MAPPING ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING PRACTICES IN ORGANIZATIONS IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of the preliminary empirical research for mapping practices of organizational learning in organizations in North Macedonia. This research has a diagnostic character – its intention is to record emerging forms of organizational learning practices resulting from the approaches in treatment of human resources. Based on that, the team of authors will more realistically define the subject dimensions of the action research carried out by BAS Institute of Management – Bitola, titled "Effectiveness of Action Interventions for Systemic Introduction of organizational learning in the practices of organizations in North Macedonia." The intention of this action research is to test in real life circumstances the feasibility and effectiveness of our integrated model of organizational learning already presented at the 13th IFKAD conference in Zagreb in 2013. The paper provides a brief overview of current research on similar topics, focusing on the findings of the preliminary empirical research – the key findings from the distribution of organizational learning practices and their effects on Peter Senge's Five Disciplines: personal mastery and organizational wisdom; team learning and effective teamwork; mental models and organizational culture in organizational change; shared vision and strategic thinking, and system thinking and organizational intelligence.
Keywords: organizational learning practices, effectiveness of organizational learning, integral model of organizational learning, North Macedonia.

1. INTRODUCTION

Contained within this paper are the preliminary results obtained through the action research diagnostic phase of the of the BAS Institute of Management – Bitola, titled: "Organizational learning efficacy in practice within the organizations of North Macedonia". The action research design, including the design of the measuring instrument for this diagnostic phase named: "mapping organizational learning practices in organizations in North Macedonia" are based on four source groups presented below.

First, the basic design concepts stem from the three-component approach of Stringer (1999): Look – Plan – Act (*diagnose* the needs for improvement of conditions, *planning* or developing actionable intervention and *act* upon the plan or conduct the intervention). The aforementioned mapping, and its results presented within this paper, has a function of real dimensioning of action interventions through current and applied practices of organization learning (OL) with which the evolution portion of the organizational changes process and sustainability is secured.

Second, in terms of conceptual content, the authors of this paper fully follow the provisions of OL practices, within the lines of the *five disciplines of OL* initially presented in Peter Senge's masterpiece The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 1990) and the initial practical implementation of the approach described in the collective effort of Senge and his colleagues (Senge, et. al., 1994).

Third, the authors experience in mentoring master and doctor thesis within this field in the previous 25 years in the Institute for Sociological Political and Juridical Research in Skopje, Faculty of Pedagogy in Bitola and the Business Academy Smilevski in Skopje. This experience is a key component in the development and the initial testing of our integral model of OL (Smilevski et. al., 2013).

Fourth, a literature review of available papers for the authors on relevant empirical research globally, published after the aforementioned book by Senge et al., 1994. According to the needs of the design of our action research, the reviewed papers are separated into two categories: A) content-conceptual papers on the relationship between the disciplines of OL with the manifestations of their effects and B) papers with pronounced methodological character (approaches, techniques & instruments for measuring effects of OL).

Several content-conceptual sources are identified as most suitable for the necessities of the action research design as follows:

Mastery (Personal mastery) as an OL discipline is identified as the main core of the development of organizational

wisdom (OW). The essence of this aspect, accompanied with a systematic and dynamic model is observed in Hays' (Hays, J., 2016:19-25) position that the relationship between personal mastery and the other OL disciplines are the foundation of the transition from individual to organizational wisdom. For this paper, his basic definition of OW as "doing the right thing" and further broadening it with "… much more than the sum of its components: knowledge, experience and intelligence". While Hays elaborates the process in achieving OW, in the work of Akgun and Kircovali, an empirical argumentation is observed on the influence of OW on the innovation and operation perceived and measured through the personal mastery competence: "development of practices through the use of peoples virtues and activity in effective decision-making" (Akgün, A., E. and Kirçovali, S., Y..,2011) thus creating the system organizational learning – organizational wisdom – organizational performance.

