scope. Operating in actual work settings and charged with accomplishing important organizational functions, they are what Popper and Lipshitz (1998) would characterize as integrated organizational learning mechanisms—groups or teams whose learning is interwoven with task performance and who are the consumers of their own learning. These teams are distinct from teams with a specific charter to learn, such as process improvement teams or action learning teams as two examples, in the sense that although they need to learn for purposes of enhancing performance, their main goal is task accomplishment. Learning is a means to an end. In this sense, they are comparable to the teams studied by Marsick and colleagues (Dechant et al., 1993; Kasl et al., 1997; Marsick et al., 1993) (teams that implemented high-involvement management in a petrochemical company and teams that managed information technology for a manufacturing company), Edmondson (1999) and colleagues (Edmondson et al., 2001; Edmondson & Moingeon, 1998) (surgical teams in hospitals and work teams in a manufacturing company), and Popper and Lipshitz with their associates (medical teams and an elite branch of the Israeli Air Force).

It is no criticism of these chapters to note that they raise more questions than they answer. The kind of understanding necessary for a more complete, situated understanding of team learning is a very ambitious agenda. The discussion here sets the agenda as much as it takes initial steps toward addressing it.

The Cultural Dimensions of Team Learning

The kind of understanding necessary for a complete understanding of team learning within various cultures will require much more research. The analysis offered by the contributors to this volume well illustrates the old saying “The devil is in the details.” Although certain cultures may be similar in terms of broad constructs, such as collectivism versus individualism, that lead to similarities in behavior patterns (e.g., deference to formal leadership and confronting sensitive issues “off-line” from the group), the underlying values, shared understandings, and legacies producing these patterns are very distinct. By way of analogy to individual cognitive styles, not all people who score INFP on the Myers-Briggs instrument are copies of one another. Many times the differences among them are more telling than their similarities, as useful as these similarities may be in general terms for facilitating communication.

Culture impacts the processes of learning at multiple levels. First, culture provides a taken-for-granted frame of reference that shapes which issues, occurrences, or artifacts become problematized for discussion. Second, culture channels or screens the kinds of input that are considered relevant to those issues that become problematized. Third, imbedded in culture are processes of power that both impact the search for meaning and define the range of acceptable solutions. Each of these effects are intensified under team and organizational learning as culture shapes the patterns of communication, influence, and other forms of interaction as well as the orientation toward the group process itself. This is well illustrated in chapter 3 as the executive team and lower level participants struggled with problematizing traditional Korean cultural values, including their implications for power relations, in facilitating change.

Whose (or What) Culture Is It Anyway?

Any attempt at unraveling the effect of culture on organizational processes such as authority structures, conflict resolution, decision making, or learning quickly becomes a complex enterprise. The construct of national culture has been a dominating influence on the discourse. As evidenced in chapters 3 and 5 of this volume, the work of Hofstede (1980, 1986) remains one starting point for many writers seeking to address cross-cultural issues in organizational settings. Despite its popularity, the idea of a national culture is problematic (Triandis, 1995). For some time it has been clear that most nation states are multicultural. Immigration patterns, the large scale movements of ex-patriot workers, and the disintegration of former colonial and satellite countries into regional, ethnic, and tribal conflicts all provide visible pragmatic evidence in support of the academic argument. Furthermore, cultures are not static; they change over time with the movement of people and with the influence of new ideas. This adaptation is seen in the struggle of societies to assimilate groups of immigrants into their existing cultural values, often through legislation and political action, even while absorbing some of the cultural practices imported by the new arrivals.

Yet the notion of certain common elements, or in the words of Hofstede (1980), "the national norm" (p. 45), remains a meaningful point of departure for understanding differences in the cultural dynamics among various nations. Taking care to recognize the underlying diversity of ethnic, racial, regional, religious, and class distinctions as well as the effect of change, people who travel and work globally encounter broad cultural distinctions at the level of public exchange. Cseh, in chapter 2, describes the various dimensions of national culture beyond those initially identified by Hofstede—including universalism versus particularism, feelings and relationships, achievement versus ascription, specific versus diffuse involve-

ment in relationships, and the relationship to time. Each of these dichotomies may allow for the placement of a particular culture in terms of a “national norm,” but at the individual level of analysis, culture is a continuum along which there is a distribution of individuals.

