

## BEHAVIOUR MODIFICATION AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: REVISITING THE THEORIES OF LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

There is heightened debate on the impact of organizational culture and behaviour on organizational development. In the middle of this debate, the processes that lead to both organizational culture and behaviour are rarely discussed. This paper focuses on behaviour modification as one process of achieving organizational development. In order to render a satisfactory discussion, the paper revisits the theories of learning which continue to shape many of the learning processes available to business organizations.

**Keywords:** Behaviour modification, learning theories, organizational behaviour, culture and development.

### INTRODUCTION

The complexity of current business environment has imposed constantly changing settings in which organizations compete for survival. As a result, special emphasis is placed on acquiring, motivating and retaining quality human resources, since these initiatives are essential for the success of organizations. Moreover, since organizational success is tied to human resource innovations, it is increasingly obvious that all organizations whatever their size and business orientation, depend on the knowledge and expertise of their employees to create sustainable agility and competitive advantage. To achieve this, organizations not only create an enabling environment but also ensure that employees have the appropriate expertise to do the job.

Learning clearly underpins these endeavours. In order to remain competitive in an environment characterised by uncertainty and constant change, organizations' ability to learn from the past coupled with a better understanding of what is required for the future is essential for their survival. As Mullins (2010) observes, learning influences organizational behaviour and development. Learning is therefore vital for their relevance and success. This learning process forms the basis for behaviour modification which is the key ingredient in the learning process.

### Individual behaviour in organizations

According to Griffin (1999), the starting point of understanding human behaviour in organizations, the consideration of the basic nature of the relationship between individuals and their organizations. This is essential in gaining the appreciation of the nature of

individual differences which significantly influence organizational behaviour. This is emphasized by Mullins (2010) who advocates that the individual is a central feature of organizational behaviour whether they act in isolation or as part of a group. Griffin (1999) further identifies personality, attitude, perception, diversity, multiculturalism and stress as the fundamental elements of individual behaviour. These elements have profound effects on organizational behaviour and development. Where the needs of the individual and organizational demands are incompatible, it can result in frustration and conflict. It is therefore the task of management to integrate the individual and the organization's needs to provide a working environment that promotes the satisfaction of individual needs as well as the attainment of organizational goals hence organizational development (Mullins 2010).

### **Learning and Behaviour Modification**

Learning frequently occurs when an individual has to deal with a new situation. It is about developing new skills, competencies and attitude to meet new situations. It is a change in behaviour that occurs as a result of one's interaction with the environment. Torrington, *et al* (2005) define learning as the changed or new behaviour resulting from new or reinterpreted knowledge that has been derived from an external or internal experience. Learning is a powerful incentive for most employees to stick to their organizations and has significant impact on individual behaviour as it influences abilities, role perceptions and motivation.

Organizations can therefore influence these factors in their bid to promote and encourage learning initiatives. As the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD-UK) put it, learning is a self-directed, work-based process leading to increased adaptive capacity. Torrington *et al* (2005) state that there are a number of ways people learn and outlined the following techniques as some of the effective means of work-related learning techniques:

- Action learning
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Peer relationships
- Learning logs.

Honey and Mumford (1992) believe that there are different learning styles which suit different individuals and have drawn up a classification of four learning styles:

- Theorist – one who seeks to understand the underlying concepts of a situation and takes an intellectual approach based on logical argument;
- Reflector – one who observes situations, thinks about them and then choose how to react;
- Activist – one who likes to deal with practical problems and is not interested in theory; and
- Pragmatist – one who only value ideas if there is a direct link to problems.

On their part, Huczynski and Buchanan (2007) contend that change in behaviour can be measured or quantified using learning curves. A learning curve is a high learning concept which is valid for a wide range of situations. It is a diagrammatic presentation of the amount of learning in relation to time. At the beginning, it is natural that the rate of learning increases but levels off at a point indicating that maximum performance has been achieved.

An organization which facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself is referred to as a learning organization (Peddler *et al* 1991). On the other hand, organizational learning is based on the detached observation of individual and collective learning processes in organizations. According to Torrington *et al*, although the learning organization concept centres more on individual learning and self development, organizational learning is more than just the sum of individual learning in the organization. It implies that it is only when an individual's learning has an impact on and interrelates with others that organization members learn together and gradually begin to change the way things are done.

The organizational learning approach is therefore critical to organizational success and is mainly focused on the process of collective learning. Easterby-Smith and Araujo (1999) indicate that the study of learning organizations is focused on normative models for creating change in the direction of improved learning processes. They argued further that the literature on the learning organization draws heavily on the concepts of organizational learning mechanisms and can be seen as a way of making the concept of organizational learning more concrete. The organizational learning mechanisms have been described as the structural and procedural arrangements that allow organizations to learn (Popper and Lipshitz 1998).