Mental models, or their change as a key for changing the organizational culture and other dimensions of organizational change are within the first areas of action research of OL. The organizational learning is directly tied to the active participation in groups and teams in the organization (Elkjaer 2004), i.e. OL is less dependent on the knowledge and information within the organization, but more dependent on the dynamical interpersonal processes through which the that knowledge and information is improved, updated and internalized. On the other hand, the study of organizational culture assists in improving performance (Boyce et al., 2015), subsequently improving the preparedness and adaptability necessary for changes, thus explaining organizations that have more open and more adaptable culture can expect more dedicated employees (Oracle, 2016). Finally, the mental models of individuals in any organization are essential to accepting and implementing change and learning. It is about changing the way we look at things from individual components to functional wholes, approaching challenges from multiple and different perspective, seeing employees as active creators of reality, from reacting to the present to creating the future. (Senge, 1994)

The sources for shared vision can be sub-divided into three groups. The largest group of sources refer to the creation of shared vision, mostly as part of strategic planning (Preston, D., S., and Karahanne, E. (2009), followed by the papers referring to the shared vision as a tool of the organizational learning (Loon H.S. 2007) and finally, a minor part of papers refers to the measuring the effects of the practice of shared vision (Gulzar, A. and Saif, M. I., 2012). Particularly important for this paper is Peter Senge's observations on the role of shared vision in obtaining "… focus and energy for learning", especially for the generative learning (Senge, P., 1990: 206).

All of the OL disciplines are interactively connected and if consistently followed, they provide synergistic effects for each separate discipline, and especially for the capacity for the organization to learn. To better illustrate this, we take the case of team learning as most suitable case. Teams and other forms of collaborative work are most fruitful situations for social learning, i.e. sharing knowledge and experience between members. This further constitutes the need for accentuating the three critical dimensions of team learning within organizations (Senge, P., 1990: 236-237): the need of insightful approach to complex problems, the need for innovative and coordinated actions and the roles of the team members in other teams. The equality principles between team members, and the open dialogue within the team, is placing the team learning within the key disciplines in the process of building smart organizations (Perkins, D., 2003).

As the systems thinking unites and supports the other four disciplines, the ultimate product of the systems thinking practice and integration – the organizational intelligence (OI) integrates within itself most of the effects of the other disciplines. As initial input in observing the systems thinking we use the characteristics and levels explained by Stave and Hopper and presented in the table 1 below (Stave, K., and Hopper, M.,2007).

Table 1 Key characteristics and levels of systems thinking

Characteristic	Level	Description
Recognizing interconnection	Basic	Seeing the whole system, understanding how parts relate to and make up wholes, recognizing emergent properties
Identifying feedback	Basic	Recognizing/Identifying interconnections and feedback
Understanding dynamic behavior	Basic	Understanding the relationship between feedback and behavior, including delays
Differentiating types of flows and variables	Intermediate	Understanding the difference between rates and levels
Using conceptual models	Intermediate	Using general systems principles to explain an observation
Creating simulation models	Advanced	Describing connections in mathematical terms, using both qualitative and quantitative variables
Testing policies	Advanced	Using simulation to test hypotheses and develop policies.

From the reviewed methodologically relevant literature and in order to finalize the design of our action research, it is worth separating the following three sources: Nemeth's paper on "Measuring organizational learning" within which a measuring instrument is developed for understanding organizational efficacy in OL through measuring the perception of manifestations of the OL practices in the organization (Nemeth, L. S. 1997); followed by Kayser's model for mapping OL practices and his complex model of using independent and dependent variables to transition from the theoretical constructions to empirically measurable characteristics of OL (Kaiser, S. M., 2000); lastly, the paper of Basten and Haamann, which contains extensive overview of approaches in the research of OL, and posits three domains for research the long-term effects of OL: People, process, technologies.

2. DATA SROUCES (INSTRUMENT AND SAMPLE GROUP)

The research for conducted digitally and online, where 90 candidates provided their insight in the presence of OL practices and effects within the organizations they are currently (or previously) employed. With this, the findings relate to a sample of 90 organizations in North Macedonia (Table 2). The elected sample group was intentional – alumni and current graduate and post-graduate students of the Business Academy Smilevski (BAS) and other collaborators of BAS, BAS Institute of Management and Detra Center. All respondents have been introduced to the concepts of organizational learning and its manifestations in practice, which further covers the prerequisites for a more realistic assessment of the current situation. The adequacy of the sample group is further broadened if we consider that respondents are belonging to 41 or 45,6% micro, small or medium companies and 24 or 27% public organizations (educational or health). Furthermore, the average professional experience of 18,62 years and current organization employment of 12,25 years of the respondents, indicates potential collaborative resource for broadened action research within these organizations.