Another important dimension of a culture is its homogeneity/cohesiveness versus heterogeneity/fragmentation. Whereas homogeneity and cohesiveness are closely related, it is also useful to think of them as distinct. The “national culture” is characterized by the emergent patterns of how members from diverse groupings play out their relationships (both within and among their groupings). Each group strives to carry forward important elements of its own cultural heritage while officially seeking to leave behind a divisive legacy shared by all groups in the society. Highly heterogeneous, the country’s culture is also quite fragmented. Nine languages are officially recognized, residential areas are highly segregated along the lines of numerous ethnic groupings, with race being the lens through which most actions are interpreted. In South African culture, speech acts are viewed in terms of their political symbolism. Even which language is used and how grammar is constructed carry implications of conferring privilege and legitimacy.

Divisions such as these exist in all diverse societies, yet some have less overt resistance to integrative, superordinate, national myths and practices and more voluntary penetration of language, customs, and other practices from subcultural groups into the national narrative. One question facing a country such as the United States is not whether it is becoming more heterogeneous but the extent to which the culture is becoming more or less cohesive. In contrast, Korean culture (chapter 4) is very homogenous and cohesive, with traditional values pervasively shaping relationships throughout society in organizations, teams, and other groupings. The South African and Korean cultures present different inhibitors to team learning and by extension, challenges for its facilitation.

National culture, in terms of normative patterns in a society, is but one influence. In addition to subcultures based on class, ethnicity, and other sources of social differentiation, organizational culture has a strong effect on team learning. Cseh (chapter 2) provides an extensive overview of the literature on organization culture, and Yorks and Sauquet (chapter 1) cite literature demonstrating that national cultural pressures can be overridden when strong contextual factors push in opposing directions. Strong organizational culture is one such pressure.

Organizational cultures, similar to national cultures, vary. One stream of this literature presents arguments in terms of empirically derived constructs (Cameron & Quinn, 1999; Schein, 1985); other streams tend to describe these variations in metaphoric terms (Adler, 2002; Deal & Kennedy, 1982). The use of metaphor, more common in discussions of organizational than national culture, is interesting. One can speculate that one influence on this

difference is the educative value of metaphor for getting members of organizations to reflect on their own culture as well as the socialization value of metaphor for transmitting culture to new members. In other words, metaphor is a way of intervening into organizations and stimulating reflective practice. It is a way of getting people to tap into their experiential knowing for purposes of dialogue (Yorks & Kasl, 2002a). In contrast to the academic literature on national culture, metaphors and cultural icons are often used by members of a society in describing their world, for the same purposes, we suspect, as in the organizational literature, their evocative communicative value.

One characteristic of both national and organizational culture is that both have embedded within them the power relationships that govern action, including group dynamics and consequently, learning. Kim (chapter 4) is explicit about this in his analysis of the traditional values that influenced the teams in his case study. However, power is implicit in Ndletyana's (chapter 5) discussion of the legacy of apartheid in organizing South African society around racial and ethnic groups and in Sauquet and Bonet's (chapter 3) analysis of the role played by leaders in bridging the power distance and collectivism dimensions of culture in the teams studied. In all three settings, organizational and national culture blend to shape group dynamics. Taking the Korean and South African examples, the relationship and role played by organizational and national culture is different. In the Korean teams, key traditional values in the national culture were imported into the organization, thus shaping the organizational culture. In South Africa, the organizational culture is said to mediate among the groups "around the table," creating a space of apparent harmony and open communication but suppressing frankness. People are described as responsive to one another in discourse with what they culturally understand to be appropriate according to the political meaning they attach to the situation. These meanings are filtered through the organizational and professional culture of the firm and the profession. Openness and sharing of alternative viewpoints are suppressed. The role played by leadership in the group is very different from the Korean or Spanish groups in terms of orchestrating expression and building integrative perspectives.

Although the strength of the organizational and national culture relative to each other differs across culture settings, their influences on each other operate in any organizational setting. Although it has become fashionable to talk of learning cultures in organizations, at a much deeper level, these cultures channel the discourse in the organization in acceptable ways and in the process, continue to set the limits to what it is possible to learn.