Organizational learning is therefore the process through which individuals and groups in an organization develop shared values and knowledge based on past experiences. Organizations vary greatly in all aspects and therefore establishing an understanding of what influences organizational learning is extremely valuable. Lohman (2005) outlined initiative, positive personality traits, commitment to professional development, self-efficacy and love of learning as factors that influence the motivation for organizational learning. Conversely, an unsupportive organizational culture, unwillingness to participate, and lack of proximity with colleagues, negatively impacted organizational learning. Albert (2005) also found out that top management support and involvement of consultants also facilitate organizational learning.

A European study showed that lack of motivation, unclear roles, lack of confidence, insufficient learning culture, lack of innovation and lack of resources negatively impacted organizational learning (Sambrook and Stewart, 2000). From the positive perspective, motivation, enthusiasm, involvement, clarity and understanding of role, increased responsibility, a developed learning culture, senior management support, and investment in human resources make a significant difference in organizational learning. Garvin (1993) cited three critical factors that are essential for organizational learning: meaning, management, and measurement. He contended that for learning to be a meaningful organizational goal, it must be widely understood, have application to the work being performed, and be supported by top organizational leadership. In addition, Garvin (1993) reiterated that for an organization to learn, a change must take place and newly gained knowledge must be intentional and managed. Learning practices and policies must therefore be the foundation of managed organizational learning. Garvin further suggests five basic practices that organizations can manage to enable organisational learning: systematic problem solving, experimentation, the use of demonstration projects, experiential learning, and benchmarking. He added that measurements must effectively gauge the stages of organizational learning: cognitive, where members are exposed to new ideas or knowledge, behavioural changes where members actually alter their behaviour based on new learning and performance improvement where behavioural changes lead to positive business results in safety, quality, market share, and profitability.

It can be seen that a learning culture plays a significant role in the organizational development. Amabile (1998) pointed out the following management practices in creating an effective learning culture within an organization: providing employees with challenges, freedom to innovate, providing the resources needed to create new ideas, diversity of perspectives and backgrounds within groups, supervisor encouragement and organizational support. Barriers to learning according to Torrington, et al (2005) are identified as the culture of an organization, risk of admitting failure, lack of incentive to change, internal competition, resistance to ideas and learning from other context. Clearly it is imperative for organizations competing in a rapidly changing world to have a continuous learning approach. The ability of individuals and groups to learn is therefore crucial to organizational success especially those organizations that are preoccupied with controlled performance.

### **Theories of Learning and Behaviour Modification**

There are broadly four theoretical approaches to understanding the nature of learning. The subsequent discussion focuses on these theories and whilst there are no right or wrong theory, organizational behaviour (and development) often reflect the explicit or implicit acceptance of one or more of such theoretical perspectives.

#### **Classical Conditioning Theory**

Classical conditioning theory discovered by Pavlov (1927) shows how a behaviour or response that is already established can become associated with a new stimulus. It is based on the premise that a physical event referred to as stimulus initially does not elicit a particular response but gradually acquires the capacity to elicit that response as a result of repeated pairing with a stimulus that elicits a reaction. Despite the theoretical possibility of the widespread applicability of classical conditioning, most theorists agree that it represents only a very small part of total human learning. Skinner (1953), in particular, argued that classical conditioning explains only reflexive behaviours. These are the involuntary responses that are elicited by a stimulus. Skinner felt that the more complex human behaviours cannot be explained by classical conditioning alone and asserted that most human behaviour affects or operates on the environment. According to Skinner, the latter type of behaviour is learnt through operant conditioning.

#### **Operant Conditioning Theory**

This learning theory states that people learn by continually looking for ways to achieve more positive reinforcement in terms of rewards and avoid negative reinforcement in terms of punishment (Skinner, 1953). Reinforcement is defined as a stimulus or event that affects the likelihood that an immediately preceding behaviour will be repeated. Besides reinforcement, punishment produces avoidance behaviour, which appears to weaken learning but not curtail it. It operates under the assumption that if behaviour can be learned, it can also be unlearned. Skinner (1953) has been associated with operant conditioning. He believes that behaviours are influenced by a history of rewards and punishments. According to Skinner, once actions have pleasant effects, then there is the likelihood that such actions will be repeated in future. This suggests that any behaviour, in a particular context that is reinforced (rewarded) in some way will tend to be repeated in that context. However, if one's actions have unpleasant effects (punishment), then one is less likely to repeat them in the future. Accordingly, behaviour is the function of its consequences. In 1974, Skinner introduced the concept of shaping behaviour by selectively reinforcing desired pieces of behaviour. His experiment

revealed that human behaviour is shaped by the environment, by past experiences in that environment and by the selective rewards and punishments that are received. He further argued that thinking, problem solving and acquisition of language are dependent on these simple conditioning processes (Skinner, 1974). Hence, operant conditioning has a great impact on human learning and it also explains much of organizational behaviour and development processes.

