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## Organizational Learning Culture in Esfahan Islamic Azad Universities

Shadi Ebrahimi Mehrabani<sup>1\*</sup> and Maziar Shajari<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Management Department, Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan Branch, Esfahan, Iran.

<sup>2</sup>Computer Science Department, Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan Branch, Esfahan, Iran.

### Authors' contributions

*This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors designed the study and gathered the quantitative data. Author SEM wrote the first draft of the manuscript and managed the literature searches. Author MS analyzed the data. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

Short Research Article

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### ABSTRACT

**Aims:** The main purpose of the study was to find the rate of developing the organizational learning culture and propose the possible ways to develop the organizational learning culture in Esfahan Islamic Azad Universities.

**Study Design:** Using a quantitative method, this study measured the rate of developing the organizational learning culture and then, using a qualitative method, a guideline for developing the organizational learning culture in Esfahan Islamic Azad Universities (EIAU) was proposed.

**Place and Duration of the Study:** The study covers Sixteen Islamic Azad universities in Esfahan, Iran, from September 2013 to February 2014.

**Methodology:** To measure the rate of development of organizational learning culture, this study used a quantitative research method based on Watkins and Marsick research on organizational learning culture. 226 faculty members of the EIAU were interviewed via questionnaires, and finally 161 usable questionnaires went through analysis. Descriptive analysis was used to test the hypotheses. Based on the results of the quantitative section of the study, interviews with five faculty members were conducted to find guidelines that can help create the appropriate context for developing the organizational learning culture in EIAU.

**Results:** Findings showed that the rate of the development of organizational learning culture in EIAU has been lower than average.

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\*Corresponding author: E-mail: ebrahimish@yahoo.com;

**Conclusion:** Guidelines were proposed to help create the appropriate context for developing the organizational learning culture in EIAU. These guidelines can be utilized by other universities in order to develop their learning culture more effectively.

*Keywords: Organizational culture; organizational learning; organizational learning culture.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, in order to face a variety of challenges, organizations are compelled to acquire core competencies and maintain their competitive advantage. In this era of fast-changing development, organizations have to deal with constant needs in learning for the development of their employees. However, the environment and the culture of an organization may affect the types and numbers of learning-related proceedings and worker job satisfaction in the workplace [1]. Many higher education professionals believe that universities are the main organization for promoting the learning process in the society. They must transform the society to a learning society [2]. Noting that the universities have a great role in developing the society, their access to newest scientific research is very important. Learning and learning culture are inseparable parts of every university.

In order to explore the rate of development of the organizational learning culture, a national study was undertaken. The main purpose of this study was to find the rate of developing the organizational learning culture and proposing the possible ways to develop the organizational learning culture in Esfahan Islamic Azad Universities.

## 2. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

According to Conner [3] organizational culture can be defined as the "interrelationship of shared beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions that are acquired over time by members of an institution"(p. 164). Employee interaction, organizational functioning and all decision making can be affected by culture [4]. Organizational success or failure extensively depends on organizational culture, as it can impact organizational operation. While there is no universally accepted definition of organizational culture [5], many definitions concentrate on norms of behavior and shared values among a group of members in an organization [3,6,7].

At the university level, culture can be defined as the values and beliefs of university stakeholders (i.e., administrators, faculty, students, board members and support staff), based on tradition and communicated verbally and nonverbally. Decision-making processes at universities are significantly influenced by values and beliefs [8]. These beliefs shape individuals and organizational behaviors. Managers and leaders increasingly have to be aware of the important role of culture in university change and development. Appropriate behavior, individual motives, processing information, and internal relationships and values are some components which are thought of by an effective university culture [9]. Organizational learning culture is a kind of organizational culture which facilitates efficient adaptations to challenging environments, and extensively helps in the ongoing development of an organization [10].

### 3. ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING CULTURE

Organizational learning culture generally focuses on research studies associated with the concept of a learning organization [11]. This learning ability has to be the continuing and driving force for all organizations in order to adjust to any unexpected changes in the environment. There is a link between organizational learning culture, and employee and organizational performance, as well as psychological and economic outcomes [12].

In fact, organizational learning culture is a type of organizational culture that integrates with the organizational learning. Organizational learning culture includes organizational phenomena that "support the acquisition of information, the distribution and sharing of learning, and that reinforce and support continuous learning and its application to organizational improvement"(p. 99) [13].

There are a variety of perspectives that have been used to define organizational learning [14]. Different levels of organizational learning were introduced by Argyris and Schon [15] which are single-loop and double-loop learning. They argued that these two levels of learning are critical for organizations, depending on the specific situation requiring organizational learning. Robey, Boudreau, and Rose [16] clearly outlined five main characteristics that define organizational learning: (a) organizational learning occurs at the organizational level; (b) organizational learning is a process, not a structure; (c) organizational learning is both intentional and unintentional; (d) organizational learning requires organizational memory repositories and mental models; and (e) organizational learning guides organizational action. Moreover, Lopez et al. [14] contended that "organizational learning can be defined as a dynamic process of creation, acquisition and integration of knowledge aimed at the development of resources and capabilities that contribute to better organizational performance"(p. 228).