Implications for Team Learning

Studying behavior such as team learning across cultures requires making a distinction between group behavior that is culture specific and cross-

culturally generalizable. The latter are behaviors that can be compared across cultures using common definitions and metrics. Culture-specific analyses require a focus on those behaviors that are unique to a particular culture or subset of cultures. Such analyses can also consider the ways in which cross-culturally generalizable group behaviors are enacted in specific cultural environments (Den Hartog, House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, & Dorfman, 1999).

Although still an open question from a research perspective, there is nothing in the literature or in the illustrative chapters in this volume suggesting that the processes or conditions of team learning vary significantly across cultures. Learning processes of framing, reframing, experimenting, crossing boundaries, and integrating perspectives (Dechant et al., 1993; Kasl et al., 1997) or the cycle of action and reflection involving behaviors such as asking questions, getting feedback, experimenting, reflecting on results, and discussing errors or unexpected outcomes (Edmondson, 1999) appears in one form or another throughout the experiences. The issue appears to be what form they take in various settings and what pressures work to suppress them; in other words, how are these cross-culturally generalizable behaviors carried out in specific cultural settings?

For example, Kim (chapter 4) describes the interaction between the senior executive team and employees as they struggle with the unintended consequences of implementing a team-based organization based on an American model. Senior management steps back and reflects on the unanticipated consequences of implementing the model in a manner that is inconsistent with the entrenched national culture, creating problems for employees dealing with customers and interacting with one another. Rather than simply reverting back to a traditional model, they reaffirm their commitment to the team-based approach and experiment with adapting it, thus creating new dilemmas that need to be addressed. At the same time, their learning is inhibited because they fail to address the subtle dynamics of power that the traditional values support. In the example of the Pharma case (chapter 3), Sauquet and Bonet note how the team deals with discrepancy, with open exchange of opinions and viewpoints, until the discussion is "closed." Once it becomes clear that the discussion is closed and no longer discussible, participants engage in cordial behavior designed for face-saving. Two very different scripts for dealing with controversy are embedded in the culture, which often occur sequentially as the topic moves from being discussible to being undiscussible, with both the transition and corresponding behavior imperceptible to the uninitiated. In both examples, however, culture shapes how learning-oriented behaviors are manifested, with the suggested consequence that these behaviors might be facilitated with significantly different strategies.

Implications for Practice

As Sauquet and Bonet observe in this volume, there is probably no one right way to facilitate team learning across cultures. However, there are some guidelines that are suggested by the literature and cases discussed in this volume. These include:

- being very mindful of crossing cultural boundaries and prepared to be mentally flexible,
- seeking to understand the power dynamics that are embedded in the culture,
- depending on the cultural context providing for face-saving through equivocality and anonymity,
- using metaphors for bridging diversity and establishing empathic connections among team members, and
- having a commitment to procedural justice.

Each of these suggestions is developed in the following.

Mindful Reflexivity

At a very general level there is a need for mindful reflexivity in working cross-culturally or in very heterogeneous or fragmented cultures:

Mindful reflexivity requires us to tune in to our own cultural and personal habitual assumptions in viewing an interaction scene. By being mindful of the “I” identity or “we” identity cultural value assumptions, we may be able to monitor our snapshot ethnocentric evaluations reflexively. . . . Beyond mindful reflexivity, we also need to be open to novelty or unfamiliar behavior. . . . We also need to develop multiple visions in understanding the stylistic and substantive levels of the communication process. Integrating new ideas or perspectives into one’s value system requires mental flexibility. Mental flexibility requires one to rethink assumptions about oneself and the world. (Ting-Toomey, 1999, pp. 267-268)

In other words, one must be very aware of personal felt experience and open to reframing expectations in the service of learning when crossing cultural boundaries.

The advice is easier given than applied if for no other reason than the subtlety with which the “I” identity and “we” identity value assumptions are woven into the cultural fabric of our experience. Following the lead of Weick (1985), organizations do not have a culture—they are a culture, which is why change is so difficult. By extension, people are simultaneously embedded in the culture and are among the most significant archival depositories of the culture, the only archive that is capable of both continuously recreating the culture and potentially adapting it through individual and collective agency. Just how difficult that potential is to real-

ize in practice becomes clear in examining the relationship between power and group dynamics.

