

The Bridge between Individual Learning and Organizational Learning

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Abstract

Effective individual learning does not necessarily result in an organizational learning. The purpose of this study is to identify a linkage between individual learning and organizational learning. By way of one's sense of honor and responsibility, the individual's value system diffusively influence other colleagues' so that both individual and organizational learning are triggered. In order to supplement the established model and to reflect on the process of organizational learning, the researchers in this study explored how one's sense of honor and responsibility affects both the individual and the organizational learning. The main research questions of this study are as follows: a) How does the public servant's sense of honor and responsibility trigger individual and organizational learning? B) Why does this sense facilitate individual and organizational learning? The semi-structured interview technique was employed. 23 departments of the central government in Taiwan were visited, while 18 interviewees' view points were directly used to form the argument of this study. This study aims at exploring the bottom-up influence in the public sector in terms of individual and organizational learning, and suggests that one's sense of honor and responsibility is a key to trigger group consensus. The value important to the individual is the foundation through which the individual learning and the behavior of making comparisons are triggered to shape organizational learning. By way of marketing the personal value within interpersonal networks, an individual's personal value may be upgraded to a common value in an organization. Whether the elements (including one's sense of honor and responsibility, the influence derived from interpersonal networks, and the reflection thorough making comparisons) can work well to improve organizational learning depends on whether or not the stimuli echo the values important to the individual.

Keywords: organizational learning, public sector, sense of honor and responsibility, interpersonal networks, making comparison

INTRODUCTION

Public servants in Taiwan are qualified by a very competitive examination. However, the qualified manpower cannot necessarily keep developing to enhance its quality to become a useful "resource" for the organization. Some argue that the public sector is structured by rigid organizational routines, so both individual learning and organizational learning within the environment are limited and conditioned by daily routines, while others suggest that because the government organization does not have the pressure from competition, public servants in the environment do not need to learn new skills to conquer the challenges from organizational or environmental changes. The very secure and regular environment seems to gradually erode the public servants' talent base and hinder both individual learning and organizational learning, making the qualified human resource fall into disuse. However, does the very stable environment mean that the people within it are hopeless at learning? In this study, the researchers try to identify particular keys to revivify

public servants' learning and to reveal how the individual learning may facilitate organizational learning within the context of public sector.

Popper and Lipshitz (2000) argued that learning within the individual level and the organizational level interacts with each other. Kim (1993) had identified that mental models within an organization may bridge organizational learning and individual learning, which leave the term "mental model" with puzzles to solve. Gau and Fu (2009) suggested that building public servants' common value may facilitate their personal learning and behavior change, so the common value can be viewed as a linkage associating individual learning with organizational goals. Schilling and Kluge (2009) reviewed the literature and divide barriers to organizational learning into 4 dimensions: intuiting, interpretation, integrating and institutionalizing. 3 forms (actional-personal, structural-organizational and societal-environmental) were also highlighted, which

stand for the process of learning from the individual level to the organizational level. The focus of their work was on theoretical debates, which gave spaces for seeking the truth from facts. Felin and Foss (2009) agreed with the importance of the linkage between individual skills and organizational routines. Although they have already provided a historical literature review on this issue, they did not actually apply practical evidence to their arguments. Reviewing the above articles, the importance of finding the keys to connect the individual level with the organizational level has been identified, while the lack of empirical studies to verify the arguments also demands immediate attention.

However, learning is a personal thing, while whether an organization is learning is subtle. At the individual level, Lie (2011) suggested that active learning, love of learning, and independent learning may influence public servants' learning on internet. There is also evidence in plenty to show that the individual will learn things through the process of achieving aspiration and preserving self-esteem (Roman, Cuestas, & Fenollar, 2008). However, does this motivation derived from the individual's sense of honor and responsibility only trigger learning at the individual level? How does the sense affect other members or influence the whole organization?

Accordingly, the statement of the problem in this research is that the sense of honor and responsibility is a linkage which connects individual learning and organizational learning, and this study is to explain how the linkage works. According to Gau and Fu (2009), establishing a common value is an important key to work organizational learning in the public sector, while being accepted by the group, establishing interpersonal networks, engaging in social exchanges and making comparisons are the four elements to underpin the common value. However, Gau and Fu did not pay attention to the sense of honor and responsibility which is deeply embedded in the individual's mind though they suggested. The researchers in this study try to explore how this sense affects both the individual and the organizational learning, in order to supplement the established model and to reflect on the process of organizational learning. So, the main research questions of this study are as follows:

1. How does the public servant's sense of honor and responsibility trigger individual and organizational learning?
2. Why does this sense facilitate individual and organizational learning?

