
Organizational dilemmas as barriers to learning

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Abstract

The theories of Senge and Argyris and Schön were used in analysing an attempt to develop a learning organization in a Swedish manufacturer of tools. The research was a case study, using different sources of evidence for validating results. The organizational learning theory used puts emphasis on the individual in the flow-group. Barriers to learning have been found because an individual's mental models and metaphors are not consistent with management's. When, as in the studied case, the ideology of organizational learning is not followed by values and norms for behaviour supporting the new ideology then barriers to learning occur. Barriers to learning have been traced to dilemmas caused by the individual and the flow-group, the organizational structure and managerial actions.

Defining the context

Organizational learning concerns growing competence among individuals in communicating and solving dilemmas and problems successfully, both in the short and in the long term. Management's effort to create a learning organization is an effort to establish a learning ideology.

Other definitions of organizational learning are: "When individuals within an organization experience a problematic situation and inquire into it on behalf of the organization. The learning must become embedded in the images of organization held in its members' minds and/or in the epistemological artefacts embedded in the organizational environment" (Argyris and Schön, 1996).

The basic meaning of a learning organization is an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. Generative learning is learning that enhances our capacity to create (Senge, 1990).

In an anthology, Starkey (1996) writes, "If people cannot learn how to learn, they run the risk of becoming 'walking encyclopedias' of outdated information". Starkey (1996) also writes that the learning process in organizations requires the creative destruction of barriers to learning and the broadening of access to new sources of knowledge and experience.

Under study here is an organization ideology in transformation from bureaucracy to learning organization; a case where management attempts to implement a learning organization ideology (Coopey, 1996; Giddens, 1976). Barriers to learning occur as the result of managerial efforts to implement this new ideology, which is not accepted or understood by employees. Acceptance and understanding by operators and white-collar workers for the change of ideology in this organization is not fulfilled.

To explain this process, theories of institutional management could be used. Institutional management means establishing a management ideology. When this ideology is changed, as in the case of a learning organization, employees should change their well established norms and values about work (Steiner, 1990). Efforts to engage employees in organizational learning – because of the ideological character of the process – can develop barriers to learning.

Barriers to learning are here considered as employees' dilemmas that do not contribute to organizational learning. A dilemma is a situation where the individual is supposed to make a decision and act, but there is no obvious decision alternative better than another. Therefore the dilemma demands reflection and reconsideration of the situation to make the best decision. A situation being a dilemma often leads to organizational ineffectiveness if the individual is forced to act. A dilemma also leads to ineffectiveness if the individual finds it easier not to act, when action is needed. A problem is a situation where there is a rational solution which the individual is able to solve. An organizational dilemma therefore demands some kind of organizational learning, and if this learning is not at hand it is interesting to inquire why. These reasons are here called organizational barriers. There are several reasons for barriers:

- metaphors carried by employees in the organization are not understood or considered by management;
- visions carried by the employees concerning the future of the organization and concerning the individuals themselves are not consistent with visions carried by management;
- power differences and communication structures are not changed to support the new ideology;
- management styles are not changed according to the change in management ideology;
- official and unofficial norms for behaviour mirror past ideology, not the ideology of organizational learning.

Organizational theory and learning

Organization theoretical perspective

The idea of the learning organization has developed to be possibly the most powerful ideology for developing organizations during the nineties. As a theory aimed at understanding organizational behaviour it can be said to have replaced organizational culture theory. Organizational learning theory, as opposed to organizational culture theory, is processual in its character, explaining structural change processes in organizations. Therefore it is possible to understand the complex developing competence relations between individuals

and groups in an organization trying to serve its customers in the most efficient way.

This approach is strongly influenced by the works of two authors. One is Argyris (1990, 1992, 1993); Argyris and Schön, (1978, 1996), the other Senge (1990). Argyris analyses actions facilitating organizational learning and barriers to organizational learning, i.e., according to Argyris (1993), organizational defence mechanisms. Argyris' work deals to a great extent with individuals facing, enacting and trying to solve conflicts containing uncertainty in organizations; whilst Senge (1990), using systems theory, is more optimistic concerning individuals' abilities to grasp learning as a part of everyday organizational work.

Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996) present a theory of organizational learning where two models of how to handle conflicts in organizations are presented. The authors define learning as the way errors are detected and corrected, especially errors that are complex and potentially embarrassing and threatening. Competence, by the same authors, is defined as solving problems in such a way that they remain solved and increase the organization's capacity for future problem solving.

