

A Working Model Towards the Learning Organization: A Case Study of Sarasas Affiliated Schools

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ABSTRACT

This research project aimed to develop a Learning Organization (LO) model for human resources development at Sarasas Affiliated Schools which is one of the largest groups of private schools in Thailand. Peter Senge's The Fifth Disciplines were used as the framework for this study. In-depth interviews were performed with 18 principals from all of the 18 schools in the affiliated school as well as supervising regional directors of the group to elicit problems and obstructions against Learning Organization implementation in the group. After that, the respondents were assigned into 5 groups for focus group interviews to discuss methods to solve the problems. Results from the discussions were organized into the LO model for the group.

Keywords: Learning Organization, Human Resources Development, Schools, Thailand

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการสร้างรูปแบบองค์การแห่งการเรียนรู้ (LO) เพื่อนำมาใช้ในการพัฒนาบุคลากรครูผู้ปฏิบัติงานในเครือโรงเรียนสารสาสน์ ซึ่งเป็นหนึ่งในเครือโรงเรียนเอกชนที่ใหญ่ที่สุดในประเทศไทย งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้ใช้ The Fifth Disciplines ของ Peter Senge เป็นโครงสร้างพื้นฐาน ผู้วิจัยใช้วิธีการสัมภาษณ์แบบเจาะลึกกับครูใหญ่ทั้ง 18 ท่าน ผู้คุ้มครองเรียนทั้ง 18 แห่งของเครือโรงเรียน และผู้อำนวยการภาค 5 ท่าน ผู้คุ้มครองเรียนทั้งหมด เกี่ยวกับปัญหาและอุปสรรคในการดำเนินการเพื่อความเป็นองค์การแห่งการเรียนรู้ของเครือโรงเรียน หลังจากนั้นผู้วิจัยแบ่งผู้บริหาร 23 ท่านดังกล่าวออกเป็น 5 กลุ่ม เพื่อทำการสัมภาษณ์แบบ focus group interview โดยผู้บริหารทำการปรึกษากันเพื่อหาวิธีในการแก้ไขปัญหาที่ได้มาจากการสัมภาษณ์แบบเจาะลึก ผลการสัมภาษณ์ได้นำไปเรียนรู้เพื่อสร้างรูปแบบเพื่อการสร้างองค์การแห่งการเรียนรู้สำหรับกลุ่มโรงเรียนในเครือสารสาสน์

คำสำคัญ: องค์การแห่งการเรียนรู้ พัฒนาบุคลากร โรงเรียน ประเทศไทย

INTRODUCTION

Sukontachit (2006) reported that while LO was suggested long time ago, Siam Commercial Bank was the first organization that tried the concept in Thailand in 1996. Learning and sharing of knowledge among personnel were tailored into their human resources development plan. The results were improvements among teams and the whole organization. Seeing the results, various industries adopted the LO concepts.

The global environment is dynamic and demands all industries to respond to changes. Education institutions

have to keep up with these changes in order to deliver up-to-date knowledge and information to learners. Nowadays, the world of education belongs to learners. The population growth rate in Thailand is declining to 0.543% 2012 (estimated) (CIA Factbook, 2012). Furthermore, learners are more inclined to seek knowledge and skills that prepare them for the job market starting from the elementary level. They are more selective about their educational institutions than before (Joseph, Yakhou, & Stone, 2005). Education institutions must keep developing in the organizational level in order to provide quality learning to learners.

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Organizations combine skills of their personnel throughout the organizations in order to attain the goals of quality (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004, pp. 31-55). Combined skills and/or knowledge could bring about synergy and competitive advantages in the marketplace. Learning Organization (LO) is a concept that helps to make learning to occur in the organization level. In order to attain learning all over the workplace, personnel should be developed continuously (Blazey, 2007; Dixon, 1999; Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1997; Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994; Kline & Saunders, 1993; and Beck, 1992). Cease of personnel development means stagnation of organization's learning. Moreover, the learning must occur in the same direction else contradictions and conflicts could occur. The improvement in the personnel level supports the improvement in the team level and the organizational level (Marquardt, 2002). An essence of LO is that individual's learning must be shared in order to create real improvement in the organization's productivity. However, the personnel may not be committed or willing to learn. They might prefer to work in the ways they are accustomed to rather than investing times to learn new unfamiliar things.

