

DEVELOPING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS FOR ACHIEVEMENT OF COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGES IN ENTERPRISES IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

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Abstract:

It is a common view in both theory and practice of modern management that enterprises of the 21st century must seek new sources to build and maintain competitive advantage in the dynamic and uncertain global market. In this context, individual and organizational learning are identified as significant sources of competitiveness. Consequently, the knowledge we gain from learning and its application ensures that companies differentiate from their competitors who are very hard to copy and imitate. In addition, organizational learning generates the changes in cognitive and behavioral nature, and as such, significantly increases the organization's ability to innovate and increase its adaptability in complex and unpredictable environment. The implementation of the concept of learning organization, which implies "double loop learning", i.e. changing the underlying assumptions, mental components and way of thinking is particularly important for companies that operate in the conditions of the transition period from ex-socialist economy to a new cognitive stage capitalism and new socially responsible ways of market business. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to focus not only on theoretical critical review of the concept of the learning organization, but also to shed light on the analysis of the assumptions for the implementation of this concept in the context of building a competitive advantage in Bosnian enterprises. The analysis will be based on the results of an empirical study on the degree of the implementation of learning organizations within a hundred of Bosnian enterprises, conducted back in 2012.

Keywords: individual and organizational learning, learning organization, competitive advantage

1. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The factors that guarantees companies long term success and its key sources for construction and maintenance is by no means, an easy question to answer. It has been a common topic of multiple discussions between the authors in the field of strategic management over the last two decades. According to Michael Porter, there are two ways for companies to achieve long term competitive advantage, either on the basis of cost leadership or on the basis of differentiations related to competitors. Porter is considered to be one of the major proponents of the so called structuralist approach to company strategy, according to which the essence of the strategic behavior of companies is reduced to connecting companies with the most important element of its environment – industry. Consequently, sustaining competitive advantage within the industry is the foundation for success.

Having a competitive advantage, in other words, means achieving a more favourable industry position in regards to other industrial competitors and other market participants (Porter, 1980). Therefore, the structuralist theory affirms the so called external orientation of the company strategy. However, a number of authors who are beginning to treat structuralist approach to strategy critically has been on the rise since the nineties (Downes, 2004). Their common argument boils down to the following: internal resources are far more important than the industrial structure in achieving and maintaining a competitive advantage. Undoubtedly, a considerable decrease of the actual possibilities of the quality of strategic positioning and the process of achieving advantages, based on exploiting the unique position in the industrial and macro environment, was evident under the influence of increased intensity dynamism and unpredictability of changes in the external environment (Tipurić, 1999, p. 3). As a result, modern enterprises should attempt to base their competitive advantage and strategic action on its own internal resources. It also represents the central guideline of the so called resource access to company strategy (Tadic, 2002). The previously mentioned concept of the term resources includes tangible, intangibles and human resources. Tangible resources are all kinds of physical (material) and financial resources that the company has. Intangible resources are invisible resources present in the form of reputation (prestige) of the organization, organizational culture and the so called technological resources (patents, copyrights, company secrets, "know-how", etc). Lastly, human resources are presented in the form of knowledge and skills of the employees (Grant, 1995, p 122, Barney, 2002). The underlying assumption of resource theory is that the quality and quantity of resources are not distributed equally among its competitors, and that the heterogeneity of resources enables enterprises to build different business strategies (Sehic & Delic, 2012, pp. 56-59). G. Hamel and CK Prahalad, who very much affirm the concept of resource based strategy of enterprises along with others, believe that Porter's theory of comparative advantage has several weaknesses, such as: a) Porter's model does not unambiguously answer why some companies are able to continuously create new forms of competitive advantage, while other companies tend to be only their followers, b) according to Porter's model, critical points of the restructuring of the industry and the construction of new forms of competitive advantage cannot be identified and neither can the main driver of the process of creating competitive advantage be recognized.

By taking into account the weakness of Porter's model, Hamel and Prahalad concluded the following: the extent to which existing capabilities, knowledge and competence of the company allow competition in future industries, and what kind of competence should be built in order to ensure a greater proportion of future business opportunities, are more important issues to deal with than the strategic issues related to the position of the existing structure of the industry (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994).