Power and Group Dynamics

Power is a key determinant of group dynamics. Furthermore, much about how power operates in a given socioorganizational context is either undiscussible or taken for granted and not problematized. Although there are many sources of power and it can be wielded in different ways, what one typically observes are power and authority relationships that are part of the articulated normative aspect of the organization (Schein, 1985). What is less obvious are the taken-for-granted issues of power and privilege that are embedded in the deep culture and typically find expression in such concepts as traditional values and leadership. These are inherently political terms that have implications for the patterns through which people learn. As observed by Maxim Voronov (personal communication, September 2002):

The social constructionist worldview tends to portray individuals as autonomous and to a great extent free to construct and reconstruct their worldviews. Individuals, teams, and organizations are seen as tending to acquire “bad habits” that hinder or even stifle learning. We should note, however, how power most effectively operates through organizational culture by controlling and constraining organizational members’ identities, subjectivities, and worldviews largely limiting the possibility of an autonomous agent. The [aforementioned] “bad habits” are usually not incidental but adaptive in a particular organizational culture. They reflect and reproduce power relations that are inextricable from the organizational culture and that frequently reproduce and perpetuate the values of short-term profiteering and cost-cutting at the expense of strategic thinking and learning. Failing to address such cultural constraints severely limits the potential for organizational learning. In order to be truly effective and sustainable, organizational learning then must include the acquisition of the ability to expose the power relations hidden behind and reproduced by the seemingly neutral taken-for-granted organizational practices.

The importance of recognizing and developing a strategy for addressing embedded power is explicitly illustrated by Kim (chapter 4), who drawing on the work of Foucault, observes that “when sovereign power is dominant in organizations, team and organizational learning will be less likely even though individual learning is active in limited ways” (p. 80). Awareness of issues of power is more difficult when, as in South Africa, the organizational culture legitimizes one constellation of cultural symbols that by definition is interpreted as delegitimizing others. In the former case, when sovereign power is embedded in a culture with high power distance, the need for working initially with leaders may be especially critical. In this case, working through trusted parties from different factions who in turn are able to work in tandem may be a viable strategy. Depersonalizing discussions of power through anonymous narrative may be another.

Power shapes group dynamics and consequently, team learning (Brooks, 1994). Marsick and colleagues (Kasl et al., 1997) argued that healthy group

dynamics are a necessary but potentially insufficient condition for group learning because groups or teams may become cohesive without ever challenging dysfunctional assumptions that block learning. This, of course, raises the question of what behavior is likely to be interpreted as representing “healthy” group dynamics in a particular setting. To the extent that behaviors culturally defined as healthy group dynamics are counterintuitive to team learning (e.g., individual expression), human resource development (HRD) professionals confront an interesting challenge in getting team members to reflect on how traditional values around group dynamics may be modified to facilitate learning while honoring their culture. There will be a need for gradually encouraging critical reflection on how power mediates cultural assumptions held by members about group dynamics and the implications of these assumptions for practices that will facilitate collective learning. The goal will be working toward group norms and operating principles that provide for the integration of both.

Equivocality and Anonymity as Possible Facilitating Conditions for Group Learning

In cultural settings with strong collectivist orientations, group practices that allow for equivocality, using communication modes that are open to several interpretations, can serve to maintain the balance between stimulating open exchange and the fuzziness within which face-saving can occur. The process through which discrepancy is handled in the Spanish teams suggests that such practices already exist. The behaviors and competencies involved are largely tacit. One potential facilitation strategy might be to encourage reflection on these tacit capabilities. Making the tacit explicit is an initial step toward enhancing group learning in highly heterogeneous and fragmented cultures, where it is often normative for participants to avoid frankness and routinely state what they perceive is expected.

Extending the aforementioned idea, initially designing anonymity into learning discussions around error, unintended consequences, or dilemmas is one possible way of initially providing for equality of opportunity in providing input to group discussions, an important condition for team learning. Valacich, Jessup, Dennis, and Nunamaker (1992) argued that designs that provide for anonymity make contributions less dependent on the links between the quality of idea and the person proposing it. Mechanisms providing anonymity also neutralize power relationships, which is a double-edged sword. An established social order is temporarily unsettled by such practices. Unless the use of such mechanisms is carefully negotiated with leadership and unless values around power are part of the ongoing reflective conversation, any substantive rationality that emerges is likely to be short-lived in practice.