"As a matter of fact, little has been known about how to adequately measure the learning organization culture as a supportive system for organizational learning process until the Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) came into being" [17]. Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) are developed by Watkins and Marsick [11]. The applicability of this questionnaire and its validity have been verified in many different cultures (e.i. United States, Colombia, China, Taiwan, Korea and Iran [1,17-22]). In this regard, this questionnaire is used for the current study. Watkins and Marsick [11] proposed an integrated model and specified seven dimensions of a learning organization culture which are described as follows:

- Continuous learning: by continuous learning individuals can learn on the job as learning is designed into the work. Therefore, ongoing education and individual development opportunities will be provided.
- Inquiry and dialogue: questioning, feedback, and experimentation are supported by organizational culture; people achieve reasoning skills to state their ideas and the abilities to listen to and inquire others' ideas and viewpoints.
- Team learning: in order to achieve different modes of thinking, teams are used in the workplaces; collaboration is valued by the culture, and rewarded; the man expecting of teams is to learn by working together.
- Embedded system: Necessary systems to share learning are created, maintained, and integrated with work; these technology systems are accessible for employees. In this study, they are called "systematic training".

- Empowerment: People are involved in setting and implementing a shared vision; responsibility is distributed so that people are motivated to learn what they are held accountable to do.
- System connection: every organization is connected to its communities; in order to adjust work practices, employees recognize the overall environment and use information; organizations have to help their employees to see the effect of their work on the whole organization. In this study it is called as systematic communication.
- Strategic leadership: strategically leaders use learning for business results. They also model, champion, and support learning [11].

#### **4. STUDY HYPOTHESES**

The main hypothesis of this research is: "There is the appropriate context for developing the dimensions of organizational learning culture in Esfahan Islamic Azad universities (EIAU).

To approve the result for this main hypothesis, 7 sub-hypotheses were posed as follows:

- There is an appropriate context for developing continuous learning in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing inquiry and dialogue in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing team learning in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing a systematic training in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing empowerment in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing a systematic communication in EIAU.
- There is an appropriate context for developing a strategic leadership in EIAU.

#### **5. METHODOLOGY**

This study was divided into two parts. In the first part, the hypotheses were tested to find if "there is an appropriate context for developing an organizational learning culture in EIAU." In this part, the quantitative research methodology was used. A set of questionnaires was developed to assess the organizational learning culture. 21 items on this questionnaire were adopted from research by Watkins and Marsick [11]. The questionnaire was translated from English into Persian (the national language in Iran). After translating the questionnaire, two professionals in the field of management who were expert in both English and Persian languages were requested to check the translation. They translated the Persian questionnaire back into English, and then contrasted their translated questions with the original ones. Then they suggested several changes in the Persian rendition of the questionnaire in order to have the most authentic translation of the questions therein.

The population of this study were the faculty members of Esfahan Islamic Azad universities. Esfahan is one of the biggest cities in Iran, with 23 branches and 6 centers of Islamic Azad universities. Sixteen branches were chosen for data gathering. These universities are ranked as comprehensive, very large, large and medium sized branches, and the rest are small sized. These universities have 1562 faculty members. Using the 30 initial distributed questionnaires, based on the Cochran formula, the sample size was estimated to include 226 people. Random sampling helped us to select individuals to participate in the study. After distributing and collecting the questionnaires and the outlier detection process, there were 161 usable questionnaires for analyzing with a response rate of 71 percent.

In the second part, five faculty members were interviewed in the place of study. These were selected from among the faculty members with a doctoral degree and more than 15 years of work experience at the university. Based on this qualitative research, a set of guidelines was compiled which can help create the appropriate context for developing the organizational learning culture.

**6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Ahead of gathering data, reliability test was done using Cronbach's alpha value. The test showed the over level of 0.7 for each contract which illustrated that the questionnaire was reliable. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the hypotheses. The results showed that 30% of the respondents were female and 70% were male. About 40% of them were more than 40 years old and around 65% had a Master's degree, and 35% had a doctoral degree. To find out the data distribution of constructs, a descriptive data analysis was done. Table 1 illustrates that the mean of the participants' scored responses for all items were between 3.64 to 4.18. It needs to be mentioned that in the questionnaire of the study, 5 is rated as the very lowest agreement, and 1 is rated as the highest agreement with the items. Therefore, analysis of the data shows that the rate of developing an organizational learning culture in EIAU is lower than average. In addition, comparing the mean scores shows that there is not an equal development of the organizational learning culture dimensions in place of the study. Continues learning has the lowest and team learning has the highest rate.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of constructs**

