

**TEAM LEARNING IN A LEARNING ORGANIZATION:
THE PRACTICES OF TEAM LEARNING AMONG UNIVERSITY
LIBRARIANS IN MALAYSIA**

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a part of an investigation on learning organization and organizational learning practices at university libraries in the Klang Valley of Malaysia. The study aimed to find out whether or not academic librarians are applying the concepts and practices of learning organization at three levels, namely individual level, team level and the organizational level. This paper focuses on the perceptions of academic librarians on the practices of team level learning in public and private university libraries. There are 17 variables on team level learning that formed a part of a survey instrument using a seven-point interval scale. The instrument was distributed to a total population of 250 librarians of the public and private university libraries in the Klang Valley of Malaysia. A total of 191 (76.4%) respondents returned the questionnaire. The study found that academic librarians perceived learning at the team level does exist in general, but they were not overly convinced of the extent to which the practices exist. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test showed that there is a statistical significant difference in the perceptions of team level learning practices between the senior and middle level academic librarians implying that the senior level librarians had more positive perceptions on the practices of team level learning in their organizations than the middle level librarians.

Keywords: Learning organization; Team learning; Academic libraries; University librarians; Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a crucial process in organizations that seek to continuously transform into a dynamic organization that could move toward responding to the demands of their environment. Senge (1990), the management strategist who is the guru in the field conceptualizes learning organization as “a place where people continually

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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 how to learn together.” An organization starts learning at the individual level, but individual learning in it is not enough. A vital learning occurs within the teams. Team building is a vital component of building a learning organization, as organizations cannot learn until their colleagues start to learn. Senge (1990) considers the team to be a key- learning unit in the organization. He defines team learning as “the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire. It builds on the personal mastery, for talented teams are made up of talented individuals.”(Senge, 1990, p. 236). Senge further explores the three dimensions of team learning. The first dimension of team learning as he realizes is the ability to think insightfully about complex issue. Another dimension is the ability to take innovative and coordinated action. The third dimension is the ability to create a network that will allow other teams to take action as well.

Organizations and societies have recognized that creative teams or groups of people rather than individuals working alone would more effectively meet the challenges created by an increasingly interdependent world. A workplace team is more than a work group. French and Bell (1995) define team as “a number of persons, usually reporting to a common superior and having some face to face interaction, who have some degree of interdependence in carrying out tasks for the purpose of achieving organizational goals.” For the teams to be effective, they must manage their culture, processes, systems, and relationships and must be able to learn how to better create and capture learning. Teams should be able to generate knowledge through analysis of complex issues, innovative action, and collective problem solving.

Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) note that real team building is achievable through team learning. The first tool that the authors recommend for developing team learning is dialogue. Dialogue concentrates on new communication forms that reinforce a group's collective intelligence. This discipline presents several stimulating tools and techniques that will transform the way people communicate with others. He states that the discipline of team learning that involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion and the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions would enable them to go through into a genuine “thinking together”.

Appelbaum and Goransson (1997) agree that team learning which starts with free flowing dialogue allows members to develop new and creative ideas, and ultimately

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to see beyond themselves and focus on the organizational perspective. Gardiner and Whiting's (1997) empirical study on success factors in learning organizations supports this notion with their results that indicate organizations are more like learning companies when they are empowered as teams and individuals.

In their study about team learning, Watkins and Marsick (1993) develop a model that captures the relationship and learning among individuals, teams, and the organization. Their model shows the learning organization as the union of individuals (the lower triangle) and organizations (the upper triangle). The foundation of this model is the overlap, which is where teams function and benefit the learning organization. It is the amalgamated usage of the resources and energies of the individuals, teams, and the organization that creates the learning organization.