The backbone of the concept of "core competence" is based on the view that companies may develop key areas on which to differentiate themselves in relation to their competitors, and consequently, ensure the long term development. In order to achieve such a potential, it is necessary to meet the criteria of uniqueness and nonimitation, and the possibility of creating a special value and benefits for the customer. According to G. Hamel and CK Prahalad, the key competence can be recognized in appearance, but they are difficult to understand and imitate. According to these authors, competitors cannot achieve the position of superior company, since the imitation of core competence is not simple. A competitor, who tried to imitate the company with developed competence, would go on a similar, often time-consuming, laborious and uncertain path of investment and organization learning (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994, p. 206)

It should be pointed out that Michael Porter criticized the concept of "core competence." According to Porter, the concept is circular. He explains that the success of the company is based on company's

own unique competence, without further explaining what it is that makes the resources and competence successful. Other authors agree that the weakness of this concept lies in the lack of a single definition of key competencies, as well as in difficulties in identifying key competence in a particular company. In addition, Porter has noticed that resource access to company strategy is applicable in environments marked by incremental change, with a limited number of strategic variables and their combinations. According to Porter, the most important advantage of this concept consists in assessing the possibilities and opportunities for diversification on the basis of integrated resources and business activities (Porter, 2005, pp. 41-42).

Regardless of the various opinions and dynamic discussion on how the company can achieve and maintain desired market position, most authors agree that by continuously obtaining and practicing new knowledge, or in other words, building the learning organization is a platform for companies today to build their competitiveness on. Today, the popularization of the sources of competitiveness, such as leadership, knowledge and learning, in the field of management, organization, human resource management and strategic management in particular, has taken on a swing in theory. The authors Raguz Jelenc and Podrug, warned of the danger that excessive use of these terms, could lead to a loss of meaning and importance of original ideas in their book titled: "The sources of competitive advantage in 21st century" (Raguz Jelenc, Podrug, 2013).

The concept of "learning organization" appeared in the late '80s and early '90s of the 20th century, primarily in response to the search for new sources to build and sustain competitive advantage in the new global competitive environment. Subsequently, in the new conditions of economy, developed under the influence of "New Age" trend, the only permanent source of competitive advantage lies in its ability to learn and use knowledge. The key competence of companies lies in its ability to act in a superior manner in regards to competitors (Janićijević, 2008, p 381), and the only way it can be achieved is through the possession and use of specific knowledge in the various stages of the business process, which by no means possess or can easily imitate competitive enterprises. Therefore, developing a learning organization is a challenge and a necessity of the modern enterprises. Senge (1990) declares that the learning organization is the vehicle to maintain competitiveness in the 21st century – it is with this sentence that he emphasized the strategic role of organizational learning and its role in achieving long term competitive advantages and organizational effectiveness and efficiency (Aghtar, 2009, p. 36).

It is possible to observe a great diversity when defining this term in the literature that mentions the phenomenon of the learning organization. For instance, Cummings defines a learning organization as an organization that has a distinctive ability to learn, adapt and change (Cummings, 1995, p 492). Additionally, Garvin identifies learning organization as an organization that has developed skills in creating, acquiring, transferring knowledge and modifying their behavior as a form of new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993, pp. 78-90). Furthermore, A. Mumford considers "learning organization" to imply "creating an environment that actively supports the behaviour and practices focused on the continued development" (Mumford, 1995). According to Pedler et al, "learning organization is one that is able to create, obtain and transfer the knowledge and modify their behavior in a way that reflects new knowledge" (Pedler, Burgoyne & Boydell, 1997).

According to Senge, who is considered to be the founder of this concept, learning organization is the one in which people continually develop their abilities in order to reach the desired results, or likewise, it is the organization which nurtures new and open models of thinking, in which the collective creativity is released from the bureaucratic discipline and people are constantly learning how to learn together "(Senge, 1990, p.17). As Senge claims, there are five "learning disciplines" that each organization should develop in order to achieve the characteristics of "learning organization", such as: Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, Team Learning, Systems Thinking (Senge 1990). It is necessary to emphasize that the concepts of organizational learning and learning organization must be distinguished: organizational learning is a process of change in cognitive structure and behaviour of the organization members, whereas learning organization is both precondition and result of that previous process (Janićijević, 2008, p. 383). The relationship between these two variables could be described as "... a learning organization is one which is good at organizational learning" (Tsang, 1997, p. 75).

After examining the literature, it is possible to see that the authors have identified various characteristics of a learning organization, but also there is a consensus with the following key features:

personal mastery, organizational culture / mental models, shared vision, team learning, system thinking, leadership, knowledge / information flow (Aghtar, 2009).