Table 2 Sample data characteristics

Type of organization	f	%	Type of respondent position	f	%
a) Micro company (<10 employees)	12	13%	a) Operator (worker) (machine, line worker.)	1	1%
b) Small company (11-50 employees)	14	16%	b) Client services operator	16	18%
c) Medium company (50-250 employees)	15	17%	c) Professional services (accountant, developer.)	28	31%
d) Public utility company	1	1%	d) Supervisor (first line manager)	6	7%
e) Local government	1	1%	e) Operations manager (middle management)	15	17%
f) State public enterprise	8	9%	f) Top manager	23	26%
g) State body (ministry, etc.)	5	6%	g) Other	1	1%
h) Public institution (Health, education, etc.)	24	27%	TOTAL	90	100%
i) Other	10	11%	Average professional experience of respondents	18.62 years	
TOTAL	90	100%	Average employment time of respondents in current organization	12.25 years	

The measuring instrument is designed as a seven-degree Likert scale with the following degrees of agreement with the offered items:

+3 – totally agree
+2 – highly agree
+1 – partially agree
0 – undecided
-1 – partially disagree
-2 – highly disagree
-3 – totally disagree

In terms of measuring the researched phenomena, the research team compiled a set of items for each of the five disciplines and the according five effects, with additional three biographical data questions (type of organization, position and professional experience of respondents). The statistical processing of the obtained data showed that the measuring instrument has a high degree of reliability (the coefficients for the 10 groups of items are between 0.94 and 0.97 for each set of items).

3. RESEARCH FIDINGS (RESULTS AND DISCUSSION)
3.1. GENERAL FINDINGS

The results of the perceived manifestations of OL practices and their effects are provided within table 3. From the provided results we can extrapolate the following conclusion:

Table 3 Perceived manifestations of OL practices and OL effects

Organizational learning practices		Organizational learning practices effects	
OL Practice	*Indicator*	**Key effect**	*Indicator*
IA) Personal mastery	1,62	IB) Organizational wisdom	1,53
IIA) Team learning	1,47	IIB) Team work	1,51
IIIA) Mental models	1,87	IIIB) Organizational culture	1,40
IVA) Shared vision	1,31	IVB) Strategic thinking	1,28
VA) System thinking	1,27	VB) Organizational intelligence	1,02

a) The practices of changing mental models averaged at 1.87 on a scale of 1.00 – 3.00 and is the highest score in relation to the other indicators, followed by the personal mastery indicator averaging at 1.62, thus showing a very satisfying condition of these two disciplines, which spontaneously and without the need of separate external intervention are apparent in the organization sample practices. This data further explains the highest average score of 1.53 attributed to the organizational wisdom as expected correlation with the development of personal mastery.

b) On the other hand, the lowest averages are attributed to the practices of system thinking and its effect organizational intelligence with 1.27 and 1.02 accordingly. These scores should be considered as expected since systems thinking as practice, without external intervention, is quite difficult to develop spontaneously.

c) A concrete, as opposed to hypothetical correlation between the practices of OL and OL effects can be also observed through the Pearsons correlation coefficient (table 4). These scores generally observed, show quite low correlation between autonomous development of OL practices and achieving OL effects as managerial practice i.e. team work, organizational culture etc. This is quite apparent at the low (and negative) correlation between team learning and team work (-0.18). This can be explained as manifestations of team work as a managerial practice just in order for job completion, however without practices of knowledge or experience sharing. We consider the performance of these teams as quasi-teams with the purpose of completing a mutual/team task without provisions for equal and effective participation of all team members, thus enabling sharing knowledge and experience and also without the practice of reflection (feedback) upon completion of the team work, as key factors of team learning.

Table 4 Correlation between the organizational OL practices and OL effects
Споредени варијабли

Практики	*Ефекти*	*r*	*Практики*	*Ефекти*	*r*
Лично мајсторство	Организациска мудрост	0.31	Ментални модели	Организациска култура	-0.05
	Тимско работење	0.34		Стратегиско размислување	0.25
	Организациска култура	-0.46		Организациска интелигенција	0.02
	Стратегиско размислување	-0.49	Споделена визија	Стратегиско размислување	0.38
	Организациска интелигенција	0.05		Организациска интелигенција	0.15
Тимско учење	Тимско работење	-0.18	Системско размислување	Организациска интелигенција	0.26
	Организациска култура	-0.08			
	Стратегиско размислување	0.08			
	Организациска интелигенција	0.19			

d) The correlation scores between the organizational practices themselves (table 5) show no significant correlation which strengthens the possibility of implementing interventions for each of the disciplines separately, not excluding the possibility for implementation of the full OL model.