Schools in Thailand have to develop in order to continually improve their quality in education. LO is one concept that several schools have tried and some were successful while some were not. This project aimed to study the problems and obstruction towards the implementation of LO concept. Sarasas Affiliated Schools was selected as the location of study. Problems and obstructions were studied and a learning organization model for the group was proposed in lieu of teachers' development.

SARASAS AFFILIATED SCHOOLS

The first Sarasas school was opened in 1964. There were four hundred and ten students at the time. Sixteen teachers were recruited. The school has expanded and new schools were opened. The group opened the first bilingual school in 1993. As of 2006, Sarasas affiliated schools group operated 18 schools servicing 39,336 students and 3,198 teachers. The administrators have laid out a centralized policy. The same standard should be maintained among all affiliated schools. When a new school is opened, experienced administrators would be moved to administer the new school in order to keep the same standards and operational procedures. New teachers of different knowledge and skills were recruited for new schools. The group wanted to implement the LO concept in order to combine and smooth out the differences among personnel's knowledge. Hence, this study aimed to examine the operations and develop an LO model for them. This model would help the group to retain quality personnel and combine their knowledge in order to make the school a learning organization that could offer quality education to all stakeholders.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The learning organization approach was developed in response to changes, complexity, and uncertainty in the environment (Khadra & Rawabdeh, 2006). Dixon (1999) pointed out that central concept of a learning organization is the intentional use of learning processes to continuously transform the organization. LO seeks to provide true learning to personnel for both personal lives and works.

Learning organization is an organization whose personnel are determined to develop and utilize their potentials to create the results they truly desire on a continual basis (Senge, 2006). Organization members in all hierarchies should take parts in the development of the organization (Kline & Saunders, 1993). Organizations should support the learning of members and create climate for such learning (Marquardt & Reynolds, 1994; Pedler et al, 1997). Organizations should promote excellence in individual employee and vice versa (Marsick & Watkins, 1994). Argyris (1999) suggested that developments occur from constant monitoring and improving errors in organizations. Large errors are easy to spot but minor errors are easy to be overlooked. Flaws resided in each person cannot be resolved by the organization. Individuals must realize and correct their own deficiencies. Corrections of errors would lead to the development of the individual, groups, and eventually, the organization. Furthermore, Senge (2006) discussed that individuals usually did not realize their negative habits and behaviors. Many did not know they were trapped in the "vicious cycle" and thought they could not make any choice but have to comply, in a responsive manner, with situations or the environment and hence did not seek for the way out so they pushed bluntly further in the wrong direction (Senge, 2006, pp. 47-51).

Learning organization promotes a culture of learning and makes sure that personnel learning are shared and applied toward the organization's development (Agarwal, 2005). Senge (2006) incorporated several concepts into his best selling "The Fifth Discipline" book based on the systems paradigm, the first edition was published in 1990 and second edition was published in 2006. He suggested organizations should practice the disciplines of personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision, and the integration of these concepts, i.e. systems thinking or the fifth discipline. These disciplines were a foundation for core learning capabilities of the organizations. These concepts should be treated as disciplines rather than just concepts, i.e. personnel should practice them rigorously. In order for organizational development, individuals in organizations should open their minds and be receptive in order to realize their flaws and improve in an appropriate right direction. They should learn in teams to respond more effectively to the rapidly changing environment rather than to separate themselves from others. Segregated individual competencies would yield little and diffused development

to the organization as a whole. The visions of the organization must be shared so personnel would know how and in which direction they should move in alignment with others. An important notion was that all of these disciplines were needed together at the same time, not in a sequential manner or with differentiated emphasis.

Personal Mastery

According to Senge (2006), personal mastery is involved with clarifying and seeing reality objectively. The discipline involves self-clarifying what is really matter to a person and identifying one's highest aspirations. Learning refers not only to the acquiring of information but also learning about oneself and expanding the ability that truly matters to us. Rowley and Gibbs (2008) proposed that an important aspect of personal mastery is the understanding of the value of our learning to others. They further argued that individual's development would contribute to the development of the whole organization. When all, or majority of, members realize their true objectives in lives, they will seek for ways to improve their abilities toward those objectives on a continual basis.

