

# A STUDY ON LEADERSHIP FLEXIBILITY IN LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS

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**Abstract:** *The business environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by significant changes, where organizations facing a turbulent environment need to transform themselves. The shifting needs of new environment like smarter workers, more demanding customers, development of new products and services are creating an urge for organizations to transform themselves. Today organizations are required to be increasingly flexible for survival. Flexible, adaptive leadership is essential for most of the present-day managers in learning organizations, where certain leadership behaviors are required to be demonstrated due to certain major changes.*

*This paper discusses the concept of flexibility in leadership in learning organizations. It also explores certain flexible and adaptive styles of leadership such as Value-based leadership, transformational leadership, team leadership and change leadership, which are considered to be effective in learning organizations. With the future changes likely to emerge in learning organizations, this paper also proposes changes in the leadership skills required to bring about organizational effectiveness.*

**Keywords:** flexibility, learning organizations, transformational leadership skills, value based leadership, change leadership, team leadership, protecting employee status, behavior

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## **Introduction**

In the present era of competition and globalization, the information- age organization operates with integrated business processes that cut across traditional business functions. The strategies for information age organizations, however, cannot be linear or stable. Today's information age organization operates in more turbulent environments and senior managers need to receive feedback about more complicated strategies. In such constantly shifting environments, new strategies can emerge from capitalizing on opportunities or countering threats that were not anticipated when the initial strategic plan was articulated; ideas for seizing new opportunities come from managers deep down in the organization (Simons 1995). It is very risky to change something that has worked in the past, but leadership demands a concern for the present and the future while preserving a respect for the past. Leaders manage change and create the conditions for it to occur. Throughout history, humanity has been in a constant state of transformation and answers to the challenges we face are found in adapting to the future. The only constant in this world is change and change must be treated as a welcome ally that offers the opportunity to excel.

### **The Concept of Flexibility**

The notion of flexibility is extensively used by organizational researchers and practitioners from all disciplines. "Flexibility - the ability to bend without breaking. Flexibility makes it possible to adapt or respond to change, to be influenced, to make modification and variations" Wonder and Donovan (1989). Flexibility requires a continual examination of situations and, when warranted, quickly adapting to changing circumstances. "Flexible thinking is creative adaptability in different contexts.... Flexible thinking allows you to take an existing knowledge base and apply it, in the abstract, to another context" (Yate, 1995). The reason for the frequent use of the concept of flexibility is the perceived importance of flexibility to issues such as change and adaptation in and of organizations. Specifically, flexibility is widely seen as a capability that affords value in uncertain and changing environments (e.g., Coronada & Lyons, 2007; Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998; Ignatiadis & Nandhakumar, 2008; Snow & Snell, 1993; Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997), and as a result is often used in descriptive and prescriptive ways even without the provision of an explicit link between flexibility and desired outcomes.

Several changes in the external and internal environment of the organizations act as a driver for their transformation (Singh, 2005). The expectations of today's workers are also undergoing significant changes. Employees need skills to be more creative and technically competent to be able to work with new technologies. The concept of Learning Organization is rapidly becoming a widespread philosophy. It is an extension of organizational learning in which *"people at all levels, individuals and collectively, are continually increasing their capacity to produce results they really care about."* defined a learning organization as *"a place where people continually expand their capacity to create 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"* (Peter Senge) He explained that the core of a learning organization's work is based on five learning disciplines- personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning and systems thinking. The employees of learning organizations acquire knowledge and able to innovate in a fast pace in order to survive and flourish in a rapidly changing environment.

### Learning Organization

The following few clear indications can be spotted and recognized when an organization is performing badly:

- i) When the employees seem **de-motivated** or **uninterested** in their work
- ii) When the workforce **lacks the skill** and **knowledge** to adjust to new jobs
- iii) When the leader seems to be **the only one** to come up with all the ideas
- iv) When the your teams **lack real productivity**
- v) When there is **lack of communication**
- vi) When the same problems **occur over and over**

Organizations need to learn more than ever as they confront these mounting forces. Each company must become a **learning organization**. Leaders should foster and encourage learning to help both the individual and organisation in learning. It is the leader's responsibility to help restructure the individual views of team members.