Research Method

The reason for the researchers using the public sector as an object of study is that most public servants in Taiwan have stable working conditions which enable the researchers more easily to discover "pure" sense of honor and responsibility. Additionally, the system provides clear organizational routines and division of labors to enable the researchers to identify some influences derived from interpersonal networks, making comparisons and one's value system.

In order to probe the reality in depth, the researchers adopted the semi-structured interview method to collect data. 59 interviewees in 23 departments of the central government in Taiwan were recruited. In order to construct a consistent argument, most of the raw data in this study was from an administrative department (D14). The viewpoints shown in this paper were derived from 18 interviewees, including 5 from department D14 and 13 from other departments. The interviews with the 5 persons in D14 provided material to construct the case of this paper, while other interviewees' opinions complemented and strengthened the argument. Table 1 shows the main interviewees' information.

Table 1. Main interviewees in this study

Dep.	Name	Age	Years of Service	Title of position
D4	Mr. S	48	22	Supervisor
D4	Mr. I	27	4	Subordinate
D6	Mr. N	41	18	Subordinate
D6	Mr. X	40	16	Subordinate
D6	Mr. T	54	28	Supervisor
D9	Ms. K	33	8	Subordinate
D10	Ms. L	40	15	Subordinate
D10	Ms. M	43	18	Subordinate
D11	Mr. F	28	5	Subordinate
D11	Mr. H	41	19	Supervisor
D11	Mr. P	52	26	Supervisor
D11	Mr. U	54	23	Supervisor
D11	Ms. G	48	15	Subordinate
D11	Ms. W	33	5	Subordinate
D11	Ms. O	36	8	Subordinate
D11	Ms. D	48	20	Supervisor
D11	Ms. H	43	16	Supervisor
D11	Ms. C	44	15	Supervisor

Source: Author

All the interviews were recorded and transcribed. In order to make the process of analysis more effective and efficient, the researchers reviewed the transcriptions and frequently listened to the audio-taped conversations. Using many labels, the researchers categorized the data to make the comparative bases emerge. Table 2 is an example which shows the way we did the data analysis.

Table 2. A sample of data analysis - Ms. M

Raw data	Reflecting on my understanding	Categories
<i>“To start with, my colleagues are excellent. Whenever we are given a task, we are all keen to get it done as soon as possible. In this job, I can use my skills and knowledge to benefit the population at large, not just my company as in my previous job. I enjoy my work more now.”</i>	A very gentle woman. She spoke slowly but clearly and logically. I could feel her energy. She attributed her success to others. She did not say much about herself and how she helped other colleagues. It seems to me that it was her sense of responsibility and honor which kept her moving forward. She enjoyed her work and enjoyed devoting herself to the job of serving the public. She seemed pleased with applying her own knowledge and skills to tasks. This seems to echo what the scholars in the field of Adult Education refer to as “learning by doing”. The more often you use skills, the more reflections you may have. She seemed to have very positive attitudes to her tasks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sense of responsibility and honor ● Enjoyment of working with colleagues ● Enjoyment of using knowledge ● Positive attitude to tasks

Source: Author

In Table 2, Ms. M was asked how she got her job done, so that every colleague leaves positive comments on her performance. Her answer, given above, has been categorized with the labels given in the right-hand column of the table. These labels were used to compare and associate with other labels extracted from Ms. M’s other stories or other interviewees’ experiences. Key labels such as “sense of responsibility and honor”, “something important to the individual”, “marketing”, “making comparison”, and other related labels were finally selected to identify different categories of text. A process such as the above, which includes classifying, comparing, explaining, and making sense of data, provides the researchers with continuous reflection to construct alternate understandings of reality.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Individual level: Something important to the individual

Why can one’s behavior influence others? Feeling important triggers individual learning, which may also upgrade the learning from the individual level to the organizational level. Ms. M’s feeling of importance not only increased her personal chances for gaining knowledge, but also enabled her to win other colleagues’ respect and to trigger organizational learning. Because she insisted on doing the right thing, she did not mind running the risk of having her proposal rejected but insisted on her idea of justice. According to Ms. K.,

“Last time we were given a task which was about community development in an area. In order to benefit the population at large, she insisted on a proposal which annoyed the local government. In the end, even though the proposal was still rejected by our superior...Personally, I thought that her courage was an example to all of us”.

