

## Transforming the Organizations in Thai Public Sector into Learning Organizations: An Explanatory Case Study Research

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### บทคัดย่อ

บทความวิจัยนี้รายงานถึงผลการวิจัยที่แสดงให้เห็นถึงข้อเสนอแนะในการพัฒนาองค์กรในส่วนราชการไทย ไปสู่องค์กรแห่งการเรียนรู้วิธีการวิจัยที่ใช้คือการสัมภาษณ์ (semi-structured interviewing) โดยผู้ให้สัมภาษณ์เป็นผู้เชี่ยวชาญและผู้บริหารระดับสูงในองค์กรต่างๆ ที่เชี่ยวชาญและมีประสบการณ์ทางด้านการสร้างวัฒนธรรมการเรียนรู้ในองค์กร และการจัดการความรู้ในองค์กร ข้อเสนอแนะหลักในการพัฒนาองค์กรไปสู่องค์กรแห่งการเรียนรู้มีดังต่อไปนี้ กล่าวคือ 1) การสร้างสำนักของบุคลากรในองค์กรให้เห็นถึงความสำคัญของการพัฒนาองค์กรไปสู่องค์กรแห่งการเรียนรู้ 2) การที่ผู้นำแสดงบทบาทเพื่อให้สอดคล้องต่อการเรียนรู้ของบุคลากรในองค์กร 3) การบริหารทรัพยากรบุคคลที่สอดคล้องต่อการเรียนรู้ของบุคลากรในองค์กร 4) การจัดการความรู้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพและประสิทธิผล 5) การสร้างวิสัยทัศน์ร่วม ซึ่งรายละเอียดของแต่ละข้อเสนอแนะหลัก รวมทั้งการบริหารจัดการและการประเมินผลการพัฒนาองค์กรแห่งเรียนรู้จะได้กล่าวไว้ในบทความวิจัยฉบับนี้



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## Abstract

This paper reports the research findings that generate concrete guidelines on how to transform organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. The research method employed was semi-structured interviewing. Interviewees were experts and top management people who had experience in creating a learning culture and managing knowledge in organizations. The key suggestions concerning the transformation are: 1) to establish an awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization, 2) to put in place the roles of leaders as corresponds to learning, 3) to manage human resources as corresponds to learning, 4) to have knowledge efficiently and effectively managed, and 5) to create a shared vision. Details on 'how to' under each of these suggestions - how to administer and how to evaluate - are provided.

**Keywords :** Human Resources Management, Knowledge Management, Leaders, Learning Organization, Shared Vision

## Introduction

This study is a part of the consulting project between Chulalongkorn University and the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, Thailand. The project involves research work which aims to generate findings that would provide a concrete explanation on an approach to transform the organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. There have been various suggestions on how to develop a learning organization. This research aims to seek out the most appropriate way to adopt what is known about developing a learning organization for use in the transformation of organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. Permission to publish this research work has already been given by the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, Thailand.

## Putting the idea of learning organization in a Thai context

The study begins by a comprehensive literature review on the topic of learning organizations. Before we search for an answer of how to transform the organization into a learning organization in the Thai public sector, the two key criteria for conducting a literature review are to see how the term 'learning organization' has been described and how the learning organization has been characterized. This is in order for us to determine how the learning organization should be defined and characterized in the context of the Thai public sector.

While reviewing the literature, the authors have been exposed to numerous suggestions concerning the definitions and characteristics of the learning organization (e.g. Senge, 1990; Pedler et al., 1991; McGill and Slocum, 1994; Marquardt, 1996; Garvin, 2000; Sun and Scott, 2003; Torokoff and METS, 2005), and have thus tried to scope them down to a few key ideas. It was found that the learning organization is commonly associated with the three following central ideas:

- 1) Enabling continuous learning (e.g. Bessant, 2000; Senge, 1990; Ferguson-Amores et al., 2005);
- 2) Exploiting knowledge (e.g. Garvin, 2000; Kontoghiorghes and Awbrey, 2005); and
- 3) Being able to follow the organization's mission and vision (e.g. Pedler et al., 1991; Torokoff and METS, 2005)

Therefore, after considering the above, it has come to the author's understanding that a learning organization should be defined as an organization which is able to learn continuously, able to use knowledge effectively, and able to follow its mission and vision.

Further to the definition of the learning organization, the reviewed literature provided a greater detailed description of the learning organization for each of these three aforementioned key ideas. This has allowed the authors to form an understanding of the characteristics of the learning organization as follows.

