

Transforming a University into a Learning Organization in the Era of Globalization: Challenges for the School System Leaders

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Abstract

Learning organization is not a new concept and has been considered as the key for many organizations, both entrepreneurial and academic, to adapt to the world of changes in this era of globalization. The focus of this article is to examine crucial roles of leaders in the process of transforming a university into a learning organization. The paper begins with interpretation of the concepts of learning organization and identifies forces and challenges influencing higher education organizations to become global learning organizations, particularly in the Vietnamese context. Important steps in the process of transformation are also presented.

Introduction

Globalization, which is inevitable and irreversible, is a multifaceted process with economic, social, political and cultural implications for higher education. In Viet Nam, the phenomenon of globalization has posed the country numerous challenges. One of which is the demand to develop and sustain a school as a learning organization. To survive and succeed in this competitive world, academic organizations, like any other organizations, have to function as learning organizations because learning is the keystone to successful adaptation. Transforming an existing school system into a learning one, university leaders are required to take new roles to create a context for the institution that enhances the capacity to learn and to adapt to a rapidly changing environment.

Learning organizations, the prominent organizational trend of the 1990's, began with early experiential learning concepts in the late 1930's. The terms 'learning organization' and 'learning company' stemmed from the notion of 'learning system' discussed by Revans (1969 cited in Pedler, 1995) and Schon (1970 cited in Pedler, 1985) in the early 1970s. The term 'learning company' is used because these authors believe it is more 'convivial'. To them, the term 'organization' is general and lifeless. Conversely, 'company' suggests a group of people working toward a shared future (Bierema, 1999). In a broad sense, a learning organization is viewed as 'a social system whose members have continually learned for generating, retaining and leveraging individual and collective learning to improve the performance of the organizational system in ways important to all stakeholders' (Drew and Smith 1995 cited in Teare and Dealtry, 1998, p.49). More specifically, Pedler (1995) defined the learning organization as 'an organization that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself.' Similarly, Watkins and Marsick (1993 cited in Bierema, 1999) perceived a learning organization as

‘the one that learns continuously and can transform itself’. These authors also identified the ‘seven C’s’ depicting characteristics of a learning organization as *continuous, collaborative, connected, collective, creative, captured, and codified*. Watkins and Marsick concluded that the knowledge and learning capacity lies within the organization and must be drawn from within. Bogue (1994) in his work ‘*Strengthening Integrity in Higher Education*’ called such capacity ‘music within’, the power of curiosity. According to the author, ‘learning journeys’ cannot take place without this inspiring and sustaining force of curiosity. Senge (1990a) popularized the concept of learning organization with his work ‘*The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*’. According to Senge (1990s), a learning organization is one ‘where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning to how to learn together’. More importantly, Senge (1990a) described a model of the interdependent disciplines necessary for an organization to pursue continuous learning. The five disciplines, sometimes called capacities, are *systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision and team learning*. The first three disciplines deal with individual learning, and the last two are about group learning. All the five disciplines work together to create a learning organization, but the author emphasized systems thinking as ‘the cornerstone of change’ because it integrates all disciplines. By systems thinking, Senge (1990a) refers to a ‘body of knowledge and tools’ that helps people see underlying patterns and how they can be changed.

Although the term ‘learning organization’ has been variously interpreted, the common point from different authors’ ideas is that learning is transformational. Learning is the keystone not only for individuals but also for organizations to adapt to change successfully. As Capper et al. (1994 cited Patterson 1999, p.10) commented ‘The organization operates proactively in its environment, rather than merely reacting to the environment operating on it.’ Although the concept of learning organization originated in corporate organizations, it has spread into academic organizations recently. At present, ‘every enterprise has to become a learning institution. Organizations that build in continuous learning in jobs at all levels will dominate the twenty-first century’ (Drucker 1992 cited in Fullan 1993, pp.135-36). In the era of globalization when higher education is a complex, demanding and complete reality, the capacity of universities to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, to adapt to unprecedented changes and to respond to community needs depends on their capacity to engage in continuous learning as organizations. According to Hitt (1996), there are at least two reasons for schools’ transformation into learning organizations. Firstly, schools have to renew for their survival. Revans (1982 cited in Hitt, 1996, p.16) proposed the equation: $L \geq EC$ in which ‘learning (L) must be equal to or greater than environmental change (EC); otherwise, the organization will die’. The second reason is excellence. In this competitive world, an organization must achieve high performance, and by achieving excellence, the organization will enhance its chances of surviving. The need for organizations to survive and success in the changing world has led to institutional transformation in the form of learning