Not only did Ms. M have strong convictions, but also she had the bravery to persist in doing the right thing. Her insistence seemed to lead others to reflect on the duty and honor of being a public servant. Mr. F said,

“If other people were in this situation, they would think of going for the second choice. There is a saying, “If the mountain won’t move, build a road around it. If the road doesn’t work, change your path. If you are unable to even change your path, just change your mind.” So, let me put it another way. However, Ms. M persists in her thoughts about the proposal. She insists on giving the best to the public. It is certainly true that we, as public servants, must put the public’s benefit as top priority.... Well, this is the reason why I treat her with respect. She can always make people reflect on themselves”.

According to Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008), an individual will strive to preserve or defend his or her self-esteem so that his or her personal identity entwines feelings, values and behavior and leads them in particular directions. In other words, this is a sort of self-identity. The individual will believe that he or she must conduct the particular behavior; otherwise he or she cannot be accepted by him or herself. The sort of self-identity can also be viewed as a kind of motivation which triggers the individual to learn new things and to change his or her behavior. Ms. M’s case seems to identify 3 implications of the individual’s influence on the group. Firstly, a strong desire to play the role well may trigger the individual learning. From the perspective of individual learning, Ms. M’s conscientious attitude to work made her more absorbed in her tasks, which also enabled her to gain more professional knowledge. Because of the sense of honor, Ms. M tried to be an excellent public servant who expand and sharpen professional knowledge in order to

sort out problems, complete official tasks and to help other colleagues. According to Schmidt (1993), in order to resolve problems and complete tasks, individuals will gradually sharpen their expertise and the skills of networking. By the process of helping people, Ms. M was gradually acquainted with other people's work to enable her to understand varied professionals about serving the public. Thus, it is the sense of honor and responsibility which creates opportunities for individual learning.

Secondly, a distinguish performance may attract other people's attention, to enable the individual's attitude to lead to other people's self-examination. It is difficult to attract other people's attention, to say nothing of making people reflect on themselves. People pay more attention to their own stuff than others' business, unless there are something distinguished, interesting or related to what they may concern. Ms. M who commits herself to become a competent public servant shows her diligence in the workplace, so that other colleagues may reflect on their own behavior to trigger further changes. According to Act 1 in the Civil Servant Service Act, "*Civil servants should abide by their oath, be loyal to the public and carry out their duties in accordance with the law*". Every public servant knows his or her own duty, but he or she may be so used to dealing with the daily routines that he or she neglects the basic attitude of serving the public. The life in the workplace does not provide the public servants with reflective activities to remind them of their basic attitude to work. This situation seems to mirror Holmqvist's (1999:435) argument that reflective activities may enable members in the group to reflect on their held assumptions. Ms. M's sense of honor and responsibility makes her colleagues reflect on their performance in the workplace and on their own meaning of life (Mr. F).

Thirdly, a righteous insistence may cause other people's respect to get more followers. The individual's sense of honor and responsibility may cause other people's respect, because other colleagues may not have the courage to insist in the right decision. Because her insistence on the task was right and additionally few people had the courage to risk being rejected, her attitude to work was respected by members of the group. This contagious situation of group dynamics means that people in the group can be affected or be directed by some logic. Particular events will arouse echoes in members' hearts to inspire other people in the organization. In other words, it is the event which is reasonable, touchable and can arouse echoes in other colleagues' mind that brings about individual and organizational reflections. The 3 implications, which

link individual and organizational learning, derive from something important to the individual.

From the individual level to the organizational level: Marketing one's value

The interpersonal network is an important key to construct the team resonance to market one's value. Because Ms. H and Ms. C were happy with helping others, not only did their colleagues respect them, but also their supervisors recognized the value of their performance. The good reputation built their massive interpersonal network, so that they had good conditions to promote themselves.