By being able to learn continuously, it is meant that learning that takes place in the organization

should appear in multiple levels: the individual level, the group level, and the organizational level. Besides these levels, learning should also occur through a variety of sources, for example, learning from other people (e.g. customers, competitors, and suppliers), learning from experimentation, and learning from work experience or learning from training (e.g. McGill and Slocum, 1994; Garvin, 1998; Sun and Scott, 2003).

By being able to use knowledge effectively, it is meant that knowledge in the organization should be managed; for example, sharing knowledge, keeping knowledge, and re-using knowledge (e.g. Marquardt, 1996; Aik, 2005; Tanriverdi and Zehir, 2006).

By being able to follow the organization's mission and vision, it is meant that vision should be shared by every employee in the organization and that the organization's internal processes and operation should enable the organization to follow its mission (e.g. Marquardt and Reynolds, 1994; Pedler et al., 1991; Yeo, 2005).

Based on the clearer understanding of the term learning organization through its given definitions and characteristics, the authors investigated an approach for transforming organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. This began by conducting a literature review in order to search for guidelines on how to develop a learning organization. Similarly to before, the authors have also been exposed to numerous ideas and have attempted to scope them down into a core of ideas. These ideas can be presented in terms of the following five key suggestions:

- 1) Establishing an awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization (e.g. Pedler et al., 1991; Bessant, 2000; Torokoff and MET, 2005)
- 2) Putting into place the roles of leaders as corresponds to learning (e.g. McGill and Slocum, 1994; Sharma, 2005;)
- 3) Managing human resources as corresponds to learning (e.g. Pedler et al., 1991; Albert, 2006.)
- 4) Having knowledge efficiently and effectively managed (e.g. Marquardt, 1996; Garvin, 2000; Kontoghiorghes and Awbrey, 2005)
- 5) Creating a shared vision (e.g. Senge, 1990; Yeo, 2005)

The authors have formed the impression that these key suggestions constitute an appropriate approach for organizations to take within the Thai public sector. However, this is not a valid conclusion. Firstly, there is no research evidence to support this conclusion. Secondly, the authors found that the literature does not provide exact details of how these suggestions can be put into action, particularly in the context of the Thai public sector. In order to be more practical, a detailed explanation is needed for each suggestion. To tackle these issues, there is the need to conduct research. Such research is therefore carried out with the aim of providing more detailed guidelines on how to develop learning organizations within the Thai public sector.

## Research approach

According to the explanations given in research books (e.g. Robson, 1993; Yin, 1994; Denscombe, 1998), the methodology of this research can be identified as explanatory case study research because it is expected that its findings will be the guidelines detailing how to transform an organization into a learning organization. The research will involve an in-depth study which particularly focuses on organizations within the Thai public sector.

The method of data collection employed is that of interview for the following reasons. Firstly, according to King (1994) and Denscombe (1998), the authors expect that the interviews would provide detailed information as well as the informant's experience as concerns the matter in question. In this research, interviewees were able to express their opinions on how to transform organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. Secondly, there are a number of top-level management people who have substantial experience and who have also made great efforts in developing a learning culture and managing knowledge within their organizations. These people have a deep understanding of what it is like working in organizations where Thai culture dominates and how the five given suggestions for developing a learning organization could be implemented within a Thai organization. In sum, a great research opportunity would be missed if these people were not interviewed.

In order to ensure that the research is more rigorous, a triangulated approach has been employed. Within the interview method, data sources are triangulated (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1994; Yin, 1994). There were 21 interviewees altogether. Although most interviewees were in top-level management, five were experts in the field of 'Learning Organizations'. Out of the 16 top-level management interviewees, 11 of them are from the public sector whereas five are from the private sector. Obviously, the three different backgrounds of interviewees means the authors have been exposed to diverse perspectives. The authors would look closely to see if there exists any discrepancies between these perspectives. Such a finding may signal differences in approaches used between the public and private sectors in Thailand

The interviews relied on a semi-structured approach (e.g. Robson, 1993; Denscombe, 1998). Every interviewee was asked a few open-ended questions. These questions first asked them to describe and characterize the term learning organization. This is to ensure that the authors and interviewees have the same understanding of the term learning organization. The questions also inquired into the interviewees' thoughts on how to develop a learning organization. The authors had to prompt and probe in order to gain as clear as possible a picture of 'how to' (e.g. Denscombe, 1998) so that the objective of the research as described earlier would be met.

## Transforming organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations

Interviewees were asked to express their understanding of the term learning organization. This was done by asking them to define and characterize the term learning organization. It was found that there were no major conflicts between the interviewee's definitions and characteristics of a learning organization and that of the author's understanding as described earlier. Therefore, it can be concluded that the interviewees and the authors have similar understanding of the term learning organization.