Learning organizations include systems thinking about effective and efficient adaptation to change the environment in which they operate. What follows is the style of leadership that encourages change and inspire organization members for individual and organizational learning, which is in the same time one of the key assumptions of the development of learning organization. According to Thompson, the organizational structure and culture have an important role in building a learning organization (Thompson, 1997, p 370). As a consequence of that, In this paper we shall further examine leadership, organizational culture and organizational design as key variables for building learning organization, all in the context of ensuring resources to build long term competitive advantage.

2. LEADERSHIP AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Leadership represents one of the key assumptions for building a learning organization. It is the leaders' duty to create an atmosphere for learning. This involves choosing an appropriate organizational design to represent an adequate "infrastructure" for learning and releasing creative energy and innovative abilities of employees, encouraging the construction of knowledge culture and confidence within the organization, as well as the construction of communication channels that enable the smooth running of the learning process (see for example: Goh, 1998; DiBella, 1995, Senge, 1990, Agris 1993).

According to Gephart and Marsick (1996), leaders and managers at all hierarchical levels must provide critical support for the learning and development of individuals and teams in such a way as to ensure a system that facilitates learning, encourages the organization members to generate new ideas and ensures that knowledge spreads further (Gephart & Marsick, 1996). Goh (1998) and Gephart Marsick (1996) point out the importance of "shared leadership" which implies that the traditional command-and-control role of managers and leaders in the organization that affirms learning is transformed into the role of coach and coordinator. Leader, in the learning organization, is actually the first among equals, which means that he includes employees in decision making and goal setting. According to Goh and Richards (1997), leaders need to create an atmosphere of trust and egalitarianism. Similarly, Ulrich believes that gaining employees' trust and confidence, based on leaders' behavior, is one of the important preconditions for development of learning organizations (Ulrich (1993). Senge believes that leaders in the learning organization should behave as designers, stewards, and teachers (Senge, 2006), and in order to achieve that, leaders would have to abandon their old beliefs and perceptions and rigid mental models, so they can be open to new experiences (McGill, Slocum & Lei, 1992). Leaders should be able to identify the reasons for the unsatisfactory performance of their employees, and then provide acquiring specific knowledge that would improve their performance (Aghtar, 2009, p.141).

3. ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

If the organizational culture is understood as a system of assumptions, beliefs, values and norms that are common to members of the organization, and if we take into account that it largely determines the behavior of their employees, it is clear that organizational culture can have a significant role in catalysis of the very process of learning in the organization. Based on a review of literature that covers this issue (Senge, 2006; Goh, 2003; Gephardt & Marsick, 1996), it can be concluded that, according to the majority of authors, organizational culture needs to contain certain values that encourage organizational learning. The most important among them are: openness to environment and new experiences, market orientation, error tolerance and learning from them, openness in internal communication, innovation and readiness for radical change and acceptance of risk.

According to Schein, the implementation of the concept of organizational learning is a major challenge for managers, and in the same time a radical change for the employees, because they are required to develop new skills and new ways of thinking and examining, new approaches to certain issues and cognitively redefined old categories, etc. (Schein 1999). Therefore, it can be concluded that the willingness of managers to change their own cognitive schema and mental models and the adoption of a system of values in which learning takes an important place, and their ability to create and pass a vision that is inspiring for the employees and as such "mobilizes" them to obtain new knowledge, is actually a precondition for the implementation of a learning organization not to only remain an

idealized image (Mumford, 1995, Steiner, 1998), but to turn into something realistic (Delic, 2012, p 234).

Developing a knowledge culture is a precondition for building a learning organization, where knowledge culture must not be parallel to an already existing organizational culture, but on the contrary, must be her integral part. Key factors for the development of a knowledge culture are the following: a) missionary work, which means deliberately raising awareness in employees related to the importance of knowledge management through the consequent communication, b) incorporation of the criteria of readiness for learning and transmitting knowledge in recruitment and selection of the candidates in the process of human resources management, c) indirect rewarding in terms of recognizing and acknowledging the willingness to learn, openness to sharing knowledge with others and the capacity to create new knowledge, and d) the willingness of employees to share knowledge and e) time for adopting new value-based knowledge (we should remember that culture is both static and dynamic category: static, if you take into account the stability of the system of assumptions, norms, values and beliefs in the short term, and dynamic, if you take into account that its components are subject to change, which is particularly evident over a longer period of time). Experience tells us that organizational activities related to knowledge management should be an integral part of the business process, and therefore, it is necessary to develop a communication and information infrastructure to develop a knowledge culture.

4. ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION

Selection of an appropriate organizational design is one of the assumptions for the smooth functioning of the process of generating and using new knowledge. It is a precondition for the development of learning organizations. Traditional or bureaucratic design, which implies following rigid rules and procedures, scalar chain in decision making and hierarchy, and a narrow specialization and the command-and-control role of managers, is certainly not suitable for the development of learning organization, which should generate a competitive advantage in the dynamic global environment. According to most authors, in order for organizational design to represent an adequate infrastructure for the development of a learning organization, a number of criteria must be met, such as:

a) minimal specialization of tasks which involves the introduction of open jobs and opens the possibility of job rotation, which, in turn, encourages learning and increases employee satisfaction, b) minimal standardization and formalization which provides the introduction of diversity and a greater degree of autonomy in the way of doing business, and c) "shallow" organizational structure and a wide range of management, d) use of teams (including cross-functional teams) as the basic building blocks of organizational structure, e) intensive, open and high-quality vertical and horizontal communication, f) penetration of internal borders (between organizational units) and permeability of external organizational boundaries, enabling absorption of knowledge from the environment (Janićijević, 2008, pp. 392-394; Lei and others, 1999).

5. ASSUMPTIONS FOR DEVELOPING LEARNING ORGANISATION IN ENTERPRISES IN BOSNIA AND HERCEGOVINA

The sample in this research is n=100 companies from different parts of Bosnia and Hercegovina. The research was conducted using a questionnaire designed according to research goals. The questionnaire contained 18 questions using two types of closed questions: multiple choice questions and Likert intensity scale questions. The questionnaires were distributed to top-managers of companies. Out of 100 distributed questionnaires 86 of them have been returned and filled out, which is satisfying regarding the representativeness of the sample. Table 1. Shows the results of the descriptive statistical analysis of the data collected through the questionnaires.

Table 1: Descriptive analysis

	Mean		Std. dev.	Var.	Skewness	
	Statistic	Std. Error			Statistic	Std. Error
Minimal specialization of work and assignments	2.7412	.10338	.95310	.908	.461	.261
Each part of organization has insight into processes in the whole organization	3.5059	.10667	.98348	.967	-.324	.261

Variety of processes and working methods	3.2588	.10605	.97776	.956	.159	.261
Balance of Autonomy and Control	3.4588	.07770	.71636	.513	.048	.261
Minimal number of hierarchy levels	3.4588	.09401	.86675	.751	-.376	.261
Intensive team work	3.7176	.09846	.90779	.824	-.089	.261
Intensive communication in all directions of organizational hierarchy	3.7529	.10167	.93740	.879	-.548	.261
Integration and permeable borders	3.4353	.08927	.82299	.677	-.444	.261
Permeable external boundaries	3.3647	.09880	.91087	.830	-.216	.261
Openness towards environment	4.2118	.08215	.75741	.574	-.882	.261
Orientation on customer value creation	4.0353	.08768	.80839	.654	-.757	.261
Acceptance of Risk	3.7882	.10193	.93978	.883	-.618	.261
Problem and questione oriented	3.8235	.10608	.97805	.957	-.730	.261
Research Oriented	3.7765	.10368	.95589	.914	-.957	.261
Mistakes tolerance and learning	3.7059	.10156	.93635	.877	-.354	.261
Openness in internal communication	3.8353	.08509	.78448	.615	-.305	.261
Positive attitudes towards change	3.6941	.10720	.98831	.977	-.787	.261
Perspective on the system	3.6824	.09645	.88924	.791	-.572	.261
Continuous employee development	3.7412	.10063	.92778	.861	-.464	.261

The table shows the mean as the „average value“ of results based on the answers of examinees for each question, standard deviation as the measure of dispersion from the mean and the variance as the measure of symmetry. The mean of all 18 question has a high value (except for the question about minimal specialization of work and assignments in the company) and exceeds the value of 3, which implies a high level of agreement with the statement in the question. This result is verified by the values of measure of symmetry: negative values imply less answers indicating lower levels of agreement with the statements (more examinees stated higher levels of agreement with the statements in the questionnaire); more positive values indicate less answers that imply higher levels of agreement with the statements (lower levels of agreement with the statements). The measure of symmetry has a positive value in only two cases: the question about minimal specialization of assignments and work ($S_k = 0,461$) and the question about balance of control and autonomy in the company ($S_k = 0,048$).