organizations. Examining the concepts and characteristics of learning organizations, Hallinger (1998) proposed five assumptions about characteristics of schools as a learning organization. Firstly, schools differ in their capacity to change; secondly, schools represent communities of learners; thirdly, teachers are adult learners; fourthly, the role of the principal in a learning organization is “head learner”; and fifthly, the role of system leaders is to create a context for schools that fosters their ability to learn and change on a continuous basis.’ These five assumptions focus attention on the need to create school systems in which all staff members have to engage in continuous learning individually and collectively. Furthermore, these assumptions suggest that the individual learning of staff actually depends on the learning of others in the school community. And most importantly, leadership and learning are closely linked in a school committed to continual improvement. (Hallinger, 1998).

Like many other universities in the developing countries in general, and in Viet Nam in particular, Can Tho University has entered the new millennium facing global challenges posed by the process of globalization. The first challenge is the information explosion which has deeply influenced the purposes and practices of the institution. Knowledge in many fields such as computer science, biology, medicine, law and business administration needs to be continually updated. Consequently, the knowledge learned in schools might be obsolete in just a few short years. Further, the university still has organized instructions and measured student success in terms of student mastery of a defined and fairly static set of the subject matter. These practices are no longer appropriate when the subject matter is changing rapidly (Hallinger, 1998). More importantly, the school curricula focus more on abstract, formal knowledge rather than on practical, experiential knowledge, which cause the gap between school and reality. The main purpose of schools in this era of knowledge economy is to prepare learners to be the life-long learners, to acquire technological skills for the workplace, to be cognitively prepared for complex tasks, to solve problems and to adapt to changes. (Hallinger, 1998). Secondly, globalization with technological innovation such as Internet, World Wide Web has provided learners with new opportunities to receive ‘transnational education’ such as online courses, internet-based distance learning, and off-campus delivery. However, in Viet Nam in general and in Can Tho University in particular, advanced education technology has not been utilized efficiently. Computers are used for decoration, and email and Internet are mostly used for personal communication and entertainment. The main reasons are due to the lack of computer literacy and English: many middle-aged and older lecturers are not adaptable to modern technology and students are not well-trained. Thirdly, the traditional Vietnamese emphasis on rote learning with teacher-centered approach has still existed in most of Vietnamese universities including Can Tho University. This static and passive mode of teaching and learning has hindered the students’ independence, creativity and problem-solving capacity. Now in the world of increasing global competition, when the business community is demanding that ‘school graduates be able to go beyond simple reproduction of knowledge’ (Hallinger, 1998), Can Tho University needs a new paradigm of learning.

Although there is no completely accepted definition, learning usually refers to how we change. That is, 'after learning, people are different in some ways from the way they were before' (Pedler, 1995). According to this author, there are four important types of learning. The first is learning about things or knowledge; the second type is learning to do things or skills, abilities, competences; the third type is learning to become oneself or personal development; and fourthly, learning is to achieve things together or collaborative enquiry. Traditionally, universities mainly focus on the first two types of learning while the last two, which are essential elements for learning organizations, are underdeveloped. Senge (1990a) noted the two kinds of learning. 'Adaptive learning' is essentially 'survival learning', and 'generative learning' helps to enhance an organization's capacity to create. An organization obviously needs both kinds of learning, but 'generative learning' must be more important and it provides guidance for 'adaptive learning'. Mumford (1994 cited in Rowley 1998) underlined the importance of individual learning as the key factor of building a learning organization. Interestingly, in his work *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Senge (1990a) also confirmed that 'organizations learn only through individuals who learn'. Further, when discussing the *mental models* about the nature of knowledge and views of the role of teachers and students, Senge (1990a) stated that 'if we view learning as the simple acquisition of knowledge, we also view students as passive receivers of instruction.' In a learning organization, it is believed that all members of the institutions have to be committed to individual learning, and that the school administrators need to view this as a central responsibility. Senge (1990 cited in Fullan, 1993, p.140) stated that 'organization learning through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning, but without it, no organizational learning occurs.' For teachers, continuous learning is the key to change. Teachers 'cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without having these same characteristics' (Sarason 1990 cited in Fullan, 1993, p. 46). This idea is also supported by Fullan (1993) when he discussed the role of teachers as key agents. Further, he noted that 'teachers must succeed if students are to succeed, and students must succeed if society is to succeed'.