Moreover, there also existed agreement among the interviewees on the five key suggestions for how to develop a learning organization as described earlier. There were no major conflicts between the opinions made by interviewees who work in the public sector and those in the private sector provided that the interviewees from the private sector were making recommendations suitable for an organization specifically in the public sector. Also, similar opinions were given by the 'expert' interviewees. The findings reveal agreement among interviewees on the five key suggestions on how to develop a learning organization listed earlier. Also, as stated in the aim of this research, the research findings give a more detailed explanation on how to transform organizations within the Thai public sector to learning organizations for each of the five key suggestions as follows:

### **1) Establishing awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization**

It is suggested that learning culture in the organization can be established through the great support of leaders. This assertion is in line with other works, for example McGill and Slocum (1994), and Pham and Swierczek (2006). It is also suggested that leaders particularly in top-level management should have a clear understanding of the idea of what a learning organization is. Because the idea itself is very abstract, leaders should be educated in a way that would allow them to be able to depict a learning organization. For example, leaders could learn more about the learning organization if they were directed to a sample learning organization and told of all the associated benefits.

After having understood clearly the concept of the learning organization, these top-level leaders should be able to promote the idea of transforming the organization into a learning organization through the support of lower-level leaders. To do this, a learning organization group of working committees could be set up. One of the top-level leaders, who specifically look after the learning organization, should be appointed as head of the committees together with every mid-level leader being appointed as committee members. The reason for the inclusion of every mid-level leader is that what is being attempted here is to send a message to everyone within the organization informing them of the need to become a learning organization. Mid-level leaders liaise more closely with bottom-level leaders and employees within the organization and could

therefore help relay the message. Moreover, a policy regarding becoming a learning organization should be implemented. This policy should be written out by running committees introducing the idea of learning organization together with a detailed explanation of how to transform the organization into a learning organization using the remaining four key suggestions as the guidelines.

### **2) Putting in place the roles of leaders as corresponds to learning**

Apart from having an active role in building 'learning organization' awareness in the organization, it is suggested that all-level leaders be greatly supportive to their sub-ordinate's learning. This 'support' role can be broken into two parts.

Firstly, leaders should have a role in creating such an environment that encourages willingness to learn. This recommendation is in line with other works, for example, Huotari and Linoven (2004), Aik (2005), and Wilhelm (2006). The practical suggestion by interviewees is that leaders could create a more informal environment in the workplace. Their behavior should not pose a too high a level of formality. Although the seniority system is prevalent in Thailand, leaders can work with their sub-ordinates more collaboratively in a less formal environment provided that sub-ordinates still pay respect to the leaders. For their part, leaders should always listen to what their sub-ordinates wish to say. Leaders should also informally provide positive feedback if their sub-ordinates have done anything useful to the team or to the organization.

By having a more open and informal environment, it is suggested that people would feel more active and willing to learn in order to accomplish good work performance. In contrast, people become more passive in a formal environment where they just do what their superiors have ordered them to do without any chance to give their own input. Another suggested example is that leaders should ensure that people are happy in the organization and that there is a certain level of harmony within the organization. This will allow people to be more active in their work. By being more active at work, there is a greater possibility that they would learn more. This is not only to learn individually, but also to learn from others. One practical suggestion to enhance happiness and harmony would be for leaders to arrange social events such as sport competitions, or parties arranged outside office hours or during weekends.

Secondly, it is suggested that leaders should have a role in enhancing subordinate's learning. Apart from assigning their subordinates tasks to do, leaders should teach their sub-ordinates about tasks as well. Likewise, they should also play the role of a teacher. This is in line with other works, for example, Marquardt and Reynolds (1994), McGill and Slocum (1994), Bessant (2000), Ferguson-Amores et al. (2005). One suggested example by interviewees is that leaders could empower their employees. By delegating such responsibility, important decisions do not always have to be made solely by the leader but can be discussed and made collaboratively.

In doing this, leaders teach their subordinates lessons by letting their sub-ordinates make more important decisions and let them learn the consequences of the decisions they make. Having been empowered, people have greater feelings of self-worth. This in turn allows people to feel more responsible and committed at work. Willingness to learn is therefore enhanced.

Another given example was that leaders should encourage creativity at work, but should still comply with rules and regulations. This is in line with other works, for example, McGill and Slocum (1994), Shukla (1997), and Yeo (2005). In the Thai public sector, following rules and regulations is seen as essential. Because of this, change or any form of innovative thinking are discouraged. Consequently, learning is not motivated. The suggestion here is that change or thinking innovatively does not always have to go against rules and regulations. In acting as role models, leaders should start to think of change or innovation while still following rules and regulations. If leaders could change their mindsets first, subordinates would then be motivated to come up with creativities. As a result, people learn more through creativity.