Traditionally it was assumed that people on their own lacked power, vision and the ability to bring about changes therefore this had to be initiated by a few great leaders (Senge, 1994). Senge contends further that when people have a 'sense of their vision and

commitment', they require a leadership style, which is participative and encourages the people to take initiative and work creatively. A leader who can initiate a higher order improvement, such as changes in attitudes, beliefs, values and needs, with innovative or revolutionary ideas and a vision of future possibilities is known as transformational leader (Bass, 1985).

### Flexible Leadership and Learning Organization

The single most hindering factor is the frequent changes at the top, which results to an absence of long-term orientation and loss of continuity. Organizations need to realize the various flexible concepts of leadership In order to get rid of these hindering forces. Studies have shown that leadership style of leaders play an important role in the metamorphosis process. To make a learning organization function effectively, it can be envisaged that organizations need to develop Change Leadership capabilities, transformational leadership; Value based Leadership and Team Leadership. A new notion of leadership has emerged which is based on a recognition that a leader's 'new work' in a learning organization should be different from the already established models of leadership namely- Modeling, Inspiring, Challenging, Enabling, Encouraging- Kouzes and Posner(2002) Leaders should be committed to being the organization's 'architect', and playing the role of a teacher. The leader essays the role of an architect by virtue of possessing the ability to maneuver the organizational design and system. Another dimension of an adaptive style of leadership is providing stewardship. Peter Senge explains that 'the act of stewardship means being entrusted with the responsibility for something'. Someone needs to accept responsibility within the organization. Leadership in learning organizations should be able to promote a feeling that everyone is a learner and that conditions should be created to promote learning.

### Change Leadership

A very common misunderstanding about change is that it is considered to be a never-ending marathon race. A big, quantum leap put forward may 'freeze' afterwards. This illusion forces many leaders to focus on technology and process and not people. For business to flourish and change, leadership must change. The work-force needs to be involved through corporate-wide training and education initiatives. Change leadership believes in the fact that a change can be brought about in the people's attitudes, which will help in modifying

the people's behavior. Change leadership is a new concept where the senior leadership team determines where maximum learning is needed. Critical areas like customer focus, culture and process improvement tries to focus on measurable results.

### Value Based Leadership

This style of leadership does not use authority or power with the employees. Value based leaders become the guiding and driving force for them in pursuing their tasks and assignments. Today, the implications of values in leadership are used as a basis for the employees' performance. Core values are considered as 'sacred' where employees are expected to conduct and behave in such a manner which ensures towards the fulfillment of the organization's mission. There is a correlation between value-based leadership and organizational excellence. A leader needs to have the urge and ability to transform backed by high values. Value-based leaders need to walk-the-talk in order to eliminate mistrust, cynicism and low-performance. By creating this spiral of leadership, employees will be encouraged not to compromise with values.

### Team Leadership

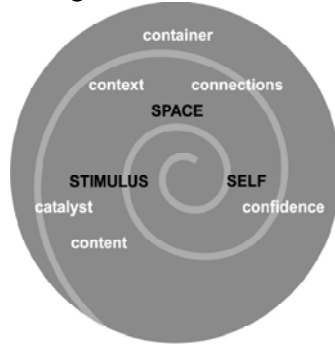
*"I think the Army would make a serious mistake if we made a distinction and said, "You are a manager, and you are a leader." So my philosophy is that we are all leaders! We also must be responsible managers or stewards of resources entrusted to us. We would make a serious mistake to think that we could be one and not the other". — General John Wickham.*

