Introduction

Organizational Learning (O.L) is a framework whereby organizations learn, unlearn and relearn (Fiol, & Lyle, 1985). Scholars agree that there is paucity of empirical studies that demonstrate the validity of the many assumptions supporting the O.L frameworks. O.L is complex because: (i) organizations and their members are complex constructs, (ii) the chaotic and constantly environment in which organizations operate, and (iii) the O.L goal’s difficulty: i.e.: whole systems renewal and constant innovation within interconnected systems, subsystems and other organizational components (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999). Researchers have explored O.L from different perspectives (e.g. either focusing on individual or organization, memory, environment etc) each emphasizing aspects deemed critical in a particular context.

However, regardless different perspectives, the importance of the external environment seems to be one of the key aspects that impact upon the organizational capacity to learn. The environmental analysis is critical as this is the element where organizations import energy to survive (i.e. knowledge, information and data) enabling them to react to external stimuli impacting upon organizational effectiveness (Schwandt, & Marquardt, 2000). Thus, the environmental scanning plays a key role within other assumptions of the model presented: (i) O.L is seen as learning unlearning, and relearning in a continuous dynamic cycle, (ii) complexity of the
contemporary business context, and (iii) organization seen as open systems with all components being intertwined with each other.

Model Characteristics

In addition to focusing on the external environment the model is based upon and presents the following characteristics. (1) The model is not linear. The reasons are that organizations are complex and open systems and dynamics in nature (Schwandt, & Marquardt, 2000). Also, organizational complexity stems from multiple interaction and constant changes that happen internally, and as a result, the individual learning is affected by factors such as climate, culture, power, politics, systems and rules. This assumption shapes O.L as a continuous process of reassessment the status quo and revaluation of the organizational capabilities in order to cope with an ongoing internal and external fluidity.

The above assumptions bring additional elements that are key to understand O.L within open systems: (i) while scholars assert that organizations do not learn but their members do, this does mean that O.L is necessarily about individuals changing their behaviors but the learning process includes the overall organizational architecture and its components, (ii) the latter concept leads to the second characteristic of the model seen as a holistic framework containing the majority of the elements that constitute the organizational infrastructure.

It is believed that accuracy is necessary to describe O.L in that human systems are both objectives and subjective which makes them elusive and difficult to analyze. Even a thorough analysis of an organization is likely to lead to different views and perspective with elements of subjectivity and biases as to what is needed to achieve O.L. For this reason, accuracy in incorporating as many elements as possible might
reduce the risk of neglecting important pieces of the framework that may have a relevant impact on the O.L outcomes.

(iii) The third feature of the model is the ongoing cyclical diagnostic, reflection, and action phases. To achieve a holistic and thorough process of learning, unlearning and relearning is necessary to continuously scan and challenge both the external environment and the internal components. This process occurs at every organizational level and it embraces a knowledge management cycle of intuiting, interpreting, and integrating information. The diagnostic, reflection, and action mechanisms enable organizations to interpret the environment, scanning and acquiring data. These data are diagnosed, reflected upon and through action are interspersed into the internal environment affecting strategies, systems, processes, and culture etc. The impact of data, information on the internal framework generates further reflection and taking action that enable a transformation toward O.L positive outcomes such as change in behaviors, alignment, innovation, and adaptation and in turn organizational performances.

Drawn upon the OLSM model, the two components of reflection and action make the model dynamic in nature (Schwandt, & Marquardt, 2000). Reflection is about integrating knowledge with previous acquired mental structures, make meanings, and changing beliefs, perceptions and views challenging existing assumptions and claims. Action triggers transformations. Action is the component that ties cognition (knowledge, beliefs, understanding) with change (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999).

The environment is where the energy for renewal innovation and adaptation comes from. Regardless the organization stance toward the external stimuli, a certain amount of scanning is always necessary (Daft & Weick, 1984). The scanning process
may have a different intensity and organizations can be proactive or reactive toward external stimuli. In spite of the differences in strategic approaches the role of management would be essential in translating the external stimuli into systems, knowledge and downward into employee’s behaviors. By contrast emergent complexity theories maintain that in chaotic complex environment leadership may loses full control on team and other internal dynamics thereby reducing influence on the O.L processes and outcomes. In these complex settings for O.L to occurs leaders have to be able to establish networks and relationships with groups to enabling a direction that is congruent with the organizational strategy. These inferences validate Morgeson, & Hofmann (1999) assumption that organizations are complex human collective construct whereby norms dictated to direct groups are not sufficient to ensure strategic alignment and political processes, personalities, and other interactions may supersede internal strategies and norms. Hence, changing behaviors by addressing how people interchange learning is critical rather than deploying traditional ways of leadership.

In addition to reflection and before action takes place the model foresees a process of continuous process of questioning, challenging and testing systems and subsystems (i.e. environment, the strategy, influence and impact of leadership, structures, culture, and others mechanisms to share information and so on). Questioning and understanding the impact of each actions is a central element of OLMS model that is based on questioning and reflection. This is one of the main challenges of dynamic O.L model requiring organizations to constantly reflect on their actions, to value dialogue and diversity, to challenge own assumptions and lastly to understand where and how HR systems and process could facilitate and develop the appropriate individual behaviors. Often time this process does not occur or occurs in
some areas of the organizations only. The “management blindness” tends to replicate actions that have produced success in the past but which may not longer be effective in a changing environment. This strategic behavior hinders effective O.L over-relying on culture, practices, and norms that are accepted as valid and successful and leading to a resistance to change. On the other hand, organizations and their members who have acquired a mindset of continuously challenging and reviewing activities, structures, policies and behaviors have more probability to achieve the positive outcome of O.L.