### **3) Managing human resources as corresponds to learning**

It is also suggested that human resources be managed in a way that corresponds to learning. The given suggestions can be elaborated upon according to three different perspectives.



Firstly, employee's performances should be evaluated in a way that corresponds to learning. For example, the evaluation system should be fair and transparent. If employees can count on the evaluation system, it can motivate them to do their best at work in order to achieve a good evaluation result. Employees should be able to make any queries regarding the evaluation result. A superior may talk with their sub-ordinates about such result. If the result is seen negatively, the superior should be able to suggest what needs to be improved. If this is understood, people would be motivated to learn at work by trying to make improvements.

Moreover, it is suggested that employee's performance evaluation criteria reflect employee's ability to learn and their own development in terms of ability to work and the skills needed for work. In this respect, evaluation could look into, for example, whether the employee has any involvement in knowledge management activities, how well the employee can work with others, whether they can achieve the objectives set out in the individual development plan, or whether these employees can propose new or innovative ideas at work. This is in line with other works, for example, Pedler et al. (1991) and Marquardt (1996).

Apart from the evaluation criteria, it is also suggested that those employees who have received excellent evaluations be rewarded in order to encourage them to keep learning at work. This should also include recognition by the highest leader of the organizations to those who have remarkable

evaluations. Rewards should also incorporate learning opportunities. For example, allowing employees to take leave to take a short course (which is fully funded). The course should be based on their area of interest and its usefulness for their responsibilities at work. The idea of rewards is in line with other works, for example, Pedler et al. (1991); Buckman (2004), Kontoghiorghes and Awbrey (2005), and Wilhelm (2006).

Secondly, policies regarding the working approach should enable employees to learn. Employees in the organization should be given suggestions as to how to work in a way that would enrich their learning at work. An example of the working approach is team-working. This would allow people to learn more from each other through a more communicative environment. Team-working does not have to be among people in the same department but could be in the form of cross-functional team-working. This would stimulate people to learn from each other through a variety of perspectives. Apart from the cross-functional team-working approach, the job rotation approach would also enhance learning at work. This is to rotate employees in the workplace so that they experience various responsibilities across the organization. By using this approach, people become more knowledgeable because they have been responsible for a variety of tasks. These ideas related to team working and job rotation approach are in line with other works, for example, Argyris (1993), Marquardt (1996), Bessant (2000), and English and Baker (2006)



Thirdly, policies regarding employee recruitment should also facilitate the transformation of the organization into a learning organization. A given suggestion was that the recruiting process should ensure that people be selected based on genuine interest in the job they are applying for. Their selection should also depend on the high potential of their skills and abilities to be improved while they are working. Therefore, recruiters should find ways to make sure that applicants are truly interested in the job and are eager to do their best at work.

#### **4) Having knowledge efficiently and effectively managed**

Another given suggestion is to manage knowledge in the organization. Many works have related knowledge management to learning organizations. This has led the authors to regard knowledge management as a concept that works alongside the idea of the learning organization. Fundamentally, managing knowledge generally comprises the creation of new knowledge, the storing of knowledge, the distribution of knowledge, and the re-use of knowledge (e.g. Natarajan and Shekhar, 2000; Awad and Ghaziri, 2004; Laudon and Laudon, 2006)

There are many knowledge management approaches, for example, community of practice (e.g. Wallace and Saint-Onge, 2004; Hemre, 2005), e-learning (e.g. Staes, 2002; Kelly and Bauer, 2004), or online collaboration (e.g. Doerner et al., 2003, Gogus, 2003). In order to successfully transform an organization into a learning

organization, it is suggested that the knowledge management approach should be carefully selected. Examples of selection criteria are cost, and availability of technologies. Apart from using a suitable approach, knowledge management should be closely linked to work, or if possible, integrated into work. Likewise, leaders should make knowledge management part of work. A given example is that instead of having a weekly meeting that only follows the progress of work, the leader can change the style of the meeting. It can be a knowledge-sharing meeting where each person is invited to tell their story about what they have done or discovered at work during the past week that would be interesting for other people to hear. It is strongly suggested that leaders (at all levels) have a proactive role in knowledge management. This is not only to impose policies related to knowledge management but to actually take part in the knowledge management activities. By doing this, leaders will be able to motivate all of the subordinates to take part. A further suggestion is that leaders (at the top management level) should also allocate budget for investing in information technologies and for training people to use information technologies. This is because knowledge management currently heavily relies on the use of information technologies.