Another concept in flexible leadership which is picking up at a fast pace is team leadership. Leaders should not just consider themselves as mere managers but rather as 'team leaders'. Traditional authority based leadership only earns respect for the 'position'. The team members' work preferences need to be understood and given due importance in order to have some unifying relationship. Thus team leadership projects a synergistic effect- where group performance is overshadowed by team performance. The nature of team leadership enables employees to develop a sense of trust and respect. The leader needs to be socially sensitive to interpersonal cues and have the ability to assume the various roles such as a facilitator and director. Teams represent an especially critical unit of analysis, because they generally provide organizational learning and learning implementation through their

performance-related outcomes. The increasing reliance of organizations on teams to devise and implement organizational strategy thus indicates the key role teams play in organizational learning and theory development. Over time, learning becomes embedded in routines, processes, and structures, such that past learning begins to guide the current learning of members and becomes part of formal procedures. Senge (1990) suggests that teams represent fundamental learning units in an organization that carry out much of the organization's functions and tasks and deliver lessons and/or performance-related outcomes. This role includes developing thought and integrating past and new knowledge, as well as creating social ties and networks. development prompts a related lack of cohesion between the disjointed pictures of learning at the individual and organizational levels (e.g. Edmondson, 2002). In response to this situation, researchers seek to provide insights into a more integrative view of learning, which lends itself to investigations at the team level. Crossan et al. (1999), for example, propose a learning framework that links individual, group, and organizational levels according to strategic renewal

**Creating space for leadership learning** - Leadership learning is a form of organizational learning, which is concerned with developing today's capability and preparing for the future. It can be argued that leadership learning is not an exact science, but that it is context dependent. While there is no single recipe for success, research has highlighted three contextual perspectives that strategic HR professionals can pay attention to in order to invest their development time and budgets wisely – space, stimulus and self (Varney, 2007). These perspectives lend themselves to being considered in many ways, highlighting six conditions where developers might have some influence on learning – context, container, connections, catalyst, content and confidence. Although it is convenient to separate them here for purposes of discussion, these conditions are not parts, but interconnected facets of the whole. As such they may influence each other and sometimes one or more will have greater relevance. Considering each separately simply brings different qualities of that “whole” into focus. (Figure)

## Enabling conditions for learning



Source: Sharon Varney,(2008), Key to organizational Transformation, Leadership learning

### Changing Conditions

Flexibility in leadership in learning organizations is important when external changes create an immediate crisis, or when threats emerge. Sometimes abrupt changes in the preferences or priorities of clients or customers give a sense of uncertainty and hence, quick revisions in plans and schedules are needed. Adaptive leadership is extremely important during crisis management. When leaders empower employees, a strong creative force drives them to perform better and thus leading to overall organizational effectiveness.

### Traits and Skills Relevant for Flexible Leadership

The trait approach has been around for many decades, but there is increasing interest in several

Skills that appears relevant for flexible, adaptive leadership. These skills involve the ability to

understand the situational requirements for effective leadership and to be flexible in adapting to changing conditions and crises (Mumford, Friedrich, Caughron, & Byrne, 2007). Evidence that these skills are related to effective leadership is still limited but the number of supportive studies has been increasing in recent years. Cognitive complexity and systems thinking include the ability to understand how the various parts of the organization relate to each other and how changes in one part of the system will eventually affect the other parts. Managers must also be able to comprehend how changes in the external environment will affect the organization. A manager with high cognitive complexity and systems thinking is able to develop a better mental model to help understand causal relationships (Senge, 1990). Situational awareness and social intelligence both involve a

person's ability to identify and understand the leadership situation, including social and political processes and relationships. Social intelligence also includes the ability to select an appropriate response and to be flexible on one's behavior (Zaccaro, Gilbert, Thor, & Mumford, 1991). Openness to learning and new ideas is one of the big five personality traits, and it is essential for leaders who must adapt to changing conditions. This trait includes the ability to accept feedback about the impact of one's actions and learn how to improve them. The trait also includes the ability to learn new ways to dealing with problems. A person who relies on habitual forms of behavior and denies negative feedback or new ideas is unlikely to be flexible and adaptive (Argyris, 1991; Dechant, 1990). The practical implications of the research on traits and skills relevant for flexible leadership is that measures of them should be included when assessing candidates for positions where behavioral flexibility is especially important. A second implication is that management development should include opportunities to enhance skills relevant for flexible leadership. A third implication is that when individuals make career choices they should carefully consider the extent of their current skills in flexible adaptive leadership and the need for these skills in the types of positions they seek to attain.