	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. deviation</b>	<b>Variance</b>
Development of continuous learning	161	2.67	4.1822	.56636	.321
Developing the inquiry and dialogue	161	3.50	3.7267	.82339	.678
Developing the team learning	161	3.50	3.6460	.78190	.611
Developing the empowerment	161	3.67	3.8261	.79415	.631
Developing a systematic training	161	3.33	3.6542	.73964	.547
Developing a systematic communication	161	2.50	3.9907	.70594	.498
Developing a strategic leadership	161	2.67	4.0455	.62416	.390
Valid N	161				

**7. CONCLUSION AND GUIDELINE**

The findings show that the development of a learning culture in EIAU is lower than average. Therefore, none of the hypotheses were supported. As a result, for development of an effective learning culture, it is necessary to create a technical, human and scientific context to support the continuous learning, inquiry and dialogue, team learning, systematic training, empowerment, systematic communication, and strategic leadership. In this regard, the researchers did an interview with five faculty members of EIAU. As a result, the following guidelines were proposed to establish further development of a learning culture. While, these guidelines are useful for the universities' managers, it is also recommended to other researchers to test their applicability in the mentioned universities or other organizations with a different culture. The main limitation of this study was that parts of the study, which was carried out by interviews, relied upon qualitative perceptions. Thus, some bias may exist,

and there is the probability that the facts may be different from one individual's perception to another. In addition, due to time and work force limitations, it was impossible to include more universities.

### **7.1 Guidelines for Developing Continuous Learning**

- Allocate rewards to support learning and teaching.
- Encourage employees to educate.
- Emphasize the importance of learning practical computer skills to avoid traditional staff training.
- Establish required training courses for staff to improve their knowledge through using new techniques.

### **7.2 Guidelines for Developing Inquiry and Dialogue**

- Promote a culture of asking, examining and getting feedback.
- Ask for the employees' views and use them in the work.
- Provide feedback to the employees regarding their learning.
- Try to make a friendlier climate in order to build trust among employees.

### **7.3 Guidelines for Developing Team Learning**

- Try to promote a culture of acceptance of others' opinion.
- Use new methods to encourage and persuade the personnel to store and distribute useful organizational knowledge.
- Create opportunities for experts to exchange their information – like having more efficient meetings.
- Use different methods of group decision making.
- Encourage employees with group work.

### **7.4 Guidelines for Developing Empowerment**

- Give people control over resources.
- Support calculated risk-taking.
- Use the best monitoring method in order to empower others.
- Facilitate easy access, for all employees, to scientific and technical knowledge used in other universities, via the internet.
- Promote research and development (R&D) centers, and have communication with other universities' R&D centers.

### **7.5 Guidelines for Developing Systematic Training**

- Record successful and unsuccessful experiences; make a larger effort to eliminate the defects of the past experiences and programs in future programs.
- Use different methods to store and record the knowledge of experienced employees.
- Establish useful training courses for all employees.
- Create a measurement system for performance appraisal.
- Measure the results of training.

## **7.6 Guidelines for Developing Systematic Communication**

- Encourage global perspectives.
- Work with external resources.
- Reduce organizational hierarchy to facilitate relationships.
- Encourage accepting diverse perspectives.

## **7.7 Guidelines for Developing Strategic Leadership**

- Provide mentoring/coaching to facilitate the learning process.
- Provide opportunities to learn.
- Support competitive thinking.
- Lead the university toward becoming a learning organization.
- Use the knowledge of experienced people at work.

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Shadi Ebrahimi Mehrabani has got her Ph.D in “Human Resource Management” from University of Technology Malaysia (UTM) at 2013. She has got her M.S. Degree in “Human Resource Management” from Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan, Iran, 2007 and a Bachelor Degree in “Computer Software” from Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran, 1999. Currently, she is Assistance Proffesor at Islamic Azad University (Dehaghan Branch), Iran. She has more than 20 research papers in various eminent journals and international conferences. She is author of the books: Principle of Supervising and also, she is one of the authors of book: Leadership and Management in 21’s Century which considered as a academic resource in several universities.

Maziar Shajari is Assistant Professor at Computer Department, Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan branch since 1998. His research interest focuses on Information Systems, Computer System Analyses and Design, and Knowledge Management. Most recently, he has been working on Information Technology Adoption Models for E-Government Services. He is working on introducing a more appropriate IT adoption model for developing countries. Shajari teaches computer system analysis and design and several other topics in Islamic Azad University. He holds a B.A. and M.S. in Computer Software at Islamic Azad University and obtained Ph.D. in Computer Science from University of Technology Malaysia. He has published several publications on the Adoption Information Systems and Knowledge Management.

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## **COMPETING INTERESTS**

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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