Mental Models

Mental models are deeply ingrained assumptions about the world (Senge, 2006). It refers to the way we look at and interpret meanings in the world. Senge further described that this discipline calls for exposing one's internal self to the world for scrutiny. Personnel should open their minds and accept their weaknesses as a starting point for development. Apart from self-scrutinizing, personnel should allow others to assist in identifying their potentials to improve. The transformation toward a learning organization should also incorporate ethical ethos and the considerations of consequences of organization activities beyond economic perspective (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008). In Asian culture where people are highly conscious of face saving (Hofstede, 2005), showing of weaknesses or flaws are not welcomed. There is a need for careful and delicate considerations regarding the practice of this discipline.

Shared Vision

The discipline of shared vision refers to the skills of leaders to draw genuine visions rather than nicely written sets of vision statement (Senge, 2006). Leaders should visualize the "pictures of the future" (Senge, p. 9) so the personnel could see the organization's future. Personnel should infuse personal visions into these visions in order to choose the right path to proceed for both themselves and the organization. These visions should be shared among followers rather than imposed for compliance. Compliance could not create long-lasting commitment. A vision is truly shared when people have a similar picture and are committed to one another having it, not just to each of them, individually, having it (Senge, p. 192). Personnel should really understand and see the visions as well as commit to them. Visions should be reviewed, shared, accepted on an ongoing basis and an important

issue is an ethical consideration of the stakeholders' interests (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008).

Team Learning

Team learning refers to the process of thinking and learning together rather than isolated (Senge, 2006). These thinking and learning should be aligned into the same direction in order to create real impacts which, in term of LO, are results that members truly desire. Dialogues and discussion are necessary to enable exchange of information and knowledge among personnel. Through team learning, the collective thinking and action, and hence wisdom, could be promoted (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008). Learning together in a team manner would help the sharing of knowledge and information throughout the organization.

Systems Thinking

Senge (2006) maintained that systems thinking discipline is a discipline that help us seeing the interconnectedness of things around us and the whole pattern rather than bits and pieces of the system. Personnel should think systematically and see themselves as subunits that are connected to each other in the whole system. Their behaviors affect others' and vice versa. They should have the whole picture of the organization in their minds and know their locations on the picture. Systems thinking discipline helps integrating other four disciplines together. It is involved with the ability to see the big picture and the understandding of the relationships among subsystems (Rowley & Gibbs, 2008).

The practice of these disciplines would lead an organization toward LO. In the next section we discussed the methodology of the project which included two rounds of interviews, one-to-one and focus group.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims at developing a suitable LO model for the group of 18 affiliated education institutions. Senge's (2006) Fifth Discipline was used as the framework for this study. The researcher investigated the problems and obstructions against teachers' development in a selected school in the group. This school is chosen because it was newly opened hence problems were more evident. Interviews were performed in two stages the first stage was in-depth interviews with top administrators to collect data related to problems and obstructions about teachers' development. In the second stage, focus group interviews were conducted by dividing these administrators into 5 groups in order to brainstorm methods to solve the problems and create a LO model for the affiliated schools.

The informants in the first round interview were principals of all schools in the group. The researcher approached the president of the affiliated schools and discussed the project and asked for permission to conduct the research project. Eighteen principals from 18 schools as well as 5 directors who supervised the principals were interviewed. All informants had worked with the group for more than 5 years. They were informed about the objective of the project, that is, for the

development of the group not to find their flaws. Moreover, they were assured that the researcher would keep their name secret. Their identity would not be revealed to the president or any other person except the researcher. All participants were willing to provide true information to their utmost knowledge.

First Stage Interview

Appointments were made with each of the 23 informants separately and semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted at their offices. The interviews were structured based on the fifth discipline's guideline. The questions were related to problems in the current process that their schools faced categorized into the facets of system thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning. Participants were probed about the practices in each problem they suggested. Each interview was about an hour per session. The data were analyzed using the content analysis technique in order to summarize the problems against LO among the affiliated group. The researcher confirmed these problems with the 5 directors afterwards in order to verify the information.