Senge (1990) makes a reference to Weston (1993) and Michael (1973) when setting his perspective for organizational learning, which is a systems thinking perspective containing five disciplines for organizational learning. They are personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. The work of Senge (1990) is normative and opposite to Argyris and Schön (1996) in analysing obstacles to learning; Senge (1990) uses mental models to show how a learning organization goal can be reached.

The theory of Senge (1990) is used to highlight dilemmas in the studied organization's efforts to become a learning organization. The theory of Argyris and Schön (1996) helped me to understand why these dilemmas exist, and eventually how they should be solved.

A qualitative case study method

The method used is a qualitative case study approach. In qualitative case studies, validity is increased by using different data collection methods (Sandberg, 1994; Yin, 1994). Actions and decision making in the studied firm are described and analysed using differ-

ent data-gathering methods: participant observations, interviews, studies of documents, conversations individually and in groups with persons at different levels of the firm. To further strengthen validity of the research data, it is interpreted using established theories of organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978, 1996; Senge, 1990). Communicative validity (Kvale, 1989) has also been established by an ongoing dialogue on alternative interpretations of data in the research process with the studied firm's managers.

This research started in autumn 1994. Two surveys were carried out in a tools firm, with about 200 employees, located in Sweden. In the first survey white-collar workers and managers in the firm were interviewed about different ways of problem solving, and dilemmas experienced by employees. The second interview concerned operators in a product shop. Around 50 one-hour interviews with middle management and operators in two work flow-groups were conducted and recorded on cassette tapes, written down, interpreted and analysed. The interviews are semistructured with the support of an interview guide. Furthermore, I took part as an observer in a board meeting, a capacity meeting, a product meeting, a Tuesday meeting (the managing director informs employees about product delivery times and sales statistics on different markets) and a workshop meeting, during which hand-written notes were documented. Also frequent meetings were held with the managing director and the top management group of the firm. Work was also observed in two product workshops, where operators were interviewed.

Description of the studied firm

Attempts to create a learning organization

The studied firm has, since 1988, carried through two major organizational restructuring projects in production and distribution. Since these changes have not been fully successful in terms of creating profit for the firm, they were followed by initiatives from management to create a learning organization. Behind this initiative lies an assumption that by creating an organization where individuals and groups by themselves can cope with change and learn from incidents and actions, the firm might become more effi-

cient. Competence among employees in dealing with dilemmas and problems occurring in the firm is a goal for management to achieve. Young people entering the firm as operators are interested in having influence on and knowledge about their work situation.

Learning in the studied firm builds on the normative vision outlined by the managing director. The managing director defines a learning organization as an organization where learning affects and changes behaviour and knowledge in the whole firm. One of management's strategies to facilitate learning is to piecemeal implement changes in a piecemeal way. Self-managed flow-groups, visualizing information on boards, special training in communication for product workshop managers and white-collar workers are actions to facilitate learning.

Product-flow work groups

The old Taylor-inspired organization of work with functional specialities was replaced by an organization that demanded each person to understand, take part and control the entire work-flow, from raw materials to customer needs. Foremen were replaced by group leaders in each product-flow work group. Managers now function as service units to the product workshop and to customers' wishes. The structure of the organization takes the form of a matrix organization. The new organization meant organizing into product shops, introducing flow-groups, changing work-flow layout, and reviewing the administration and control system. This new work organization implies a new way of working and thinking for employees, managers, clerks and operators as well.

Work is organized in work flow-groups, with different goals ahead. These new values guide work and are revolutionary, compared to earlier management norms, when Taylorism was still used in the workshop. Many managers and employees have difficulties in changing their attitudes, communication and actions according to the new situation.

There is a customer-oriented organization structure. The entire organization is oriented towards the market. Four product workshops are each run by a product workshop manager.

A theory of organizational learning used for analysis

Systems thinking creating a dilemma

Senge (1990) offers five disciplines for the development of a learning organization:

- (1) systems thinking;
- (2) personal mastery;
- (3) mental model;
- (4) building shared vision; and
- (5) team learning.

This theory is here used to analyse the organizational learning process studied.

Systems thinking means that individuals in a firm take part in things going on in different parts of the same organization. Senge (1990) means that for a firm to develop as a learning organization it is necessary for every individual to develop systems thinking. Systems thinking enables a person to understand the underlying structures that govern the way people act and relate to each other, the group and the organization. Mostly, individuals react to events, rather than analyse the situation and act after some reconsideration.