Using Metaphors for Bridging Diversity

Reference has been made to the potential educative value of using metaphors in discussing national and organization cultures. There is a growing tradition of using metaphor as a tool for stimulating reflection and learning around organizational cultures and practices (Morgan, 1997a, 1997b; Short, 2001). Observing that empathy is a precondition for trust and security, Yorks and Kasl (2002a, 2002b) drew on the work of Heron and Reason (1997; Heron, 1992) to describe how metaphors as one form of presentational knowing can be instrumental for creating an empathic field among diverse group members. Metaphors as objects for reflection and shared experience are potentially useful as tools for establishing the trust and learning values necessary for team learning in global teams and in national settings where the culture is highly fragmented. Empathic fields establish the basis for learning within relationship (Yorks & Kasl, 2002b). The use of metaphor may also be useful for facilitating discussions of various experiences of power in highly cohesive and collectivist cultures.

Procedural Justice as Precursor to Procedural Rationality

An assumption underlying the aforementioned suggestions for practice is that HRD practitioners striving to facilitate team learning must be concerned not only with learning behaviors, processes, and conditions but broader issues of procedural justice as a precursor to procedural rationality. To paraphrase Eden and Ackermann (1998), who wrote about strategy making as a process of organizational learning, learning outcomes are not delivered by processes and practices but by real people who have a future together. Their social relationships as members of a society, organization, and team and consequently how they learn collectively are mostly expressed in their ways of working together, patterns of interaction, and dependencies with one another. These relationships are largely shaped and maintained through the cultural foundation on which they are built. They will vary among settings; the skilled educator and HRD practitioner will understand that facilitating learning often means challenging learners' social order as part of learning process. This must be done with mindful care and adaptive behavior on the part of the HRD practitioner.

Implications for Research

It can be argued that team learning, similar to other social-science-based models of practice, should be contextualized. The literature and authors in this volume are supportive of that argument. However, the available evidence does not permit sound theory building that links different cultural

dimensions to specific conceptual changes in the models. Studies within global organizations can provide cross-sectional data that would map the links between dimensions of culture, variations in level of support for team learning processes and conditions, and organizational performance. This in turn can provide valuable guidance to HRD practitioners charged with building team learning capacity into their organizations.

Such maps need to be supplemented by in-depth case studies that describe learning behaviors in different cultural settings along with the impediments to facilitating the process. For example, one might ask what fragmented, pooled, and synergistic phases of team learning (Kasl et al., 1997) look like in collectivist cultures compared to how these phases are manifested in a North American context. Similarly, a fertile topic for inquiry is how appreciation of teamwork is impacted from a learning perspective in settings where maintenance of the group is a self-validating outcome. What mix of operating principles are most effective for facilitating learning in different culture settings?

More concretely, there is enormous opportunity for well-designed action research initiatives that focus on developing and experimenting with ways of introducing learning practices such as action science methods, equivocality, and designing anonymity into learning teams. How well do such practices work in high power distance, collectivist cultural settings, especially those that are fragmented or hold strong traditional values? What methods build synergistic learning? How such interventions move teams through phases of team learning and what these phases look like are all questions that require intervening to be answered. Taken together, such research initiatives (cross-sectional work, case studies, and action research efforts) will provide the necessary basis for rigorous and needed theory development in team learning.

Summary

The Kasl et al. (1997) model of team learning highlighted in this volume provides a useful point of departure for researching and facilitating team learning in various global settings; so does the existing literature on national culture. However, the behaviors, processes, and conditions identified in the models as descriptive of team learning are manifested differently in various cultural settings. There is also considerable difference in the forces that inhibit or suppress team learning among cultural settings. Therefore, different challenges confront HRD practitioners seeking to build team learning capability in organizations. Power relationships embedded in cultural practices are one of the most critical of these forces for an HRD practitioner to understand when working in a particular situation or setting. The interplay

between national and organizational culture is also important for understanding the dynamics of team learning.

Although there is a need for more research to refine the models of team learning, it is possible to identify some important implications for practice. The relationship between power and group dynamics as a context for learning is an important area of focus. Creatively developing practices that provide for equivocality and anonymity, especially in cultures that are highly fragmented and/or high in power distance and collectivism, are another; so too is working with metaphors to establish empathic field amid diversity and foster learning within relationship. Carrying out these suggestions will increase the effectiveness of team learning.

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