Team learning occurs in almost all organization, and academic libraries are no exception. Academic libraries are affected by various internal and external pressures, such as budget constraints, changing of information needs by the non-traditional students, as well as changes in the teaching and learning mode and practices. Working in an atmosphere of radical change is both threatening and challenging. Academic libraries are facing an ongoing need for knowledgeable staff. The staff must be knowledgeable and resourceful apart from being active supporters of the faculty members and students in developing effective support for learning. Effective collaboration with the faculty members would enable them to jointly manage differences and change.

In order for academic libraries to develop, grow and remain an excellent resource to students, faculty, and staff, library professionals need to acquire the critical skills and the tools that will allow them to become a key player in a learning organization. In the academic library environment, integrating working and learning is an essential requirement as the library stakeholders are not only making heavy demands on their services, facilities and collections, but their expectations on them are also high. The professionals as well as the supporting staff must continually learn to apply existing knowledge to routine or innovative situations and to construct new knowledge in response to changing workplace situations.

OBJECTIVES

This study is carried out to (a) explore whether university libraries are learning organization; and (b) capture the perceptions of librarians on the practices of learning at the team level in their organizations. The objectives of the study are to:

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- a) Find out whether the university libraries are learning organization from the aspect of team learning practices.
- b) Identify whether the public and private university librarians in the Klang Valley of Malaysia are practising team learning in their workplace.
- c) Find out which team learning practices are more prominent in the library organizations.
- d) Compare the perceptions of learning practices between the senior and middle-level librarians.
- e) Compare the perceptions of learning practices between the public and private university libraries in the Klang Valley, Malaysia.

HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses are:

- a) There is no significant difference on the perceptions on team learning practices between the senior and the middle level librarians.
- b) There is no significant difference on the perceptions on team learning practices between the public and private university libraries in the Klang Valley of Malaysia.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses the survey method using questionnaire as the instrument. The instrument was partly adapted from Watkins and Marsick (1996)'s "Dimensions of a Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ)." The questionnaire consisted of 17 variables on the team learning. A seven-point interval scale where 1 was marked "almost never," and 7 was marked "almost always" was used to measure the scale. In responding to the questions on the practices on team learning, respondents were asked to determine the degree to which the statement "is" or "is not" true of their library.

The questionnaire was pre-tested and a pilot study was conducted before the survey instruments were distributed to a total population of 250 ($N = 250$). The actual respondents of this research were selected among the senior and middle level librarians, and the professional-technical levels from 12 university libraries (six public and six private respectively) in the Klang Valley of Malaysia. They were selected because of their qualification and position they hold in the library. The response rate was 76.4% with 191 returns ($n = 191$).

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Data Analysis

Various analyses were performed to test the data and hypotheses. Reliability tests were carried out to test the internal consistency of the respective scales for the team level learning variables. The scales for all variables are very reliable as all Cronbach Alpha values exceed 0.9. Mean ranking was used for the descriptive statistics. The Mann-Whitney *U* Test was utilized to test the hypotheses. In this study, the variables in the questionnaire are based on a 1-7 low-high scale. Therefore, when respondents marked 5 or more (5 to 7) in the scale, this indicated that their organizations could be considered as practicing the principles of a learning organization.

FINDINGS

In this study, more than three-quarters (151 or 79.1%) of the respondents are from public university libraries, while 40 (20.9%) are from private university libraries. One hundred and seventy or 89.0 % of 191 respondents occupy middle management posts in the libraries. Twenty or 10.5 % are in the senior management level, while one (1) or 0.5 % holds a technical post.

Perceptions on Learning Practices at the Team Level

Perceptions on learning practices at the team level were measured using 17 questions/statements, and the mean scores of these statements are presented in Table 1. Also included are the percentages of those respondents who responded *5 or more*, as described in the individual statements in Table 1. These are arranged in ascending order of the mean score i.e., from the least “agreeable” to the “most agreeable”. With the interpretation of the various statement measures with respect to 1 being “almost never” and 7 being “almost always”, and a score of 4 being “neutral”, the results are discussed below.