Table 5 Correlation between the separate organizational OL practices (disciplines)
Споредени варијабли

Дисциплина 1	*Дисциплина 2*	*r*	*Дисциплина 1*	*Дисциплина 2*	*r*
Лично мајсторство	Тимско учење	-0.23	Ментални модели	Споделена визија	-0.19
	Ментални модели	-0.07		Системско размислување	-0.12
	Споделена визија	0.04	Споделена визија	Стратегиско размислување	0.38
	Системско размислување	0.13			
Тимско учење	Ментални модели	-0.17			
	Споделена визија	0.04			
	Системско размислување	-0.05			

3.2. SPECIFIC FINDINGS

A) PERSONAL MASTERY // The current condition of professional and personal development of employees are observed through the practices of personal mastery and organizational wisdom. The lowest observed averages are regarding that employee potential is developed through using organizational resources (1.27). Furthermore, quite a low average is attributed to the item regarding the organizational support for personal development and experience sharing (1.40). Also, under the arithmetic mean are the items regarding that the organization is a safe environment for innovating new ways of learning and implementing new practices (1.48), as well as the potentials for continued development of individual capacity and capabilities. In the organizational wisdom part, a satisfactory perception of employee's attributions to the development and the organizational performance is observed (2.23), however the individual knowledge is inadequately transferred in organizational knowledge through separate strategies (1.21).

B) TEAM LEARNING // The general observations of team learning and team work are additionally confirmed with the broadened per-item analysis. Thus, within the team work practices, three under average items are observed such as: focus of achieving team goals (1.76), effective group conflict resolutions (1.33), identifying failure causes (1.33) and withholding information to other employees not belonging to the group (1.32). Worrying situation is observed within the team learning effects items, with 6 out of 10 low & under average scores. Feedback is not provided for learned lessons (1.18), withholding failures with others (1.20), inadequate team composition (1.33) and no encouraging different views (1.44).

C) MENTAL MODELS // The general items observation for the mental model changing practices show full above average scores, with the highest averages attributed to It is important to have an open mind (2.51) and Diversity and differentiations are important things (2.46). By themselves, these two items show that there is a solid foundation for further development and implementation of organizational OL practices, further confirmed with the averages of the following items: Preparation for reconsidering decisions when new information has emerged (1.88), In group decisions, we talk openly and we ask challenging questions (1.87). The other items are still above the average with scores between 1.56 and 1.77. The lowest observed average is attributed to the item: The employees are able to overcome standard ways of thinking and look at things in new and different ways (1.56) which can be seen as a priority when introducing and designing adequate organizational practices.

D) SHARED VISION // The averages of the shared vision practices are quite low within the sample data (1.31). If we deepen this observation we can note that half of the items are averaging low and below average with scores 1.08 – 1.31, thus extrapolating the conclusion that the management is not adequately dedicated to the participatory building or at least sharing the organizations vision as a powerful tool for organizational dedication. This further is compounded and observed at the lower average for strategic thinking of 1.28, which is not only a key factor of the strategy design but the strategy implementation as well. These findings are even further confirmed with the observations of the items that show that the employees are not considering the organizational values, vision and mission as their own (1.08), thus not showing organizational strategy and vision dedication (1.22).

E) SYSTEMS THINKING // In correlation with the levels of systems thinking provided in table 1, and throughout deepened observation per the items we can extrapolate a key finding regarding the system thinking practices: it is below the basic level. This unfortunate observation is observed through more than half of the items averaging between 1.00 – 1.18. It can be mostly observed within the items regarding: employee initiative for providing feedback and participation in strategic and operations decision making. On the other hand, close to the average line and above is the item regarding knowledge and understanding of employees on how their work attributes to the achieving of team or organizational goals (1.53) which indicates a strong potential for further development and implementation of external interventions regarding organizational system thinking practices, providing the management places a higher priority on this discipline.

4. CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Within the organizational sample we identified blooming experiences of practicing separate forms of organizational learning and, practically independently, separate practical effects of OL (i.e. new concept of organizational wisdom and organizational intelligence) which can be connected and improved with actionable interventions with current OL practices.

The relatively low correlation between the OL practices and the current conceptual OL effects strengthens the need of additional and broadened study of the correlation between the OL effects and the full five-set of OL disciplines and vice-versa – the expected effects of each discipline separately towards the whole organization performance.

The initial positive effects of the mapped OL practices and OL effects are highly actionable base for designing future action research for evolutional changes through the implementation of the integral OL model and with it, the connected participative organizational changes methodology.

The findings of this initial research should be further including additional deepened needs identification for the real

needs and potentials of action intervention in any client-organization.

As for the measurements of action interventions a separate measuring instrument should be designed/developed for continuous monitoring of the implementation for each action intervention implementation and final measurement no only on the results but the intervention influence on the total efficacy and performances of the organization.

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