Why does not every employee in the studied firm agree on the signals from management to work by learning more about the different things that affect practice at the workplace? Operators in the workshop of the studied firm handle and think about their work situation and if necessary those aspects of the work of others that affect them personally. One explanation for the employees' unacceptance could be that it is not possible for an operator to understand this whole complex pattern. Therefore employees screen off the part that is not immediately affecting their situation. The mental models and metaphors of the employees are not the same as management's. By metaphor is here meant a way of thinking and a way of seeing that pervade how we understand our world generally (Morgan, 1986). The images of the firm are not the same for management as for other employees.

Another explanation is that there is a difference in power between management and employees creating an institutional bias (Coopey, 1996; Giddens, 1976).

A dilemma exists since management's vision is for operators to understand, consider and engage in all factors affecting the firm's performance. Management wishes operators to share information and understanding.

Personal mastery differs among operators

An organization's commitment to and capacity for learning can be no greater than that of its members (Senge, 1990, p. 7).

Young operators in the studied firm want to develop their own competence at work, while elderly operators think their competence is already enough, or are not motivated to enhance it. This could create conflicts between young and elderly operators and a dilemma for elderly operators. Also, this creates a dilemma because management's vision of establishing a learning organization is not fulfilled. Also in this respect we see different ways of seeking application between operators and managers.

Shared mental models not meaningful

Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action (Senge, 1990, p. 8). Morgan (1986) uses the word metaphor with a similar meaning. Nonaka (1996) is explicit when using metaphor as a way for management to create creativity in a development process. Nonaka writes that metaphors help people to put together what they know in new ways and begin to express what they know but cannot yet say.

Shared mental models create a climate of co-operation since everyone wishes the firm to develop in the same way (Senge, 1990). Differences in mental models and metaphors concerning the firm and work life are not hard to find in the studied firm. Since the owners have the mental model of the firm as a place where they the owners try to raise productivity to make more money, it is not surprising to find the same thoughts among operators themselves. That is, they also want to earn more money, but want to go about it in different ways. The differences in mental models mean that a meaningful dialogue and sharing of thoughts and information between management and operators about day-to-day operations and long-term goals for the firm are difficult to establish. The mental models held by management are so different from those held by operators that mostly it is not meaningful to share each other's mental models.

Building shared vision hard to achieve

This is perhaps the most difficult part of the learning paradigm of Senge (1990). Visions of management and operators differ substantially. Therefore good results in building shared vision between management and operators seem hard to achieve. Perhaps this theory is applicable only to management groups.

A learning organization is something abstract that operators do not understand. Operators – in common – do not want to talk about work and think about how to work; they enjoy the practical work itself. To enjoy work, their work situation must be closely related to the machine. They have the most satisfaction in their workplace when they produce a lot and there are no hold-ups in the production chain, and no meetings. Because of management trying to implement projects concerning development of the workplace, a feeling of alienation about project work has spread among workers. Projects are seen as something difficult, accomplished separate from work in the product flow. It means carrying papers and sitting in meetings, in which they feel insecure. If you ask operators if they know what management means by building a learning organization, they either say that they have never heard of it or that they do not know what it means.

What is the reason for this dilemma for management? All the hard data in the workshop, shown on white boards and screens, focus on production quality, product flow and rejection of manufactured products. This is what signs and boards inform operators is important. Therefore the operator must think that only what is measured is meaningful. Double messages from management make operators doubtful about the real meaning of the learning organization effort, since their everyday observations are keyed to the importance of the product flow.

Team learning unnecessary without shared uncertainty

Senge (1990, p. 10) writes: "Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations."

However, you do not have to use teams to get collaboration in a workplace (Schrage, 1989). There is no need for teams when the work to be done does not involve shared uncertainty (Critchley and Casey, 1996). This latter theory embraces three modes of

working: unshared uncertainty, co-operation and shared uncertainty. Although these authors are talking about management groups their distinction between different kinds of work is useful. You can see the same in flow-group production. Not all kinds of tasks demand sharing. Sharing means not only to share information, but to share a problem, a task, a happy moment. Certain tasks do need sharing and in those cases collaboration is necessary.

The empirical study reported here shows that the individual is as important as the team. By focusing on the team, each individual is depersonalized. By instead taking each person seriously, management can try to understand personal views, interests and thoughts about work and the firm (Johansen, 1994). Those employees interested in change projects are able to develop and contribute to the ideological transformation.