The classical and operant conditioning theories constitute the behavioural theories concentrating on changes in observable behaviours. Behaviourist psychologists like Pavlov and Skinner associate reward with certain behaviours in order to increase the display of such behaviours. The relevance of this for organizations may be seen for example in telesales training where employees are taught to follow a script and calls are listened to, to ensure that the script is followed. Reward or punishment follows depending on behaviour. The main challenge of behavioural theories is that they are manipulative and limited in nature.

### **Social learning theory**

Various psychologists have been associated with this theory notable among them being Albert Bandura, N. E. Miller and J. C. Dollard. Social learning theory also known as observational learning states that people learn through observing others' behaviour, attitudes and outcomes of those behaviours. Social learning theory explains human behaviour in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural, and environmental influences. Bandura (1977) believed that direct reinforcement could not account for all types of learning. As such, Bandura added a social element, arguing that people can learn new information and behaviours by watching other people. He noted that external environmental reinforcement was not the only factor to influence learning and behaviour but also intrinsic reinforcement such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment. In other words, this theory assumes learning to be a social activity that is based on one's needs as a human being to fit in with others. In organizational setting, this happens naturally as workers learn to fit into the perceived organizational culture. Fitting here means that one can be accepted successfully into the organization but does not necessarily mean the individual has internalized and believes in the way things are done in the organization. Social learning theory therefore has a considerable relevance to organizational behaviour (Miller and Dollard, 1950) but its main limitation is that it ignores the role of individual choice.

### **Cognitive theory**

Cognitive theory is based on an information processing approach and is basically concerned with what goes on in the learner's mind. Cognitive theorists argue that the rewards and punishment which behavioural theorists call reinforcement work in more complex ways than the conditioning theories suggest (Huczynski and Buchanan 2007). Cognitive theorists claim that in reinforcement, people are always aware about the results of past behaviour thus a feedback on how successful behaviour has been. Huczynski and Buchanan further stress that knowledge is information which can be used to modify or maintain previous behaviour. Therefore, cognitive theory is not concerned with the relationship between stimuli and responses, but rather with the plans that people choose, the way they adopt them and how these plans are modified by experience (Torrington et al 2005). The cognitive process assumes that people are conscious and active participants in how they learn. This theory is relevant in the contemporary managerial practice just as motivation theories such as equity theory, goal-setting theory and expectancy theory which centers on the concept of cognition.

Expectations, attributions and locus of control are all cognitive concepts requiring attention while motivating employees.

### **Influencing organizational behaviour and development through the application of learning theories**

The behavioural approach (classical conditioning and operant conditioning theories) to learning has led to the development of a range of techniques generally described as behaviour modifications which have effectively been applied to organizational settings. Behaviour modification is a general label for approaches to changing behaviour through the use of appropriate and timely reinforcement. This approach is based on the premise that people learn to repeat behaviours that have favourable consequences. It uses the principles of reinforcement (motivational strategies) to eliminate undesirable workplace behaviours and to increase the frequency of such desirable behaviours.

Effective motivational strategies can either be transactional or relational rewards. The transactional rewards are mostly in the form of pay increase and attractive benefits whereas the relational rewards are in the form of employee recognition, flexible work arrangements, work/life balance, positive working conditions, sense of achievement, employee empowerment and involvement in decision making, opportunities for personal growth and career advancement. All these motivational strategies drive employee satisfaction and commitment toward the achievement of organizational goals hence organizational development.

When a manager wants an assignment completed on time and not to be submitted beyond the required deadline, the manager may use positive reinforcement like compliments to reinforce this behaviour or use negative reinforcement (punishment/sanctions) like a warning letter to deter undesirable behaviours. Smither (1988) cited a typical example of how this was applied in a factory in Mexico which suffered serious timekeeping problem. 15% of their workforce arrived late for work on a regular basis. The management decided to reward good timekeeping by paying workers two pesos a day extra if they started work early. Lateness fell from 15% to 2%, at minimal additional cost to the company. In customer oriented organizations, a positive reinforcement can be used to create superior customer value. A motivational strategy like recognition can greatly influence behaviours positively as far as enticing customers is concerned.

