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European Journal of Experimental Biology, 2012, 2 (6):2206-2211



### Relationship between learning culture and organizational performance in Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was the relationship between organizational learning culture and organizational performance from the perspective of Ministry of sports and youth sports experts of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Sports experts of Ministry of Sports and Youth have established Statistical population of research that they all participated in the study. For this purpose, Yang, et Al's (2004) Organizational Learning Culture questionnaire And Cho's Organizational Performance questionnaire (2009) was used. Reliability of questionnaires after a pilot study using Cronbach's alpha test, respectively ( $\alpha=0.84$ ) and ( $\alpha=0.82$ ) were obtained. Descriptive and inferential statistics methods for data analysis were used. The findings showed that between organizational learning culture and organizational performance in sports experts of Ministry of Sports and Youth, there is significant positive correlation ( $r_s=0.674$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Also among learning levels, positive relationship between learning in team level and organizational performance was significantly ( $r_s=0.653$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). The research findings on the importance of learning and its levels as one of the factors affecting performance level increase Ministry of Sports and Youth has stressed. Therefore recommended that managers and human resource department of the Ministry of Sport and Youth to create a learning culture and support that in this organization work.

**Keyword:** Organizational Learning Culture, Organizational Performance, Ministry of Sports and Youth.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century is called *fast changing world*. The name is ascribed to the era because of globalization effects, technologic developments, and the role of modern science in human life and demographic characteristics of different nations[1]. Under such circumstances, organizations struggle for survival to maintain themselves in a turbulent environment; thus, they incessantly hatch out of their dynamic moulds and move towards learning and creation of learning organizations [2].

Cyret and March (1963) first introduced the concept of *Organizational Learning* in their *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*. They contend that organizational struggle to respond to external changes and adaptation of their goals to new

circumstances would result in approaches that bring about higher organizational efficiency [3]. At the outset of the 1990s, organizational learning and learning organizations came to be common concepts in organization literature [4]. In a learning organization, people are constantly developing their capacities to attain the favorable results. New modes of learning develop. Group needs and wants are realized and employees learn to how to learn together [5-6]. Jones (2001) defines organizational learning as the ability of an organization as a whole to discover and correct mistakes as well as increasing employee competency through modification of organizational knowledge and values so that organizational efficiency will develop continually. Based on this definition, the characteristics of organizational learning process include changed mindset of employees, changed knowledge and values as well as improved organizational performance [7].

Many a scholar believes that learning is a process occurring at the individual, group and organizational levels [5-8]. Crossan et al. (1999) contend that individual learning refers to changes in individual's knowledge, beliefs and ideas. Team learning refers to shared understanding and interaction among employees. In this type of learning, people learn they should learn together. Organizational learning requires something more than shared understanding among employees. At this level of learning, organizational factors need to be linked together and to individual and group learning to facilitate organizational learning [9].

In an organization with a high level of learning, people constantly increase their competencies to create favorable outcomes [10]. To create such organizations, fundamental barriers should be identified and removed. Farr (2000) contends that an important barrier to creating learning organizations is repeated mistakes and lack of future amendments [11].

Shafaie (2001) identified management and employee false conceptions, management tendency to remain in office, environmental and non-competitive restriction, poverty of managerial knowledge and unsystematic thinking as the major barriers to learning in Iranian organizations [12]. The major barriers to creating learning organizations in Iranian sports institutions may be unsystematic organizational thinking, lack of management stability, gradual acceptance of problems and threats, lack of a shared ideal among the employees and disregard for creative individuals [13].

Learning organizations are bold, competent organizations founded based on the premise of learning and consider learning as the best way to improve performance in the long run. In other words, learning organizations draw on virtues, values and competencies of their employees as well as the lessons they learn to change and improve their performance continually [14]. Therefore, learning is process that affects organizational performance [15]. Before the relation of learning and performance is described, organizational performance should be elaborated on.

Literally, performance refers to the status or quality of functions [16]. Neely et al. (2002) contend that performance is the process of determining the efficiency of past activities. Organizational performance is a general concept referring to how organizational operations are performed. Organizational performance measurement determines whether the organization has been successful. Performance measurement is much discussed but little understood [17]. Performance measurement systems are designed as monitoring and supervision tools. Nani et al. (1990) contend that performance measurement refers to the process of ensuring that the organization follows approaches that lead to goals [18].