#### Link between Learning Organization and Leadership Flexibility

The learning organizations profoundly affect the individuals employed in it and several questions arise regarding what is the responsibility of the individual especially the leader to the time and commitment towards learning activities. Learning in Organizations is reliant on individuals applying shared new understanding to their organization and to the generation of new behaviors. The role of those who create learning organizations is to produce an environment in which such a coordinated intellectual transformation can take place (Waldersee, 1997). The transition to a learning organization involves change in a complex system. Transforming a complex system is difficult without a leader who understands the needs of the situation, the people and the goal and undertakes the necessary action to achieve the transition. With this understanding the study will focus on the role of a transformational leader in creating a learning organization.

According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), five practices of exemplary leadership include:

- i) Modeling
- ii) Inspiring

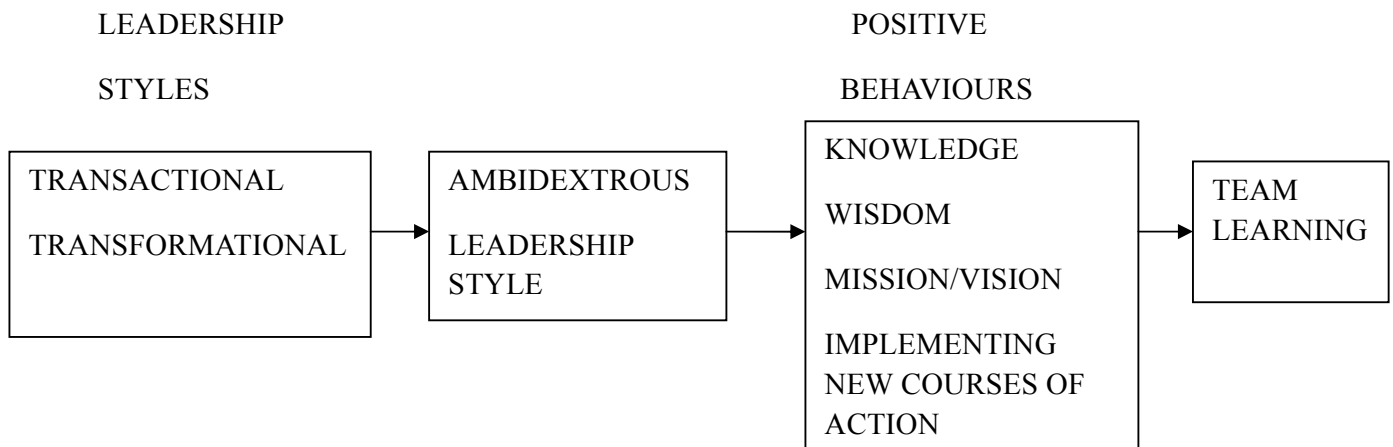
- iii) Challenging
- iv) Enabling and
- v) Encouraging assure successful relationships between leaders and constituents.

These five practices reflect key traits that characterize a highly regarded leader. Hence, leadership flexibility should ensure a supportive learning environment which encompasses the following distinguishing characteristics:

- **Psychological safety.** To learn, employees cannot fear being belittled or marginalized when they disagree with peers or authority figures, ask naive questions, own up to mistakes, or present a minority viewpoint. Instead, they must be comfortable expressing their thoughts about the work at hand.
- **Appreciation of differences. Learning** occurs when people become aware of opposing ideas. Recognizing the value of competing functional outlooks and alternative worldviews increases energy and motivation, sparks fresh thinking, and prevents lethargy and drift.
- **Openness to new ideas. Learning** is not simply about correcting mistakes and solving problems. It is also about crafting novel approaches. Employees should be encouraged to take risks and explore the untested and unknown.
- **Time for reflection.** All too many managers are judged by the sheer number of hours they work and the tasks they accomplish. When people are too busy or overstressed by deadlines and scheduling pressures, however, their ability to think analytically and creatively is compromised. They become less able to diagnose problems and learn from their experiences. Supportive **learning** environments allow time for a pause in the action and encourage thoughtful review of the **organization's** processes.