By incorporating one of the main features of the 4Is framework (Crossan, Lane, & White, 1999) the model places individuals at the core of the O.L process following a process of intuiting (making connections, and identifying patterns and meanings) integrating (through collective actions) and institutionalizing (linking systems, strategies and routines with individual learning through interactions and communications). On these aspects, the challenges lie on the organization’s capability to have motivated staff with a positive attitude toward change and teams where members interact and learn from each other. Therefore effective HR practices in attracting and retaining staff with the required competencies is of paramount importance to achieve the O.L outcomes. In addition to individuals’ self-motivation and effective HR practices, Nonaka (1994) adds the socialization process, dialogue, trust, and coordination with managers providing sense of direction, self-organized teams as the underpinning conditions to achieve effective O.L.

Another challenge of the model is what Levinthal & March (1993) call the “learning myopia”. They contend that in many settings members solely learn to achieve immediate performance but in the long run this causes atrophy in that successes develop some competencies but overall neglects innovations hindering the organizations’ capability to achieve a competitive position or unlearn and relearn.
Another barrier to OL is that organizations tend to apply knowledge and proven solutions or adapt what other organizations have experimented with success without accurate testing (Bapuji, & Crossan, 2004).

Another central element of the model is the organizational infrastructure (strategies, leadership, structures, rules, culture and climate, etc.) Scholars assert that O.L is more than the sum of the learning of individuals. Within this assumption the learning takes place managing the components of the organizational infrastructure and moving pieces around (Easterby-Smith, Lyles, & Tsang, 2008). This is achieved by changing management practices, processes, and culture in view of adapting to the organizational strategies and changes in the environment. This is the place where the organization should constantly reflect, and diagnose its effectiveness through surveys, and other data collection methods and in turn making sense as to whether or not the organization is achieving the O.L outcomes. The subsequent challenges are multidimensional: (i) individual complexities and differences in beliefs and perceptions that make culture and climate difficult to change or (ii) leadership styles ingrained in the leaders behaviors that have shaped the organization’s modus operandi over the years, (iii) at this stage the organization should inquiry as to whether members are learning, and overall whether there is congruence and alignment of the overall infrastructure with the external environment, the strategies and the O.L outcomes.

This process of enquiry about alignment, innovation and ability to adapt to external complexities and predict future consequences should be an ongoing process at managerial, group and individual levels. (iv) Lastly, given the multiplicity of these challenges it should be noted that there is no recipe that would offer solutions as to
how to build effective infrastructures. However, the model places leadership and management practices at the center and for very specific reasons. Management and leadership practices are considered one of the main drivers that help organizations learn due to the influence upon individuals, team, processes, rules and strategies, which in turn affect culture with multiple ripple effects on systems and subsystems. Whilst Daft and Weik (1994) identify managerial behavioral as critical in scanning the environment along the same lines Schwandt, & Marquardt (2000) consider managerial behaviors the essential vehicle toward O.L effectiveness. In their OLSM model they advocate for leaders that are system thinkers, encourage action-learning activities and who are ethical, open, and focused on relationships, networks and encouraging accountability, innovation and experimentation.

However, given complexity and multidimensional notion of leadership there should not be a universal leadership style that serves all purposes. However, there could be behaviors that stem from the characteristics of the O.L framework and its positive outcomes and goals. These behaviors would, inter alia, include the following (i) vision and ability to look backwards and forward both internally and externally. (ii) Ability to see organizations as complex interconnected array of systems and subsystems foreseeing impact of action and events. (iii) Ability to stimulate an organizational consciousness that learning is good but no enough and there should be a continuous challenge of assumptions, mindsets, cultures, and modus operandi. (iv) A leadership expertise that enables dialogue, cooperation, communication and interchange as the drivers of an effective O.L model. (v) Leadership capacity to transform organizations in a continuous self-appraisal system. (vi) Leaders’ ability to manage the tensions between current staff competencies and the need to review and
adapt employees’ skills acquired to the new information and data thus shaping culture, values and beliefs.

**Conclusions**

Theories of organizational learning are not natural laws; they are explanations of social phenomena that need to be continuously tested in the context of the organization (Schwandt, & Marquardt, 2000). This statement summarizes the complexity of the O.L process and the need to test and diagnose models and theories. The model presented captures elements form the OLSM and 4Is models, and is based upon a number of other assumptions: focus on reflection, action, continuous diagnosis, centered on individual and effective HRD practices, such leadership and other behavioral mechanisms to enable culture changes an shift in mindset. One element though has emerged as a common vehicle for O.L effectiveness that is the need to ensure dialogue within the organization and its members at all levels as the essential condition to achieve the O.L outcomes. Dialogue is the central element of any model of organizational transformation (Schein, 2003).

Like other models, the one discussed presents many challenges stemming from the complex nature of organizations as multifaceted human constructs. Lastly and as asserted by Huber (1991) another challenge is how to evaluate and measure the O.L outcomes and deliverables.

**References**


