

LEARNING ABOUT THE LEARNING ORGANISATION: A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

Roland Yeo

Abstract

This paper aims to provide a critical insight into both the conceptual and empirical literature of the learning organisation. Uncovering its intellectual roots, Peter Senge's fifth discipline is perceived to have several weaknesses. Empirical studies of six scholars are analysed to illustrate these deficiencies, suggesting that an amalgamation of organisational theories will provide a more encompassing explanation for the development of a learning organisation. Different models are compared and contrasted, and commonality between them is identified. It ends with suggestions for future study, identifying barriers to learning, the interactional aspects of learning processes and the sixth discipline of organisational learning.

Introduction

Significance of the learning organisation concept and practice

The concept of the learning organisation has, in the past decade or so, begun to make an important contribution in organisational studies and management practice. It was in the 1980s that few companies started realising the potential power of corporate learning in increasing organisational performance, competitiveness and success. As we are entering a new era of the twenty-first century where the evolution of organisational life and structure cannot be avoided, there is a need for organisations to learn faster and respond to the rapid change in the environment; otherwise they simply will not survive! Owen (1991) terms learning as the business of business.

Scope and delimitations

The notion of 'learning' has taken on a plethora of definitions and interpretations. Already, there are a number of scholars who have made constructive attempts to separate the underlying nuances of 'the learning organisation' and 'organisational learning', such as McHugh et al. (1998). Others have tried to relate the concept of 'the learning organisation' to other management theories in Management Development, Human Resource Management and Development, Organisational Behaviour and Development (Reynolds et al., 1998), and Institutional Management (Steiner, 1998).