There are two approaches to performance measurement: subjective and objective. Either approach has its advantages and disadvantages. Objective scales are more realistic but are restricted to fiscal data and do not cover other organizational domains. On the other hand, subjective scales are less realistic but provide a rich description of organizational efficiency. It remains a matter of organizational orientations and management attitudes as to what approach to choose [19]. Yang et al. (2004) contend that a combination of subjective and objective approaches provide the best method for measuring organizational performance [20].

There are other factors that influence organizational performance either directly or indirectly. Murray (2003) refers to internal and external factors as the major variables influencing organizational performance [21]. Organizational learning culture is one of the most important internal factors affecting organizational performance [22]. Chasten et al. (2001) reported that creative companies employed high levels of organizational learning and could use the information more efficiently comparing with non-creative companies [23]. Bontis et al. (2002) contend that there is a positive correlation between the levels of learning and organizational performance such as increased income [24].

Yang et al. (2004) showed that organizational learning reinforced individual and group performance, and transmission of knowledge to the system improves organizational performance [20]. Cho (2009) conducted an empirical study on South Korean companies and found a positive correlation between the levels of learning and financial and knowledge performance [25].

As with other organizations, sports organizations tend to change constantly. These organizations need to fulfill variable requirements due to their interaction with such institutions as government, private sector, sponsors and other national and international sports organizations as well as social, cultural, economic and political factors. Creation of a learning organization can help sports organizations withstand the changes and maintain their structure. Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth Organization is the result of a merge of Physical Education Organization and National Youth Organization. The ministry is the main institution to manage sports activities in the country and has established a broad relationship with both sports and non-sports organizations, both national and foreign. Considering its responsibilities about sports, youth affairs and organizational goals, the ministry requires continuous learning at all work levels.

Several studies have yet been conducted on organizational learning at the international level. The effect of organizational learning has been investigated on various factors such as job satisfaction, market orientation, organizational commitment and performance. However, few studies have yet been conducted in Iran to investigate the relation between organizational learning and performance only in non-sports organizations. Therefore, considering the importance of organizational learning and its role in improved performance, the present study aims to investigate the relationship between organizational learning and performance in the sports experts working with Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The method of the research is descriptive and correlational, which is conducted as a field study. The population of the study consisted of all sports experts with the Ministry of Sports and Youth. The sample size was considered equal to the population (N=280). The data was collected using Learning Organization Questionnaire developed by Yang et al (2004) and Organizational Performance Questionnaire developed by Cho (2009). Both organizational learning and performance were measured in the sports experts using these two questionnaires. The content validity of the questionnaires was approved by ten professors of sports management. To calculate the reliability of the questionnaires, a pilot study was conducted whereby a number of 40 questionnaires were distributed among a sample of experts. The results showed a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha=0.84$  for Learning Organization Questionnaire and  $\alpha=0.82$  for Organizational Performance Questionnaire, which indicated the consistency of measurement. A demographic data sheet was used to collect the data on personal information including age, sex, level of education and work experience. SPSS software was used to analyze the data. As to the statistical measures, descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation and tabulations were used to describe the data. Inferential statistics including Spearman correlation formula was used to test the hypotheses.

## RESULTS

The results showed that the participants were 35 years old on average. 87.9 per cent of the participants had B.S or higher degrees and 80.1 per cent had more than 5 years of work experience. As shown in Table 1, the mean learning scores were 3.263 at the individual, 2.771 at the team and 2.890 at the organizational levels. Maximum organizational learning score was found to be 3.19 out of 7, which shows a moderate organizational learning culture in sports experts working with Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth.

**Table 1. Description of organizational learning culture based on experts' opinions**

variable	Statistic			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Learning at the individual level	3.263	0.541	2.80	5.17
Learning at the team level	2.771	0.720	2.0	5.33
Learning at the organizational level	2.890	0.643	2.83	5.18
Total organizational Learning	3.190	0.570	2.43	5.67

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of organizational performance was 2.448 out of 7.

**Table 2. Description of organizational performance based on experts' opinions**

variable	Statistic			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Organizational performance	2.448	0.586	2.25	6

Spearman correlation formula was run to examine the relationship between organizational learning culture and its subscales with organizational performance in the sports experts. As shown in Table 3, there is a significant correlation between organizational learning culture and its subscales with organizational performance. There was a positive correlation between all the subscales of organizational learning culture and organizational performance except for the individual level, which indicates a direct correlation between these two variables.

