Factors affecting Learning Organization Culture and hotel managers' Leadership Styles in Thailand

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Abstract

Learning Organization has been proposed as a fundamental strategic process creating sustainable competitive advantage for the future. Leadership is vital in facilitating learning organization. The objectives of the present study are to examine the relationships among learning organization, leadership style, and subordinates' demographic variables such as age and gender. The samples are 360 employees from twelve five-star hotels in Bangkok, Thailand. The results demonstrated that demographic variables, such as gender and age show significant differences in learning organization and subordinates' perception of managers' leadership style.

Keywords: learning organization, leadership style, satifaction with supervision, hotel industry

Introduction

The concept of learning organization has been a major concept in management literature since 1990, and this concept has been established increasingly in Thailand. Many references to this concept are available in the Thai language, including The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 1990) and Watkins and Marsick's (1993) Sculpting the Learning Organization: The art and science of systemic change. Based on these books, many organizations have enthusiastically attempted to implement learning organization practices; the Thailand Business Council for Sustainable Development posted lists of organizations that attended the learning organization workshop during August, 2005 (e.g., Advance Agro Company Limited, Amway Thailand, Bangchak Petroleum Public Company Limited, Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand, PTT Public Company Limited, Saha Union group, and Toyota Motors Thailand). However, a literature search identified no empirical research on the learning organization in the Thai context. So, there is little knowledge about the concept of organization learning, which originated in a western context, in the Thai context.

According to Robbins (1993), learning organizations require managers who can effectively challenge traditional perspectives, manage the organization's knowledge base, and make necessary changes. Senge (1990) stated that learning organizations require a new view of leadership, viewing leaders as designers, stewards, and teachers. Recently, leadership has also been a topic of interest among Thai researchers (Amnuchkmanee, 2002; Cheaupalakit, 2002; Dangsuwon, 2002; Laohavichien, 2004). Most leadership studies in Thailand have been conducted in the education industry (e.g., Aphimonbute, 1999; Cheaupalakit, 2002;

Dhanasobhon, 1982; Ratanakiranaworn, 1980; Saetang, 2004; Wisessang, 1988), multinational corporations (Srisilpsophon, 1999), hospitals (Chuwattanakul, 1993), and the army (Tinsulanonda, 1999). Very little is known about this topic in the hotel industry.

Research Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether subordinates' demographic variables such as gender and age influence the perceptions of their organization as a learning organization by investigating the seven dimensions of a learning organization, as proposed by Watkins and Marsick (1993), and subordinates' perceptions of managers' leadership style, as conceptualized by Bass (1985).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is comprised of conceptualizations of Watkins and Marsick's (1993, 1996) learning organization and Bass's (1985) theory of transformational and transactional leadership. Watkins and Marsick (1993) defined the learning organization as one that captures, shares, and uses knowledge to change the way in which the organization responds to challenges. Central to this theoretical framework of the learning organization are seven complementary action imperatives: (1) create continuous learning opportunities (continuous learning); (2) promote inquiry and dialogue (dialogue and inquiry); (3) encourage collaboration and team learning (team learning); (4) empower people toward a collective vision (empowerment); (5) establish systems

to capture and share learning (embedded system); (6) connect the organization to its environment (system connection); and (7) provide strategic leadership for learning (strategic leader) (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Watkins and Marsick (2003) developed the Dimensions of Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) to assess the learning organization on these seven dimensions. It was based on both their conceptualization and practice to measure organizational learning and its association with organizational performance.

The second theory used in this study was transformational leadership by Bass (1985). Bass proposed that the concept of transactional and transformational leadership includes seven leadership factors that he labeled as charisma, inspirational, intellectual stimulation, individualized consideration, contingent reward, management-by-exception, and laissez-faire leadership. Bass and his colleagues (1985) developed and modified the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). The MLQ has been validated in various samples and cultures with distinctions between samples and cultures. Saetang (2004) modified and translated the MLQ to measure transformational and transactional leadership in the Thai context and explored its relationship to the outcome variable of subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. According to Saetang (2004), the underlying constructs of transformational and transactional leadership in the Thai context; hard worker, training and encouraging employees, strategic planning, democratic workplace, and employee development represented transformational leadership style, and rewards represented transactional leadership style.