The interpersonal network may strengthen or magnify the individual's influence on the group. In D14, as Ms. M got along with her colleagues, her sense of honor and responsibility could always be understood and disseminated throughout the interpersonal networks. Her colleagues respected her insistence on doing the right thing and fixed their eyes upon her proposal so the event of being rejected evoked their reflection and marketed Ms. M's personal value within the network. It is not always the case that insisting on the individual's value system can win others' respect. In D4, Mr. I. did not want his colleagues to give him any suggestion, because he thought that a public servant should be independent in dealing with official business. He admitted that his interpersonal relationships were not very good in the organization, because other colleagues thought that his ways of doing things were different from theirs. Mr. I's proposals were also based on his sense of responsibility and his honor in being a public servant, but his supervisor often rejected his proposals. His sense of responsibility is actually similar to Ms. M's. However, the results of both of the cases are different. Ms. M had won her colleagues' respect, yet Mr. I became an outsider of the group. He had no strong interpersonal networks to highlight his noble ideas. Because he was viewed as an outsider, his performance was often questioned. Not only could he not win colleagues' respect, but also some good ideas might never be adopted by the organization.

Ms. M's ideas or her sense of responsibility are not necessarily better than Mr. I's. However, because she had the market to sell the idea, not only could her experience be transferred into a personal knowledge base, but also the market connections triggered other colleagues' introspection. The introspection then promoted Ms. M's status within the network to enable her idea to be noticed and to reinforce the value of the idea. The idea could then be put into practice and so got more chances to produce more products (follow-up ideas) and create more markets (interpersonal

networks). Therefore, in order to create an organizational learning environment, the individual value system cannot complete itself. It needs marketing approaches, interpersonal networks, to highlight the value and to promote the influence of individual value to the organizational level.

Organizational level: Making comparison and developing identity

From the individual level to the organizational level, there are some linkages between both levels. For instance, the desire to be an insider makes people strive, not to be the best performer but to avoid falling behind other colleagues (Tajfel, 1978). In this situation, the sense of responsibility and honor has been upgraded from the individual level to the organizational level. Employees make comparisons with their colleagues to strive for excellence for fear of falling behind, so that different values can be juxtaposed to evoke further reflections. Because of these daily sense-making activities, individuals may gradually understand the role they are playing in the workplace and reveal their own meanings of life.

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997), members can learn with one another by dealing with overlapping tasks. Hara (2006) echoed this idea and suggests that an appropriate learning environment is so important that the less experienced may gain tips from the old-timers. Because of the regular shared practices as well as overlapping tasks, members' performance will be juxtaposed so the individual has the chance to compare his or her own performance with others (Mr. U). Making comparisons enables the individual to be aware of the gap between his or her performance and other colleagues' so that the individual can improve his or her expertise to close the gap.

Because of making comparisons, Ms. K faced the dilemma of worrying about being behind and not being unique enough. Interviewees such as Ms. O, Mr. N and Mr. X reported similar experiences. On the one hand, people hope that they can behave in the same way as other people do to be accepted by the organization. On the other hand, they want to keep their own style to show their uniqueness. This dilemma reveals the discordance between self-identity and group identity. Some people try to find a leverage point to cope with the contradiction, while others just leave the dilemma and do what they want to do to wait for a new order to emerge. This seems to echo Humphreys and Brown's (2002) idea that "*individual and collective identities are constituted within discursive regimes*". The process of discourse provides both sides of interactions with symbolic resources so that members identify with each

other to make interactions keep going (Reed & Bartkowski, 2000).

Organizational level: To learn or not to learn

When an individual's important value is crucial to other members, common value can gradually be formed. - Forming a common value does not mean that every member will be disciplined by the value, but that people in the group have common acknowledgement of a set of rights and wrongs which may direct their behavior. The common value cannot guarantee that members will reflect on their own performances. Only when the particular event just echoes the important value in each individual's mind can the event cause a deep reflection to bring about team resonance. For instance, Mr. N compared himself to others and strove for excellence in order to be accepted by the group, because Mr. N believed that being accepted by the group is extremely important to him. Other colleagues' view on him would normally influence him to make him a person who is sensitive and reflective. In contrast, Mr. I did not think that gaining group acceptance was important enough to enable him to change his behavior to gain the identity. In his opinion, providing the public with a high quality service is even more urgent. He insisted in doing the right thing even if most of his colleagues did not agree with him. From this point of view, although the concepts of networking interpersonal relations and gaining group acceptance are both highlighted, both key elements cannot trigger one's behavior without identifying one's significant value.