Similarly, inappropriate behaviours in organizational settings can be punished directly by withholding rewards or by initiating disciplinary procedures. Punishment, be it perceived or real, is likely to cause feelings of resentment in the minds of the affected employees leading to apathy or psychological revenge. It is therefore not surprising that most organizations prefer to use reward management as means of positively controlling organizational behaviour. It is however important that behaviour modification techniques are carefully planned to identify specific behavioural goals and particular procedures for reinforcing the behaviour that will achieve those goals and translate to organizational development. Where behaviour and appropriate reinforcement can be clearly identified and linked (example, 'if you wear your seat belt we will give you a prize') the techniques can be effective. Where this relationship is less clear (example, 'if you demonstrate commitment to the organization we will consider you for promotion') the applicability of the technique is less certain. Behaviour modification techniques also involve clear communication of goals and expectations to employees in unambiguous terms.

Social learning theory can also be applied in organizational setting to influence organizational behaviour. A great deal of what is learnt about how to behave in organizations can be explained through the process of observational learning. For instance, a new staff acquires job skills by observing what experienced employees do. Organizations tend to have different standards concerning, for example, what counts for good work performance, familiarity in everyday social interactions at work, the appropriate degree of respect to show to superiors, dress and appearance and attitudes to work, colleagues, managers and customers. The newcomer has to learn these standards to be a successful and accepted member of the organization. It is not enough just to learn the knowledge and skills required to perform work duties and responsibilities but to also acclimatize towards the accepted corporate culture. Individuals arrive in a new organization with values, attitudes, beliefs and expectation that they have acquired elsewhere. The old way of doing things from their former organizations may have to be unlearned oftentimes in order to learn the new ways of doing things in a new organization. As such, the concept of learning is unavoidable.

Observational learning occurs in a very informal and unarticulated manner. For example, people who experience the norms and traditions of their organizations and who subsequently incorporate these into their own behaviour may be recognized as having learnt through observation. The new recruit often learns about the organization by just being there. This is achieved by giving rewards such as encouragement, privilege and promotion for accepted behaviour and on the other hand by punishments such as being sanctioned for undesirable behaviours.

Social learning on the other hand enhances the self-efficacy of the learner, where self-efficacy refers to a person's belief that she has the ability and motivation to complete a task successfully. Social learning increases self-efficacy because people gain greater self-confidence after observing others perform a task. Managers can shape employee behaviour by systematically reinforcing each successive step that moves the individual closer to the desired response. If an employee, for example, has often been an hour late for work comes in only twenty minutes late, the boss can reinforce that improvement.

The main challenge in the application of the social learning theory is that it is a natural social process without a clear financial or material benefit from investing in its operation. This may be difficult gaining management support and commitment. Cognitive learning theory, which emphasizes the informative and motivational function of feedback, can also be applied in an organizational setting to positively influence organizational behaviour in various ways:

- Motivating organizational members to learn and with management establishing what the motives of organizational learning are and clearly outlining the benefits. The motivational strategies may include a prestigious job title, career opportunities or the acquisition of a valued skill;
- Tasks to be learned should be divided into meaningful segments for which performance standards can be established. The more meaningful the task, the stronger the motivation to learn;
- Giving employees clear, frequent and appropriate feedback on their performance and progress. It is worth noting that intrinsic feedback is usually inadequate in organizational learning and therefore it is essential for the management to provide the relevant extrinsic feedback as well;

- Focus on rewarding appropriate behaviours since punishment does not tell employees what they are doing wrong or what they have to do to improve. Punishment is likely to instill dislike, distrust and hostility in affected employees and reduce their motivation for learning. The effect of punishment is likely to be less predictable than that of reward. Managers would rather deploy encouragement and recognition as these create a feeling of confidence and competence that enhances motivation to learn.
- Concurrent feedback is more effective than delayed feedback. Research into employee performance appraisal systems shows that delayed feedback is catastrophic. In other words, too little is done too late to be of any use in developing knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for optimal performance. Supervisors therefore need to give frequent feedback in a helpful and considerate manner. It is not unreasonable to think that most workers would potentially respond positively to helpful, encouraging and motivating criticism than to no feedback at all.

## CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that learning theories can be applied in various ways to influence organizational behaviour and development positively. The role of management in organizational learning is to encourage continuous and collective learning and subsequently transform them into desirable behaviours and processes to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Managers must therefore recognize the central role motivation plays in influencing the behaviour of individuals and groups in organizational settings and be familiar with the content and the cognitive motivational factors that drive employee satisfaction and commitment. Key motivators such as recognition, flexible work arrangements, work/life balance, empowerment and participation, advancement and growth and sense of achievement can be used to reinforce desirable employee behaviours towards the attainment of organizational goals. When these goals are achieved the organization achieves a considerable degree of development.

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