For the past few years, Can Tho University leaders have responded in various ways to the challenges indicated above. In fact, the school leaders and managers have been concerned about changing methodologies. The university has developed different policies and undertaken many actions to encourage the shift from teacher-centered, traditional methods of teaching to a learner-centered, teaching-for-learning emphasis with a wider range of teaching strategies. The school leaders have also recognized that curriculum reform is an integral part of restructuring the institution. New student outcomes-based curricula are replacing traditional curricula. Together with the curriculum reform, the curriculum framework has been modified and adapted so that students can have more time for their independent study, which is essential for the self-development. In addition, the class size has been reduced, especially the language learning classes so that class activities such as pair work or group work are more efficiently conducted. Well-equipped

classrooms, libraries with large electronic sources, computers, and other facilities are provided to facilitate the active teaching and learning. The university has continually upgraded its Internet system so that all the staff and students can have free access to Internet. Assessment methods have also been changed so that the evaluation is not only on final product but more on the learning process. For the staff's professional development, the university has organized courses of English, French and information technology to update their skills, and improve their work performance.

All these efforts have helped to improve the school's performance and have brought about positive changes. However, institutional transformation is not simple and is not limited to such these changes. It is commonly misconceived that universities are naturally learning organizations because of their learning culture. Transforming a university into a learning organization differs from traditional approaches to school reform, which tended to focus on changes such as implementation a specific reform policy, practice or process. A learning organization should lead and manage changes in order to increase the 'habit of curiosity' which Bogue (1994) referred to as inspiring and sustaining capacity in a learning organization. This capacity allows the organization to anticipate and react to changing external and competitive environments in a positive and proactive manner.

Learning organizations are not a fashion or a label but an inevitable trend in the global era. Transforming a university into a learning organization requires all the stakeholders' participation and change, but any radical change must originate from the top management. Institutional leaders and managers should take active roles to initiate significant changes. This is especially important at Can Tho University, and in most Vietnamese universities where the bureaucratic management style is still popular. Traditional management favors activities of directing, deciding, resisting change, and focusing on short-term plans. Working groups are a common practice in the hierarchical structure with the controlling leadership style, and staff members are required to have adaptive learning skills to perform specific assigned tasks. In essence, traditional management fosters two values: efficiency and effectiveness. For the institutional survival and development, these two values are certainly important. However, to prosper in a rapidly changing environment with ever-increasing competition, these two values are not sufficient. The other two values, excellence and self-renewal, are more important. Excellence is 'the strive for the higher standards in everything one does – commensurate with the needs of the customer and the resources available'. By 'self-renewal', Hitt (1996) meant 'a framework within which continuous innovation and rebirth can occur – a framework that allows the organization to adapt to a continually changing environment while maintaining the integrity of its own identity.' As a lodestar of action, a learning organization must reach excellence, and the means for achieving this goal is through self-renewal (Hitt, 1996).

The need of the school renewal starting from the management change as the 'internal pressure' together with the 'external pressure' of the global phenomenon creates the 'pressure of change' for the school transformation. This 'pressure of change' was discussed by Cacioppe (1997a), and was considered as the first step in the process of change. Many authors when presenting the model or framework of change also indicated this important step. Bartol, Tein et al. (1998) described it as a 'a need for change'. Kotter (1995) called this 'establishing a sense of urgency'.