Second Stage Interview

Problems against LO implementation in the affiliated schools derived from the first stage interview were used as the guideline for focus group interview. The 23 administrators were randomly assigned into 5 groups each group contain 4-5 informants. LO concept was explained to the informants and problems, one by one, were raised to them for discussions in order to come up with possible solutions to solve them. The researcher supplied the groups with research findings about the implementation of LO from Chang & Lee (2007); Jamali & Sidani (2008); Kenny (2006); Khadra & Rawabdeh (2006); Watkins & Marsick (1998) to assist them in the discussions. Each focus group was about 2-3 hours. The data gathered were analyzed to create an LO model for the affiliated schools.

RESULTS

First Stage Interview

The participants revealed that personnel could be grouped based on their tenure. Those who had been working with the group for less than three years were considered newcomers and those who had been working with the group for more than three years were considered senior. These two groups had different level of knowledge about the group. The senior group had more organizational knowledge such as policy, vision, and etc. Hence, they were more confident in making decision regarding their jobs.

The group was effective in the recruitment process due to the group's reputation and compensation system. Bachelors, Masters and Doctorates both native speakers and Thais were recruited into the group. Their experience and skills were of different levels regarding language proficiency, culture, as well as basic educational and organizational knowledge. With such diversity, some qualified new recruits did not understand and could not assimilate into the group so they quit from the

school. Moreover, teachers tend to work in the individual or teams' level rather than school or cross-school level. Highly educated as they were, they could teach and develop successfully but did not share knowledge with personnel in other schools in the group.

Furthermore, the group's rotation policy had an objective to expose teachers to tasks in other position. However, this policy created confusion and lack of continuity and coordination among teachers. The transfers of tasks were ineffective. Those who were rotated would move to perform works in new positions without transferring operational knowledge to those who moved to assume the tasks. There were also frequent reassignments of tasks among teachers. The rotation and reassignment of tasks made it ambiguous for teachers of which tasks should they develop skills or knowledge for their career paths in the group. An informant mentioned that "the rotation is good but sometimes occurred abruptly." Another informant revealed that "some of my subordinates were perplexed of what kinds of skills she should acquire."

The informants revealed further that new teachers were mostly young of age and they were less capable to accept critiques than more mature teachers. Moreover, in the Thai culture, younger people tend to be shy and reserved in front of the elders. They felt uncomfortable to converse closely with people of other generations. They did not want to ask for assistance from others. They also did not know the organization's structure well enough to seek channel to obtain information they need for their operation nor for self-development. Since they were new they might not have acquaintances to talk to and discuss their rooms for improvement. An administrator reported that "new teachers tend to be reserved and separate from others" and that "they did not converse or ask for opinions from elder teachers."

Most administrators reported that many teachers did not know the visions and missions of the affiliated schools especially among the newcomers. Teachers had low level of organizational knowledge. Hence, they did not share the group's visions. This obstructed the teachers' commitment to the group. Some did not have real understanding about the tasks in the schools and their directions. Some teachers were unclear about suitable behaviors that would contribute to the organizational development. As an administrator put it that "some teachers did not know how to talk to parents and students" and another commented that "sometimes they said something against the values of the school to parents". In addition, teachers tend to work towards short-term goals rather than organizational long-term goals.

Most administrators agreed that their teachers liked to work together in small teams. Teachers were grouped in teams and teachers did well in working together. Teams were structured to include a few teachers in related discipline. These teams share their learning within the teams but not with other teams. Another problem occurred because of the age gap. Some new teachers thought that offering their knowledge to the elders was inappropriate because

they assumed that the elders were likely to know more than them. Being expressive would bring embarrassment. An informant put it that "the youngsters thought that sharing their knowledge to the elders was like teaching the elders." This is considered impolite in the Thai society.

The informants confessed that it was difficult to assess whether new teachers think systematically or not. There was little evidence in their behaviors that suggested they work with an understanding about their interrelationship with people in other positions or with the group's whole picture in mind. Most showed responsibility in their own positions only. Those who talked to people in other teams or departments were the seniors. Most new teachers depended on their supervisors' decisions. An administrator said "young teachers did not know much about the organizational norms so they chose not to make decisions but followed their supervisors' decisions in work." Moreover, some new teachers responded to operational problems without referring to other units hence sometimes their decisions obstructed works in other units. Senior teachers seemed to have little problems compared to newcomers regarding systematic thinking. They understood the system well enough to behave and decide in accordance with other units under the group's guideline. However, those seniors who were sent delegate to operate new branch could sometimes remote themselves from the whole organizational picture because they had to solve operational problems in new establishments.