Gau & Fu (2009) had argued that interpersonal networks might not necessarily trigger organizational learning, while gaining group acceptance is not always the key to motivating individual learning. One's significant value which determines the influence of the common value on the individual is a key reason which may explain why the both elements cannot work well. Not every member agrees with the common value (Ms. H) and not every individual believes in the importance of gaining group acceptance. All the above concepts are not absolute but relative and they all depend on whether or not the stimuli are associated with those which are important to the individual.

Since interpersonal networks and group identity are not necessarily able to trigger individual learning, making comparisons might not necessarily bring about a deep reflection. To do or not to do depends on how strong the individual's feeling of importance about the event is. Only when the value of changing the behavior is important and strong enough will the individual start performing an action or changing particular behavior. For instance, in Ms. M's group, Ms. L and Mr. F tended

to behave in a safe way, because they thought that they had a job for life and they did not want to make their life too complicated. People know what role a public servant should play, yet they choose the ways which are convenient rather than those they ought to do. Because the perception of importance is not absolute and may change from situation to situation, one person's value of importance then may or may not trigger another person's reflection on their performance.

At the level of organizational learning, organizational members seek to maintain their established common identity and at the same time try to expel or mitigate different ego defenses from individual members. Both individual and collective self-esteem are maintained by not questioning the established self-concepts (Brown & Starkey, 2000). However, because of the changeable and competitive environment, organizations try to adjust their positions in order to fit varied changes so that their organizational identities become incrementally adaptive and unstable (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In order to foster a positive learning culture to improve organizational development, Brown and Starkey (2000) highlight the importance of critical self-reflexivity. They suggest that critical self-reflexivity relies on negotiating the individual's and the organization's internal and external factors, through which the individual and the organization are experiencing a process of profound self-questioning.

The process of self-questioning is not only derived from the individual's self-reflexivity but also from the comparisons originating in the interactions between the individual and his or her colleagues, tasks and the environment where he or she is. According to the cases of this research, although making comparisons may bring about members' reflection, the result of comparison does not necessarily result in behavior change.

Accordingly, individual's and organizational learning becomes, in this situation, unstable. All depends on whether or not the particular stimuli can reflect to individuals' value system. The individual's feeling of importance is not necessarily fixed and is sometimes contingent on different situations. Different perceptions of importance in one's mind may conflict with each other, especially when the individual is forced to choose certain roles to play on particular occasions. These circumstances may then direct different ways of individual learning and behavior change to form different types and degrees of organizational learning.

CONCLUSION

By way of the individual's sense of honor and responsibility, not only may individual learning be triggered, but also team or organizational learning is developed. However, the idea is not absolute but relative.

Because of the sense of honor and responsibility, the individual keeps improving him or herself. This shows evidence of individual learning. In order to implement the public service, the individual helps other colleagues so his or her interpersonal networks expand to provide the individual with a foundation to market his or her sense of honor and responsibility. It enables the other individuals in the network to compare themselves with each other to reflect on their own view of life. Two situations may occur. Firstly, the other individuals may not want to fall behind to maintain self-identity and social-identity to trigger individual learning. Secondly, making comparisons with the influence of interpersonal networks may bring about a change in personal value to prompt organizational leaning.

From the angle of organizational learning, a person who has good interpersonal relations may have more chances to affect others in the group. In this situation, the concept of marketing is a key which prompt the influence of one's value system from the individual level to the organizational level, while making comparison is also a key to enable public servants to reflect on their own performance at both of the levels.

However, learning or not learning is judged by the individual's value system. Because of overlapping practices as well as well developed interpersonal networks, colleagues' performances will be juxtaposed to enable individuals to compare their performance with others'. Whether or not making a comparison may influence organizational learning depends on whether or not the stimuli echo the values which are important to the individual.

This study is a qualitative and small-scale investigation. Although the findings of this research represent a phenomenon within particular circumstances, the generalization is limited because the present study includes only 18 interviewees who were from personnel related offices. Further study is needed to examine the validity of the findings in other contexts by quantitative techniques to generalize the arguments.

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