In the studied firm there is a mutual understanding (a group norm) among operators that working in projects with development work is not quite accepted. Operators do not understand why there is a need for project work of this kind. By focusing on individuals and creating status in working with production development maybe a change in norms could be accomplished. Argyris and Schön (1996) would have called this a model II solution of this organizational dilemma. Instead of trying to solve the problem under existing norms of behaviour the firm tries to change existing norms of behaviour.

It is enough that 60-70 per cent of employees understand the necessity of continuing improvements according to the managing director. The other employees can specialize in their share of the work and contribute in their way. Younger operators then do not have to complain about the elderly and the elderly do not have to participate in things they cannot manage. The total budget for young people in education will also be bigger.

You cannot make a team learn, without establishing a situation where individuals learn. By focusing on those special tasks that need information sharing, operators might change their norms concerning project work. Co-ordination, being the style with which to manage a bureaucracy, should no longer be the dominant management style. Instead co-operation is needed. Co-operation is an individual-to-individual activity. The manage-

ment style to facilitate co-operation must change into a tutorial one.

Changing management focus towards tasks and operators in the product workshop, and the possibility to learn and work together, will also affect the capacity to perform better. Also this is a proposition to alter the norms of the firm to accomplish a desired change in behaviour from model I behaviour to model II behaviour (Argyris and Schön, 1978; 1996).

If management also focuses on co-operation in flow-groups as concrete goals for action (vision), operators and other employees would be able to start acting accordingly. In fact this is something that on a small scale has been done in the studied firm, by building meeting places in the product shop where operators get information via white boards about capacity, productivity and rejection statistics. This is also a place to have lunch or coffee. Some of these spots are built as small wooden log houses. The operators' view about these places is that they have improved their ability to discuss problems in the work process. It is disappointing that mostly these are not places where white-collar workers and operators share information inquiring into problems together.

People are individuals, though they work in flow-groups. Schrage (1989, 1995), Johansen (1994) and Critchley and Casey (1996) show that to establish individual, team and organizational learning you must start focusing on the individual's learning abilities and tasks, not production flow figures on white boards and not team learning in the first instance.

Barriers to learning

The individual and the flow-group causing barriers

At the beginning of this article five reasons for barriers to learning among employees were presented based on the empirical study reported here. Here these reasons are discussed under the headings: the individual and the flow-group, where mental models and visions will be discussed; organization structure, where power differences and communication systems will be discussed; and managerial actions, where I show how organization values and norms cause dilemmas leading to barriers to learning.

The individual dilemmas for employees causing barriers to learning are found to be:

- spoken language by management;

- insufficient levels of competence;
- insufficient proficiencies;
- inability to think, talk, see the same thing as management does;
- difficulties in telling the truth to managers;
- difficulties in telling the truth to their own flow-group; and
- all employees do not want to take part in the firm's decision making.

Language can be a reason for individual dilemmas. The individual is not acquainted with the language that management uses for communicating with employees. This means that information from management is not understood, and therefore not considered by employees, and creates alienation.

Insufficient levels of competence and insufficient proficiencies create dilemmas for employees when dealing with problems in the workshop individually and in project teams. It creates agony for learning. Negative experiences when own initiatives are not being taken seriously lead the individual not to take any more initiatives.

Inability to think, talk and see what actions are proper in specific situations causes unforeseen problems. Lack of training in expressing their own view of a situation can lead to the idea that it is easier to stay quiet.

Difficulties in telling the truth to managers means that some employees experience management as apart from them and consider it not proper to talk to them when something is wrong (Mayo and Lank, 1994). Difficulties in telling the truth can also arise for individuals in their communication with their own work flow-group members. It is easier to stay quiet than to risk being wrong.

Another dilemma is that all employees do not want to take part in everyday decisions about work. Workshop operators do not want to acquire more responsibility in some instances in their work situation. They are satisfied with the fact that their workshop manager takes responsibility for their work.

As mentioned before, a norm that has spread among some operators is not to participate in project groups. This could be found among all operators, but especially among elderly workers. These operators find it more in line with their competence to do a job, whilst not embracing working in a project group. Writing, discussing and seeking solutions to problems in the workshop which are not obvious are not what this category of

operators call doing a job. Mental models and visions in the workplace differ substantially in these cases between operators and managers.