The practices at the level of team learning in the organizations are moderate as indicated by the mean scores, which range from 4.21 (*In my library, teams are confident that the management will act on their recommendations*) to 5.10 (*In my library, teams communicate freely with each other*).

The respondents agreed with all of the 17 statements (mean scores being larger than 4), and the overall mean score is 4.77. These responses point to the existence of learning practices at the team level. Therefore, the libraries may be considered as being learning organizations where team spirit and cooperation function to enhance knowledge in the libraries being studied.

Table 1: Mean Scores of Respondents by Statement: Team Level

Statement (n = 191)	Mean score	Percentage with positive responses
1. In my library, teams are confident that the management will act on their recommendations	4.21	44.5
2. In my library, teams are rewarded for their achievements as a team	4.38	50.8
3. In my library, teams influence decision making at the top management level	4.43	51.8
4. In my library, teams have the freedom to adapt their goals as needed	4.49	56.0
5. In my library, teams treat members as equals, regardless of ranks and other differences	4.59	60.5
6. In my library, teams foster ongoing and orderly dialogues (conversation)	4.71	65.6
7. In my library, teams have little fear and learn from what goes wrong (“failure learning”) and what goes right (“success learning”)	4.73	64.4
8. In my library, teams focus both on the group task and on how well the group is working	4.79	62.8
9. In my library, teams revise their thinking as a result of group discussions or information collected	4.81	67.0
10. In my library, teams consistently create an atmosphere of mutual trust	4.82	66.5
11. In my library, teams have fun in learning	4.91	67.5
12. In my library, teams learn from best practices of competitions or from colleagues internally and externally	4.92	70.7
13. In my library, teams value how they learn and what they learn	4.98	74.3
14. In my library, teams use learning to reach their goals	4.99	72.6
15. In my library, teams work and learn together harmoniously in self-guiding teams	5.05	74.9
16. In my library, teams share relevant information with everyone	5.08	77.5
17. In my library, teams communicate freely with each other	5.10	76.4
All statements	4.77	59.2

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There are four statement measures with mean scores closer to “neutral/not sure”. These are: *teams are confident that the management will act on their recommendation* (4.21); *teams are rewarded for their achievements as a team* (4.38); *teams influence decision making at the top management level* (4.43); and *teams have the freedom to adapt their goals as needed* (4.49). These four statements and ten others, which account for 82.4% of all the 17 statements, have mean scores of less than 5.0. There are three statements (21.4% of all the 17 statements) with mean scores of more than 5.0. All these figures point to respondents being less than fully convinced that learning practices at the team level exist in their libraries. They did say learning practices exist, but evidently they said so with some reservations.

In conclusion, at the team level, the respondents identified *teams communicate freely with each other* (5.10) as the most important indicator to their libraries being learning organizations, if at all. This is followed by *teams share relevant information with everyone* (5.08), *teams work and learn together harmoniously in self-guiding teams* (5.05), *teams use learning to reach their goal* (4.99); the other statements’ mean scores can be gleaned and interpreted accordingly from the table. What is important to note is that the respondents are more generous in their evaluation of statements if they reflect team spirit (*esprit d’ corps*), and are rather critical (giving lower scores) with statements that have to do with top management decisions such as rewarding achievement, having final say on recommendations, deciding on overall goal, etc. The traditional “animosity” of employees towards the top management is manifested strongly in their scoring patterns.

The above results are also supported based on the percentage of positive responses given. Overall, slightly more than half (59.2%) of the respondents felt that their organizations are learning organizations at the team level. However, the percentage of those who were positive about their organizations with respect to this aspect ranges from 44.5 percent (*In my library, teams are confident that the management will act on their recommendations*) to 77.5 percent (*In my library, teams share relevant information with everyone*). Looking at both the mean scores and the percentage of positive responses, the first five statements can be considered as the weakest aspects of team level learning in the organizations. In conclusion, the respondents are positive about team spirit among the staff but have some reservations about the management.