Second Stage Interview

Problems regarding LO identified from the first stage interview were listed and focus groups technique was utilized in order to brainstorm administrators for solutions to these problems. The informants agreed that training programs should be organized for teachers as follows.

Personal mastery

Teachers in the group had high education level. They were capable and realized what they want relatively clearly. However, the group should stimulate teachers to realize the benefits and necessities of lifelong learning.

Mental models

One major problem with young teachers was their defensiveness. It was suggested that developing

their Emotional Intelligence (EI) would help teachers to control their emotion and take comments non-personally (Tanchaisak, 2005 and Wattanapanit, 2006). EI training would help teachers to endure critiques and be benevolent to each others. Furthermore, appropriate feedback systems should be devised in the way that objective feedbacks could be offered to teachers. Hence, they could learn to accept their weaknesses and improve themselves.

Shared vision

The group should utilize strategy map concept (Kaplan & Norton, 2004) to illustrate the overall visions of the organization and the way that each personnel should contribute. Teachers would learn and understand the cascading visions. They would learn the ways that their performances are related to the objectives, goals, missions and visions both in the departmental level and organizational level. A clear understanding about vision and mission as well as leaders' support and employee empowerment helps organizations towards LO (Goh, 2003). It would be easier to align personal's objectives and the group's. The learning chain (Maqsook, Walker, and Finegan, 2007) should be planned to create learning in each level of the strategy map.

Team learning

Although the schools had structured teachers into teams already, training to create acquaintances and esprit de corps should be organized periodically. The group should rotate team members once in a while so that teachers could get to know each other. Moreover, special activities such as picnic or sports should be organized to promote rapport and trust among the teachers.