The organization structure causing barriers

Organizational structures are, for example, barriers when they come from the hierarchy or when they cause divisions among the different product shops. It is hard for management to get through to operators the idea of the learning organization. Why is that? One of the reasons could be that changing the organization structure is the biggest change so far. Focus is still on co-ordination of activities caused by that reorganization. Speed in the flow, a low rejection rate and speed in customer services are the most important goals. A steady flow in the product workshop is the most important efficiency criterion. Quality improvements to reach this is what management so far have put their efforts into. Concrete actions to reach these goals are taken by the implementation of ISO 9001.

A short-sighted view about productivity in the production process is management's norm for the firm, and thus also for employees. All these short-sighted actions hinder long-term planning for a learning organization. Short-sighted planning is institutionalized in the organization structure by planning procedures such as eight-week capacity planning.

Another aspect of barriers to learning in the organization structure is the division of work between, for example, the personnel manager and the finance manager. Tradition carries certain norms that specify what should be done by each one in the hierarchy. For example, the chief of economy is supposed to collect quantitative data, while the chief of personnel is supposed to collect qualitative data. Group leaders in the product flow-groups carry with them some of the work that previously was done by foremen in the old functional organization. Managers in the firm still have to subordinate their work to norms dictated by their superiors. Some norms have not been changed since the organization was organized along functional lines.

Managerial actions causing barriers

Managerial dilemmas are not understood or not considered enough by management and thus cause barriers to learning. They are often created by information from management. I consider the most important obstacle to

learning in this case study to be management's double messages.

The double message is both short-term and long-term at the same time. The main norm of efficiency concerns handling the product flow today. The other message concerns an expression of establishing a learning organization, which will take several years. Employees do not understand the objective concerning the learning organization. This objective is abstract, while short-term efficiency objectives are concrete. Most operators handle this dilemma by neglecting the importance of being a learning organization.

So far the most important thing in the product workshop has been the throughput of products. The quality of the flow has been in the centre, and co-ordination of activities has been implemented to speed up the product flow. Building a learning organization is an objective that is not concrete, but abstract, and therefore hard to understand. In response to the question, "What does that mean for me as an employee?", Senge (1990) writes that a vision must be concrete to be understood. The objective of making quality products in the way the customer wants and delivered to the customer when the customer wants, is concrete and reachable. Creating a learning organization therefore could easily be forgotten and become only an espoused theory, not a theory in use (Argyris and Schön, 1978; 1995).

The message to build a learning organization is not taken seriously by operators in general. They find other aspects of the workplace more important. The employees interpret symbols in the product workshop, and those symbols point to the flow of products as being most important. Consequently, they try to follow these signs as well as they are able. The actions of the individual, therefore, are a barrier for learning. These barriers I call managerial, since it is the information that management gives – through established communication channels using the ideas of Greif (1992) about "the visual organization", that create a dilemma for the employee.

The new role for the manager in a learning organization is to be a tutor and helper. Of course it is difficult for managers to fill this role and for operators to understand their new responsibilities and freedom in the new organization structure. Management tends to create a management style that is a mix

between delegation and approval of the new situation where the operator and the group should be able to decide how to run the production flow. Management sometimes takes decisions that, in the new order, should be taken by individuals or the group where sometimes the individual or the group should decide. Uncertainty is spread concerning the width of decentralization in the organization. Enthusiasm is easily lost and also the motives for learning. Making decisions by communication and dialogue is something quite different from making decisions by the hierarchy, which traditionally has been the way of doing this.

The organization is traditionally defined as a goal-oriented hierarchical structure to produce something. This way of organizing has influenced firm management for decades and is still the main theory for understanding the management of work in firms of today. Since these theories guide organizing they also explain many of the obstacles that managers meet when trying to change the organization.

The problems of sharing information and co-ordinating people for co-operation are the big challenges for management.

Reflections and summary

I have found that the individual and the flow-group, the organization structure and managerial actions cause barriers to learning. I have explained these barriers as causing employees' dilemmas.

The theory of Senge (1990) has been used to describe and analyse dilemmas that individuals face in the firm. This theory does not explain why the individual's dilemma affects the process of organizational learning.

To understand and explain learning barriers the research has been an ongoing process with meetings, interviews and conversations with management, white-collar workers and operators. The research has taken an interpretative form using different sources of evidence to validate the results. Also discussions with management have validated interpretations.

The study shows that individuals' mental models and metaphors guide their ability to grasp a learning ideology. Management has to understand different aspects of employee metaphors. A discussion of the way

empirically determined barriers to learning affect the process of organizational learning has been detailed.

Management's espoused theory about what takes place in the name of organizational learning and what actually is understood and considered by the employee as guiding metaphors differ.

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