According to Senge (1990a cited in Fullan, 1993), the new model of management must be based on 'accountability without control, trust, redistribution of power, communication, coaching, teaching, and learning.' Hitt (1996) also differentiated the traditional management style from the contemporary leadership style needed in learning organizations. Traditionally, the controlling leader's style is 'to exercise restraining or directing influence' through the three main functions: setting objectives, evaluating performance, and taking corrective actions. According to Hitt (1996), this traditional management style is not the leadership for learning organizations. More specifically, Cacioppe (1997b) examined different types of leadership such as situational, transactional and transformational leadership. While situational and transactional leadership with more direction is more effective in an emergency or in the situation when someone is learning a new skill, transformational leadership is more collaborative and supportive. According to Cacioppe (1997b), transformational leadership is necessary to 'help lift the followers beyond personal goals and self-interests to focus on goals which contribute to a greater team, organizational, national and world good.' Burns (1978 cited in Johnson, 2002) also viewed transformational leadership as 'a type of leadership that changes organizations rather than maintaining them in their current state.' According to these authors, transformational leaders have capacities and qualities 'to recognize the need for change, create the vision for change and enlist the organization in the change process.'

Regarding the necessary characteristics of effective leaders in learning organizations, Scott (1999), Cacioppe (1997b), Goleman (1998), Ramsden and Lizzio (1998) and Johnson (2002) presented numerous distinctive characteristics. Of course every author has different views on what makes successful leaders, but they do have some points in common. Successful leaders should be honest, charismatic, dynamic, consistent, supportive and inspiring. In a learning organization, the function of a leader is to set a path toward a goal and motivate others to follow. More importantly, in this rapidly changing world, an effective leader must be a change agent, as Ramsden and Lizzio (1998) noted 'since leadership is about change, academic leaders must themselves be constantly changing' and 'if they (leaders) cease to take pleasure from addressing change, from desire to learn, they cannot be effective university leaders any longer' (Ramsden and Lizzio, 1998).

Discussing roles of leaders in learning organizations, Senge (1990b) suggested that the leader's work is radically different from typical leadership and he proposed that

leaders need to be responsible for learning by building learning organizations. Argyris (1991) stated that leaders must 'learn how to learn'. More specifically, Senge (1990a) identified the new roles of leaders as designers, stewards and teachers. Firstly, as a designer, the leader helps to create infrastructure necessary to support the learning process. Secondly, the role of a teacher is not about 'teaching, but about designing the learning process.' In the university context, the leader who is the teacher has great advantage to understand, inspire and motivate the staff better. Williams (2002 cited in Kerfoot, 2003) made the point that 'if you can't teach, you can't lead.' The reality in Can Tho University has shown that most of the top leaders and managers have had teaching experiences, and most of them are still teaching in addition to administrative work. Williams (2002 cited in Kerfoot, 2003) also noted that 'great teachers are great perpetual learners.' For these leaders, 'everyone has something to teach them' (Kerfoot, 2003). Bogue (1994) emphasized that 'no lesson is lost on the learning leader, and each lesson strengthens leader artistry'. Thirdly, as stewards, 'leaders may start by pursuing their own vision but as they learn to listen carefully to other visions, they begin to see that their own personal vision is part of something larger' (Senge 1990a cited in Fullan, 1993, p.71). According to Senge (1990a), the role of designer is crucial in promoting effective learning. Sharing this idea, Bennis (1994 cited in Johnson, 2002) wrote that 'leaders are innovators'. That is, leaders must create a vision for an organization and take required actions to enable the organization to achieve that vision. Hitt (1996) summarized essential factors a successful leader needs to deal with change and create a learning organization. Leaders, according to this author, must *develop a shared vision, and provide the resources needed for achieving the vision*. Interestingly, these two factors are very compatible with the steps of implementing change discussed by Cacioppe (1997a): *creating a clear and shared vision, providing adequate resources for change and implementing the change*.

Creating a shared vision, according to Senge (1990a), is the key component of a learning organization. Vision represents 'a stable, future-looking value system, which dictates appropriate and approved behaviors' (Whitely, 1997). It is important to note that institutional vision is not a mission statement, but a future direction. In essence, a clear vision must be created and modified through the consensus of all the stakeholders. Senge (1990a) suggested that 'true shared vision is never imposed. It emerges from people who truly care about one another and their work, who possesses a strong sense of personal vision, and who see the collective vision as one that can encompass the personal visions of all'. However, in Can Tho University the school leaders have customarily followed the direction of development designed and developed by the Ministry of Education. This practice is no longer compatible with the notion of a learning organization in which the staff members together identify the needs and develop a common vision. Decentralization is a good practice so that the staff members are able to contribute their efforts and ideas for the institutional goals. At the department levels, the heads of departments the staff together are empowered to set up departmental goals and are responsible for their plan implementation. For the top leaders, they should work with the