Hereinafter, we will present the results of the analysis for key characteristics of learning organisation: intensive usage of team work, openness towards the environment, acceptance of risk, positive attitudes towards changes, perspective on the system and improvement and continuous investment in employee development.

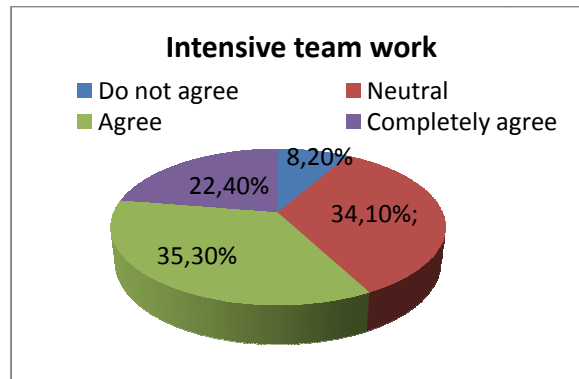
Systemic perspective and acceptance of risk are considered to be key characteristics of learning organisation. The attitudes of examinees towards these characteristics are shown in the table below. According to these results it is obvious that 64,70% of the examinees agree (intensity 4 and 5; 15,30% completely-level 5) that the organisations are oriented on the system. In the same time, the results indicate a high level of awareness of risk acceptance- 23,50% of the managers are inclined to risk.

Table 2.: Attitudes towards perspective on the system and risk acceptance

Level of agreement	Perspective on the system	Acceptance of Risk
Completely disagree	1,20%	2,40%
Do not agree	9,40%	4,70%
Neutral	24,70%	28,20%
Agree	49,40%	41,20%
Completely agree	15,30%	23,50%
Total	100,00%	100,00%

As shown in Picture 1. 22,40% of the examinees emphasise the importance of team work in the companies. Generally speaking, 69,40% of all managers significantly consider that performance of assignments is based on team work.

Picture 1: Attitudes towards team work



Given that the learning organization is the core of knowledge management, development of knowledge and skills of employees is one of the characteristics of learning organisation. More than a fifth of all respondents (21,20%) completely agrees that there is continuous education, specialization and employee development in their companies, 42,4% of all respondents agree with this statement, while only 9,40% of all respondents pointed out that there is not enough attention paid to employee development in their companies.

Table 3: Attitudes towards the environment and changes

Level of agreement	Openness towards environment	Positive attitudes towards change
Completely disagree	0,00%	3,50%
Do not agree	3,60%	8,20%
Neutral	9,40%	22,40%
Agree	49,40%	47,10%
Completely agree	37,60%	18,80%
Total	100,00%	100,00%

The concept of learning organization is based on the assumption that the organisations operate in a dynamic environment and that continuous adaption and learning is necessary in order to adjust to changes in organization's environment. More than a third of respondents (37,60%) highlighted that the companies are completely open to its environment, almost a half of respondents (49,40%) agree with the statement that the company is open towards its environment. Adjustements to the environment imply implementation of organizational changes. Generally speaking, 65,90% of all respondents stated that their companies have a positive stand towards necessary changes and that there is no resistance to them in the company (see Table 3).

6. CONCLUSION

The learning organization represents an important concept of creating competitive advantages today. Key assumptions for developing learning organisations is the creation of „organic“ organisational design, development of learning culture, inspirational leadership directed towards encouraging employees towards changes and adaption of new knowledge. Examining the existence of presumptions for development of learning organizations in companies in B&H was conducted within the empirical research conducted in 2012 on a sample of 100 companies in different branches. The presented results indicate that companies in B&H have relatively developed characteristics of learning organisations based on the fact that high levels of agreement of respondents with the statements (about the characteristics of learning organisations) have been established. This refers primarily to the orientation towards team work, openness to external environment, internal coherence of organisational parts and orientation towards value creation for buyers. These results are contradictory to a research conducted in 2010, which showed that the dominant type of structure in companies in B&H is the U-structure. The main characteristics of this structure are high level of centralisation of decision making and high level of formalisation of behaviour. Therefore this structure is commonly identified with a bureaucratic organisation. The results of this research also showed that the dominant type of

organisational culture in companies in B&H is the role culture. The contradiction of results of these two researches indicates that the companies in B&H increasingly recognize that competitive advantages can be created based on knowledge and usage of knowledge and therefore in structural and cultural context increasingly tend towards organic forms and towards knowledge culture.

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