#### **5) Creating a shared vision**

Another suggestion is to create a shared vision within the organization. This is in line with other works, for example, Senge (1990), Marquardt, (1996) and Yeo (2005). This is to enable everyone

in the organization to look in the same direction thereby helping employees have a better understanding of how their jobs contribute to the overall goal of the organization. As a result, a greater level of harmony could be formed in the organization encouraging people to learn from each other through trying to support one another. To develop a shared vision, it is suggested that everyone in the organization be given an opportunity to set up a vision for their organization. One practical example provided here is for top management people to organize sessions inviting everyone in the organization to raise their opinions about the organization's future direction and to take these opinions into consideration. Moreover, leaders (of all levels) should ensure that their sub-ordinates understand the organization's vision and keep reminding their sub-ordinates about where the organization is going. For example, leaders could explain to their sub-ordinates how their jobs would help the organization move towards the vision as they assign each job to sub-ordinates.

## Administering the transformation

The findings also suggest how to make efforts to administer the transformation of an organization into a learning organization and how to evaluate the transformation.

There should be a working group of committees that specifically looks after the transformation of the organization into a learning organization (this being the same group of committees as mentioned earlier). This group of

committees should consist of all mid-level management personnel with a high-level manager appointed as a head of the committees. Firstly, these people should understand what a learning organization is and what its associated benefits are. The group then implements a policy introducing the idea of transforming the organization into a learning organization and which explains in great detail how the organization can become a learning organization using the 5 suggestions stipulated earlier (Please see figure 1).

Using these five key suggestions comes with a condition. This is that the first suggestion which highlights awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization should be conducted first and then followed by the rest of the 4 suggestions all at the same time. The reason for this is that everybody in the organization needs to clearly understand first what a learning organization is and be aware of how important it is for an organization to transform itself into a learning organization.

Apart from implementing a policy, the same group of working committees should also have a role in evaluating the transformation of the organization into a learning organization. Because it would normally require some time to transform an organization into a learning organization, it is suggested that an evaluation of the transformation be incorporated. This is in line with other works, e.g. Law and Chuah (2004) and Pham and Swierczek (2006). It is also recommended that both short term and long term evaluations be included. Short



**Figure 1: Five key suggestions for transforming the organizations in the Thai public sector into learning organizations**

term evaluation could be conducted at the end of each year once the policy has been implemented. The evaluation is to look at the progress in efforts in developing a learning organization based on a detailed approach set out by the committees in the ‘learning organization’ policy (which is based on the five suggestions mentioned earlier). The long term evaluation could be conducted at the end of third, fourth, or fifth year after the ‘learning organization’ policy has been implemented in the

organization. This evaluation should look into whether the organization has been able to accomplish the vision set out. The reasoning behind this is based on the definition of the learning organization given earlier - that of an organization which is able to learn continuously, able to use the knowledge effectively, and able to follow its mission and vision. This implies that having active learners in the organization should result in having the ability to accomplish the organization’s vision.

There were two formal meetings set up to validate findings. The first meeting was for interviewees. The second meeting was for officers of the Office of the Public Sector Development Commission, Thailand who would be involved with the transformation of organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations. Participants in the meeting asked the authors to clarify several parts of the findings. Finally, the findings were validated with two additional suggestions. Firstly, the heading of the first suggestion for transforming the organizations into a learning organization should be made more clearly in order to be comprehensible. This suggestion has been incorporated in the findings stipulated earlier. So the heading 'Creating awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization' is one which has already been revised. Secondly, it was suggested that all the mid-level leaders should be a group of management people who drive the transformation of the organization into a learning organization. Again, this suggestion has been incorporated in the findings stipulated earlier in the part suggesting all the mid-level management people should be appointed as a committee in the learning organization working group of committees.

## Conclusion

The authors conducted this research with the aim to generate a concrete set of guidelines on how to transform the organizations within Thai public sector into learning organizations. The definitions of the learning organization had been defined as an organization which is able to learn continuously, able to use the knowledge effectively, and able to follow its mission and vision. To develop a learning organization, there is a need to establish awareness in transforming the organization into a learning organization, to initiate the roles of leaders as corresponds to learning, to manage human resources as corresponds to learning, to have knowledge efficiently and effectively managed, and to create a shared vision. A working group of committees should be set up to administer the transformation to conduct both short and long term evaluations on the transformation.

Further recommended research work should be incorporated when evaluating the transformation with the aim to determine the effectiveness of the guidelines stipulated in this study, to gain additional key suggestions on how to transform the organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations, and to gain additional detailed explanations under each of the aforementioned five key suggestions on how to transform the organizations within the Thai public sector into learning organizations as described earlier.

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