heads of departments and faculties to define the school ideal's future and develop a process to make that future accountable for everyone. It is a good idea for the school leaders to organize an annual staff meeting where everyone can discuss and contribute their ideas to the school decisions. The school leaders create and facilitate these discussions. Once the vision of the school development is built and shared, leaders need to integrate it into all institutional work, shaping direction and content of all projects to align with this ideal future.

Providing adequate resources is the essential step to empower the staff in the process of institutional transformation. For any change management to be successful, leaders need provide support and budget for the management of the change. One big challenge for school leaders when reframing the school structure is the lack of resources such as money, time, ideas, material, assistance and training (Fullan and Miles, 1992). One principal commented: 'There will always be a shortage of time and energy, and in most situations we could always do with more staff and money' (Dimmock, 1999). When discussing the reasons of success of 'moving school', Louis and Miles (1990 cited in Fullan, 1993) found that these schools were better at getting and managing resources.

More importantly, these authors emphasized that the school leaders should know how to 'select resources linked with vision-building, mastery, and collective effort' (Louis and Miles 1990 cited in Fullan, 1993). At Can Tho University, time constraints are a major barrier to teacher learning and school change. Teachers usually complain about their heavy workload. Most teachers are assigned so many classes that they do not have sufficient time for their lesson preparation, for their individual learning to update skills and knowledge, or most importantly, for their own research. When teachers do not have enough time for their own learning, they cannot motivate students to engage in the learning process effectively. Finding time to support teacher learning remains a challenge for school leaders. Redesigning the curriculum so that teachers spend less time in class, and students have more time for their independent study can provide the teachers more time for their individual learning. However, this is not very positive solution if teachers are not committed to their own development. In some cases, leaders need to set up the goals of professional development for teachers. For example, teachers have to participate in conducting research, attending training courses, or pursuing further study. The dilemma for the school leaders at present is that assigning the teachers fewer hours of teaching also means reducing their salary, which also negatively affects the teachers' performance. Solving financial problem is not easy at all, but understanding and articulating the problem is the first critical step to the solution. It is suggested that when the globalization with the market-based economy has become a fact of life, knowledge is also commercialized and education is also a business. This is a new view of education. The school leaders have recognized that universities are no longer the only part of the national system funded and protected by the government. Universities should have projects to fund their activities from the local community, from partner universities, and from foreign partners.

Developing capacity through personal mastery is an action step in the process of transformation. Senge (1990a) proposed that ‘organization learn only through individuals who learn’. Personal mastery includes a strong sense of personal vision. According to Isaacson and Bamburg (1992), people developing personal mastery are continually enhancing their abilities to grow and to adapt to change. Change at the individual level depends on the capacity to master new skills, develop new attitudes, and come to new understandings. This is a lifelong process for the teachers to develop. The school leaders should recognize that the process of change requires both pressure and support. The lifelong learning must be the goal of fostering lifelong learning in students.

Creating the vision, providing adequate resources and developing the capacity of learning are critical steps for institutional transformation. Although there is no definite model or framework to build a learning organization, Merriam and Simpson (1995) presented some questions guiding the school leaders in the process of transformation. The leaders should identify the precipitation for the decision of transformation; specific actions to develop a learning organization; the critical milestones in the process; and the obstacles and challenges hindering the development.

Conclusion

The transformation of the traditional academic organization into a learning organization has posed Can Tho University leaders big challenges. The school transforming has led to the transformation in the style of leadership. There has been a dramatic shift from heroic, autocratic styles of leadership to collaborative, participative styles. According to Burns (1978 cited in Johnson, 2002), 'transforming leadership is the type of leadership that raises both leader and follower to higher levels of motivation and morality.' An important role of the school leaders is to act as a designer, a teacher and a steward in a learning organization. In this world of increasing global competition, learning is the key to future success for any organization. 'As learning becomes the currency of the future, it is imperative that organization embrace it' (Bierema, 1999).

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