**Information Technology, strategic predictors and flexibility-** Technology has exponentially increased the amount of information available in an instant, while time to sort and process new information has evaporated. Leaders everywhere are facing challenges that they did not anticipate and are expected to act quickly, decisively and honorably, under the pressure of increasing public cynicism and litigiousness invoked by ethical and legal scandals in every sector. Vaill (1996) coined the term “permanent white water” to describe environments of continual change in which novel problems emerge regularly and need to be

dealt with swiftly, the cost of mistakes is high, and no amount of planning or foresight can prevent or forestall the next wave of inevitable change. The dynamic nature of today's environment and the recent dramatic increase in public scrutiny has increased the nonprofit sector's urgent need for leaders who can incorporate vast amounts of information, synthesize it in new ways and develop innovative new approaches. More than ever before, nonprofit leaders are required to be active and skilled learners



### **Proposed Model for Team Learning Through Flexibility in Ambidextrous Leadership**

Ambidextrous leadership is Meta analytically analysis integrate innovation to show a complex and inconsistent picture of this relationship. This has mostly neglected the complex nature of innovation process that leads to changing requirements within these processes. The main requirements of innovation are exploration and exploitation as well as a flexibility to switch between those two activities. The ambidexterity theory of leadership for innovation that specifies two complementary sets of leadership behaviour that foster exploration and exploitation in individuals and teams opening and closing leader behaviours, This ambidextrous leadership, because it utilizes opening and closing leader behaviours and switches between them to deal with the ever changing requirements of innovation process. Routes to ambidextrous leadership (Rosing, Kathrin; Frese, Michael)

## Flexibility in transformational leadership

Transformational leadership aims to operate beyond self-interest, which prompts visionary, enthusiastic transformational leaders to perform their roles to reflect loop and adaptive learning (Argyris and Schön, 1978; Kolb, 1984) by combining existing with new knowledge and ideas, as well as experimenting and encouraging others to do the same (Bass and Avolio, 1990). Thus, transformational leadership is characterized by charisma, inspiration, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration (Hsu et al., 2002; Bass, 1998, 1999; Jung and Avolio, 1999), and a transformational leader provides vision and sense of pride, which promotes the respect and trust of followers (Bass, 1998). These leaders inspire by leading-by-example, and explaining how to achieve high standards (Bass, 1999). Tushman and O'Reilly (1996) argue that in a competitive environment, leaders must be ambidextrous; that is, they need to have the capacity to implement diverse courses of action simultaneously, including exploration and exploitation, incremental and radical, flexibility and control, and feed-forward and feedback learning (Vera and Crossan, 2004, p. 227). In certain circumstances, leaders need to implement transactional behaviors, such as when the organization is in a stable position and the learning objectives aim to refine and restore balance. In this case, transactional leadership, which emphasizes structure and routine, is appropriate. However, when the organization faces a dynamic, evolving situation and organizational learning is required to be adaptive and progressive, transformational leadership is more suitable.

But rarely are organizations solely in one phase or the other. In a competitive environment, they do not have the luxury of choice and must instead oscillate between or be both simultaneously. In this realistic scenario, leaders must adopt the most suitable approach, which in most cases demands ambidextrous leadership.

## Conclusion

The establishment of a positive relationship between learning strategies and flexibility in Transformational leadership has significant implications for leaders and for leadership development programs in learning organizations. Ackoff (1999) noted that in spite of a significant investment in leadership development programs, there has not been a noticeable increase in transformational leaders. Hence, this study has introduced new lines of inquiry

about affecting leadership flexibility through focusing on cultivating specific strategies for learning from experience.

Today's management practices indicate that the long-coveted industrial model of a centralized, authoritarian, or top-down management is not as effective as a participatory management style in producing quality products or services. Management must provide commitment for long-term learning in the form of resources. Yet, adaptation to current problems and changes is unlikely to prove sufficient; it is now suggested that companies need to develop proactive strategies so that future trends and environmental conditions can be predicted and continuous modifications made (Senge, 1994). It has been proposed in the study that transforming into learning organizations is imperative to meet the present environmental challenges and

Flexibility in leadership along with transformational leadership impacts the development of learning organizations.

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