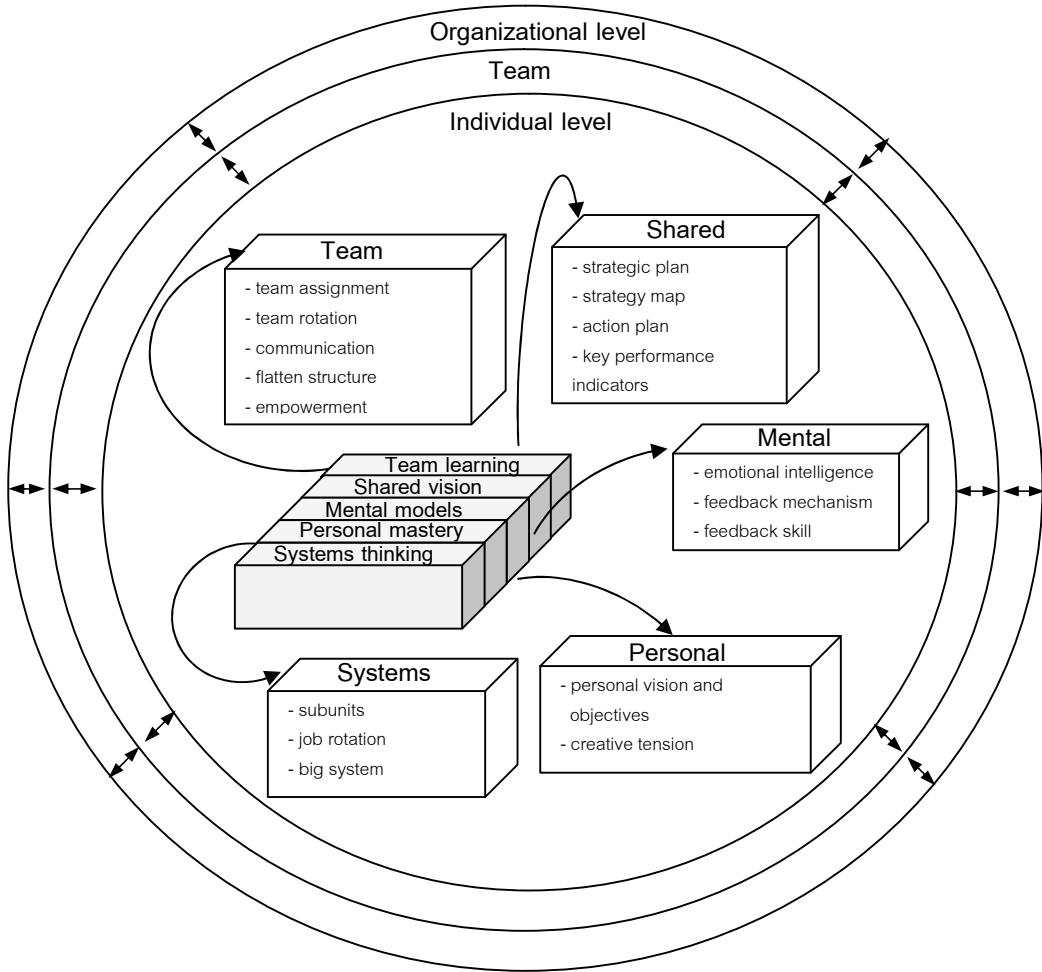
Systems thinking

Programs should be created so teachers would learn about jobs in other units so they would understand their interrelationships with others. Clear job descriptions should be drawn so job rotations would not create confusion. When needs to rotate occur, teachers should be rotated to a new position that is related or similar to their current position so the learning curve could occur quickly.

The LO Model

The LO model for Sarasas Affiliated Schools was developed and proposed in figure 1.

Figure 1: The LO model for Sarasas Affiliated Schools



DISCUSSION

The administrators shared better understanding regarding the ways to develop personnel at the affiliated schools. Series of training programs for each element shown in the model were proposed. These elements could be offered in the same training sessions. Objectives of the training programs should be stick with. Marquardt (2004) suggested action learning as one method for human resources development. Teachers in the group liked to work in teams hence action learning should be the appropriate method for training programs here. Trainees from different units should be assigned into small groups and give them problems to solve. Action learning could create working and learning as a team. Team members could learn from each other and develop rapport. Teachers would open their minds to accept feedbacks from friends who they think have good intentions to them. Moreover, action learning enable teachers to realize the interdependent among units and hence shared vision can be attained. However, it is important to also include materials in the programs to make trainees understand the methods for systematic thinking.

One session might not be sufficient. Periodic programs should be organized in several modes such as lecture, action learning, sport activities, educational trips, and etc. The objectives of these programs should be maintained so the content would be directed towards the development according to the model.

Personnel should be educated to verify their personal visions and the discrepancy from the organizational visions. They should be convinced that personal visions could be modified to be aligned with the organization's which will create a win-win situation. Working with a win-lose mindsets would be destructive to both the teachers and the school. If personal visions are aligned with the school, teachers will be stimulated to work enthusiastically for the school and keep developing themselves in the lifelong fashion. It is important to assist teachers to understand the mutual objectives.

Furthermore, in the structural aspect, an effective feedback system should be created. This system should encompass human factors into consideration as well as objective measurement of performance. Apart from training personnel to accept fact, a justified feedback system would help them to accept the feedback easier.

The teachers were doing well in their teamwork. However, it is essential to create a culture and organizational system that stimulate sharing of knowledge among the personnel. Friendship and trust should be created through common activities, empowerment, teamwork assignment, and etc. Leaders should support cross-functional team so personnel can create network within the group.

CONCLUSION

The development according to the model would result in learning in the individual level that goes in the same direction as the school. Collective and shared individual learning enables the development in the organization level. The elements in the model are interrelated. Each supports the others, for example, the development of mental model would enhance the development of personal mastery and vice versa. Personnel's participation in the process leads to successful implementation of LO in the affiliated schools. An important factor is the continuous commitment from the administrator towards the creation of LO else personnel would lose theirinte rest and LO attempts would be wasted. Furthermore, rapport and friendly culture could contribute a lot towards the process.

This research project aimed at finding an LO model for the affiliated group. Next, a project to measure the results from the implementation should be conducted in order to know the results and needed adjustment. Moreover, this project collected data only from the administrator. Data from the teachers' side would further shed the light for the adjustment or refinement of the model. Mechanisms should be established in order to have objective evidence to measure the success of the Learning Organization creation at Sarasas Affiliated Schools. It would be good to apply this model with other school in order to create a generic model for private schools in Thailand.

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