(a) Perceptions on Team Level Learning by Management Groups

To determine whether there is a significant difference in opinion on team learning practices between senior management and middle management groups, the Mann-

Whitney Test, a non-parametric *t*-test of difference between average scores is used. This is because the distribution of scores for team level is not normal. Results of the statistical test are presented in Table 2.

It can be seen that the overall mean score for the senior management group, at 5.22, is higher than the middle management group's figure of 4.72. This difference is statistically significant at the 5% level (*p*-value < 0.05). Therefore, it can be concluded that the senior management group tends to think that team level learning is being practised in the libraries relatively more than does the middle management group.

Table 2: The Mann-Whitney *U* Test Results on Perceptions of Team Level Learning Between Senior and Middle Management Groups

Management group	Sample Size	Mean score	Mean Rank	<i>p</i> -value
Senior management	20	5.22	128.78	0.004*
Middle management	170	4.72	91.59	
Overall	190	4.77		

* Significant at the 5% significance level

(b) Perceptions on Team Level Learning by Type of University

The next research question examined is: *Is there any difference in the perceptions on learning practices at team level between private and public university librarians?* The results of the Mann-Whitney *U* test are presented in Table 3. It appears that private university librarians gave a slightly higher mean score (more positive about team level learning in their libraries) than those from public universities, but this apparent difference is statistically not significant at the 5% significance level (*p*-value > 0.05). Therefore, it is concluded that on the average, the perception on the existence of team learning practices does not differ between respondents of public and private universities.

Table 3: The Mann-Whitney *U* Test Results on Perceptions of Team Level Learning Between Public and Private University Librarians

Type of University	Sample Size	Mean score	Mean Rank	<i>P</i> -value
Public universities	151	4.74	92.63	0.101*
Private universities	40	4.87	108.73	
Overall	191	4.77		

* Not significant at the 5% significance level

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATIONS

The libraries under study cannot be considered as truly learning organizations. At the team level, respondents are not too convinced about the library being a learning organization. Senior level librarians tend to think that team level learning is being practised in the libraries relatively more than the middle level librarians, however, there is no difference in perceptions on team level learning between universities.

The results of the analyses point to the fact that learning at team level in the public and private university libraries are not encouraging. Hence, the top management should realize the compelling need for them to make learning intentional at all times and in all locations. The creation of a learning environment in the library would encourage staff to learn and re-learn among them with full support of the top management. Besides providing a learning environment, the library management should also motivate the employees to freely pass on newly acquired knowledge or the tacit knowledge to their colleagues in the workplace. As knowledge has become the key factor for achieving efficient service and high productivity, the culture of knowledge sharing at the workplace environment will essentially enhance team and organizational learning, and eventually lead to desirable organizational success.

The library staff should also be rewarded for their initiative as rewarding staff that learns is an important aspect in learning organizations. It serves as a tool that can attract the staff to contribute whether directly or indirectly in the process of becoming learning organizations. Therefore, the library must identify as many ways as possible to reward individuals, as well as the teams in either financial or non-financial forms. The output of giving rewards towards individual and teams that learn, which benefit the library can be seen through improved services and relationships as well as documented knowledge acquired, created, stored and/or transformed by individuals and group.

Another position that the library management should take is to create a corporate climate for continuous learning. It encompasses such elements like creating a culture of continuous improvements, establishing the practice of learning as the key to the organization's purpose and success, supporting mistakes for the effort and learning gained, sharing problems and errors by not hiding them, showing concern for development of the whole person, expanding accessibility of information, helping to make learning as a habit, and viewing performance shortfalls as opportunities of learning. In addition to this, the staff also need to change their mindset as well as attitude in creating a continuous learning environment such as listening to each

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other's view, giving open and honest feedbacks, and building an environment of trust where everybody tend to share their knowledge among themselves.

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