**Table 3. Relationship between organizational learning culture and its subscales with organizational performance**

	Organizational performance		
	N	r	P
Learning at the individual level	280	-0.018	0.539
Learning at the team level	280	0.653	0.000
Learning at the organizational level	280	0.626	0.000
Total organizational Learning	280	0.674	0.000

## DISCUSSION

Continual changes in the organizational environment and intense competition among organizations have come to be routine challenges to the directors. These challenges have extended over business organizations and covered sports organizations as well. Management tends to follow approaches that may guarantee organizational success. Since organizational learning is considered as an important factor in the efficiency of dynamic organizations, including sports organizations, and is closely associated with organizational achievement, the present study aimed to investigate the relationship between learning culture and organizational performance in the sports experts working with Iran's Ministry of Sports and Youth.

The results showed no significant correlation between learning at the individual level and organizational performance ( $r=-0.018$ ,  $P<0.05$ ). This is inconsistent with the findings of Bontis et al. (2002), Yang et al. (2004), Cho (2009) and Hernaus et al. (2010).

Learning is a process that brings about changes in performance through acquisition of knowledge and experience as well as training. Learning at the individual level entails changes in skills, attitudes, knowledge and values of individual employees. However, creativity, knowledge and changes in employee skills do not suffice to consider an organization as a learning organization; rather the organization needs to draw on this knowledge and changes in its performance. A key step to the realization of such performance is the elimination of old mindsets and beliefs by the management. Shafaie (2001) refers to the false conceptions held by management and employees as a significant barrier to building learning organizations. While old mindsets might have been useful in the past, they may become a barrier to current learning. An important method to eliminate these mindsets is to raise awareness towards organizational learning and its importance for the directors and employees. Management should emphasize learning as a strategic process because setting a learning strategy, particularly at the individual level, is an important tool to achieving long-term results. Therefore, the authorities in the Ministry of Sports and Youth should seek to eliminate barriers to learning, describe learning and its advantages, create learning opportunities for individual employees, support creative employees and provide suitable contexts for acquiring knowledge. In this regard, the researcher recommends seminars and training programs, journal articles and books, self-learning techniques, peer learning, formal and informal workplace training.

The results showed a significant correlation between learning at the team level and organizational performance in the sports experts ( $P=0.01$ ). This is consistent with the findings of Bontis et al. (2002), Yang et al. (2004), Cho (2009) and Hernaus et al. (2010). Considering the correlation coefficient between team learning and organizational performance ( $r=0.626$ ), it may be concluded that with increased team learning in the experts, organizational performance increases as well.

In modern complex organizations, teams bear a crucial role. Work teams carry out many duties in the organizations. Teams need learning as well. Team learning refers to the team ability to think, create and learn as a unitary entity. Senge (1990) considers team learning as a bridge to organizational learning. This type of learning is based on a principle of shared perspective. Still, individual competencies are a crucial principle since competent teams comprise competent individuals. A shared perspective helps with convergence as the main concern in this type of learning.

It is recommended that authorities and directors of the Ministry of Sports and Youth increase team learning through establishing work teams, ascribing authority to, trusting, supporting, and rewarding the creative teams and providing them with sufficient information.

The results also showed a significant positive correlation between learning at the organizational level and organizational performance, which is consistent with the findings of Bontis *et al.* (2002), Yang *et al.* (2004), Di Xie (2005), Cho (2009) and Hernaes *et al.* (2010).

Organizational learning may be realized through sharing attitudes, knowledge, experience and mindset among employees. This type of learning hinges on the knowledge and experience that constitutes the organizational memory and relies on some mechanisms such as general organizational policies and strategies [20]. Organizational learning may be realized through employees and teams. Organizations typically seek to institutionalize organizational learning as part of their culture. Learning culture should be developed so that it may increase job satisfaction as does salary, bonus, allowances, promotion and supervision. Consequently, it may improve both employee and organizational performance. Therefore, developing learning culture in sports organizations, particularly the Ministry of Sports and Youth, may improve performance in such organizations.

The directors and HR managers in the Ministry of Sports and Youth should pay considerable attention to fundamental factors influencing organizational learning including employee empowerment, strategic leadership and systemic relations. Some approaches to improving the learning culture in the Ministry of Sports and Youth may include identification of experts' performance restrictions and attempting to eliminate them, participation in group discussions, raising awareness towards organizational goals and the importance of cooperation, assessment of experts' performance, providing the experts with the latest information technologies and updated information and modeling the organizations with successful implementation of learning.

Ministry of Sports and Youth is a newly established organization whose earlier structure is changing. Considering the present findings, organizational learning may prove helpful in improving the organizational performance in this ministry. It is recommended that similar studies are conducted in other sports organizations including Sports and Youth offices as well as sports federations.

#### **Acknowledgment**

The author would like to express his appreciation to the subjects for their participation in this study.

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