

# LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN PUBLIC SECTOR UNIVERSITIES: POLICY FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIES

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## Introduction:

The proposed strategies in this paper were formulated taking cognizance of the current government policy on the modernisation of the public sector universities to meet the challenges in the rapidly changing environment. It is to be noted that the series of Development Circulars introduced by the Federal Government since 1991 and the Ministry of Higher Education recently are essentially aimed at creating a learning environment in the public sector universities.

For instance the advocacy of quality control circles, the use of manual work procedures and desk files, and even the introduction of punch clocks or cards and name tags way back in 1980's, were aimed at to discipline the work habits of civil servants towards the process of improvement of individuals and the organisation. With the advent of ICT and the government commitment towards knowledge based economy to realise vision 2020, there is no other alternative but for the government agencies and public sector universities to be a Learning Organisation to remain relevant and effective.

## Concept of Learning Organization:

Learning Organisation is defined as an organisation in which people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns or thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free and where people are continually learning how to learn together (Senge, 1990).

Learning Organisation is basically an organisation that goes through 'organisational transformation'. In contrast to the traditional organisation that evolves through 'organisational development', this transformation process makes the organisation develop itself rather than be changed by external intervention. The development of a Learning Organisation involves the assumption that learning is of value, happens at all times, is a continuous process and can be shared (West, 1994).

## Strategic Conceptual Framework:

In attempting to form strategies based on the analysis made and the conceptual framework based on Peter Senge's five disciplines (Senge, 1990), following strategies are proposed towards creating a Learning Organisation in the public sector universities.

Learning is the soul of the organisation. Everybody should be made aware and be conscious of this value. The people in the organisation must be seen to fully support and believe in continuous learning. An illustration of this shared value is the development of the vision, mission and objectives statement through the involvement of people from all levels in the organisation so that everybody learns and understands the process. Another shared value that the organisation should strive for is excellence in all aspects of the organisation's activities.

## Strategy 2: Self-Renewal

Knowledge gained by an organisation should be used to further improve output and to avoid from being obsolete. In this regard, it is proposed that the series of all development administration circulars and guidelines should be updated and consolidated as a cohesive administrative reform program to realise the self renewal objective in the public sector.

## Strategy 3: Foster Continuous Learning Environment

Organisation should encourage everyone to embrace continuous change and help develop a learning environment as in the Japanese Kaizen. This can be translated into learning opportunities through programs such as workshop, seminars, discussions, dialogues, group dynamics, meetings and courses. This can be reinforced through having continuous access to information through an established information system such as library, archives, boards, notes, ICT facilities, periodicals and news media. Top management should publicly talk about learning at weekly meetings, forums and monthly assemblies.

## Strategy 4: Build Desire and Opportunity to Learn from others

Managers should facilitate learning from external and internal environment. Regular dialogues and interaction with the clients and partners of the organisation will enable it to meet the expectation of its target group and in the process strive for excellence in the delivery of its services. In this regard the practice of holding regular dialogues with the various partner organisations and stakeholders is an example of the adoption of the strategy which others should adopt.

## Strategy 5: Better Managed Learning Environment

For an effective learning environment, the organisation should focus on training the trainers. Continuous and reinforced training should be practiced in the entire public sector universities. Organisation should provide adequate funding to ensure acquisition of better tools and use of improved techniques and methods of training and efficient support staffs.

## Strategy 6: Changing Organisation Culture

For Learning Organisation to be effective, organisation culture must change to encourage learning. An example of good organisation culture is the Fish Bowl concept where the entire organisation is given the opportunity to participate and comment on future directions and strategies of the company. Open communication should be encouraged to draw lessons from success and failures. Failures are viewed as opportunities to learn. Corporate climate must engender learning and not stifle learning among its personnel.



## **Strategy 7: Retain and Retrieve Organisational Memory**

Organisations must be equipped with systems for easy access and retrieval of records and information for personnel to review and learn organisations experience so that the organisation will have the benefit of hindsight and improve further in future endeavours.

### **Strategy 8: Empower to Stimulate Learning and Creativity**

Managers in organisation must empower to stimulate learning and creativity through delegation of power at relevant levels within the organisation. In the public sector universities there must also be delegation and relegation of power between the central and operating agencies. For example, to provide flexibility to handle allocation and budget so that managers are not subject rigid rules and regulations that hinders learning and creativity.

### **Strategy 9: Availability of Skilled Manpower**

Aspiring Learning Organisation should invest in the development of its human resources so that it can avoid the situation of having 'square peg in round hole'. It is wise for organisation to even "over invest" in people so that they can make excellent workers out of ordinary people. This is an area where the public sector universities must pay particular attention to.

## **References:**

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## **Strategy 10: Synergise with the Environment**

As a result of globalisation and the ICT revolution the public sector organisation should be adaptable and responsive to the changing environment. A case in point is where it is faced with competition from within, because of the liberalization in education and as well as rapid developments in technology. Organisations including those in the public sector universities should remain abreast and synergise with the environment to remain competitive and avoid obsolescence. This is particularly important as the public sector universities have continued to be the vanguard of economic planning and development of the country.

### **Conclusion:**

This case study (Yunus, 2000) has shown that the concept of a Learning Organisation is applicable in the public sector in Malaysia and therefore applicable to universities. The study confirms that many government agencies are considered as a Learning Organisation, albeit, not a fully fledged one. The adoption of the strategies proposed in this paper can facilitate the realization of Learning Organisations in the public sector universities in Malaysia.

It is important to have a concerted plan of action to create awareness in the public sector universities of the concept of Learning Organisation and its importance as a means for improving their efficiency and effectiveness in delivery of services. This will be in consonance with the objective of striving for excellence in the higher education service, particularly in the context of Malaysia's move to leap frog into knowledge-based economy to realize vision 2020.