According to Saetang (2004), Hard Worker "reflects a leader's ability to demonstrate the importance placed in values and beliefs in subordinates such as work for society and become a role model". Training and Encouragement refers to a leader's ability to train their subordinates on both work context and personal issues, which reflects Thai values and beliefs. Democratic Workplace consists of ten items. This factor shows "leader's ability to be considerate of subordinates' individual needs to contribute to deciding what is to be done and who to be fair" (Saetang, 2004, p. 136). Strategic Planning "reflects the leader's ability to see the future, develop the organization's mission, and find ways to accomplish goals" (Saetang, 2004, p. 135). Leader's ability to share and communicate his or her vision to subordinates is also reflected in this factor. Rewards, according to Saetang (2004), are similar to the Contingent Reward factor of Bass (1985). This factor fits into transactional leadership and also exists as a transactional leadership factor in the Thai context.

Research Question

Based on these concepts and past research, the following questions were addressed in this study:

1. To what degree do hotel subordinates' perceptions of their hotels as learning organizations as defined by Watkins and Marsick's seven dimensions of the learning organization differ according to their gender and age?

2. To what degree do hotel subordinates' perceptions of their managers' leadership styles, as defined by Bass's transformational leadership style differ based on their gender and age.
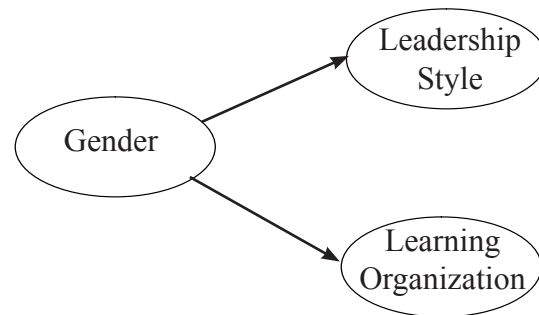

Figure 1. Hypothesized Model of Relationships

Significance of the Problem

The presence of multicultural staff and management is an essential factor in the ability of hotels to provide service to guests from many cultures. If one has not been exposed to individuals from foreign cultures, one is obviously unaware of the existence of differences. Diversity in terms of race, gender, religion, ethnicity, age, nationality, sexual orientation, physical and mental ability, and so forth, is a fact of life in today's organizations. The importance of knowledge learned and shared among hotel staff has long been recognized. Therefore it is interesting to investigate learning culture in the hotel industry. The behavioral examples of employees from foreign cultures may provide valuable examples to other employees as a benefit of workforce diversification. Workforce diversification requires leadership that is flexible and able to deal with diverse perspectives. This study investigated influence of age and gender on subordinates' perception of their managers' leadership style.

Research Methods

A survey questionnaire was used to investigate the relationship between learning organization and leadership style.

Instrument

The Dimensions of Learning Organization questionnaire (DLOQ) (Watkins & Marsick, 1996) was used to measure the influence of a learning organization culture. The DLOQ was selected because it has been widely used in several studies in many parts of the world. It has proven to be a reliable and valid measure of learning organization culture. The original, long-form DLOQ consists of 43 items. The instrument requires the respondent to determine the degree to which each statement reflects the approach practiced in the organization. Each statement is measured on a scale of 1-6, ranging form "1" for "almost never" to "6" for "almost always." Numerous studies have been conducted to establish the reliability and content and predictive validity of the DLOQ (e.g., Ellinger, Ellinger, Yang, & Howten, 2002; Selden & Watkins, 2001; Yang, Watkins, Marsick, 1998). Several stages of empirical research have assessed the psychometric properties of the DLOQ. This study used an abbreviated form of the DLOQ that included 21 measurement items, three for each of the seven dimensions (Yang, 2003). Overall reliability estimate for the 21-item scale was originally found to be .93. DLOQ was translated into Thai using back translation process. Reliability estimate found in the current study was .88, which showed that the instruments used in this study was reliable in this Thai context.

Table 1 show the results for DLOQ used to measure learning organization in this study. The eigenvalues for strategic leadership, dialogue and inquiry, and embedded system dimensions of the three factors were above 1.0 with factor loadings ranging from .66 to .82 (p < .01) while the three dimensions (continuous learning, system connection, and team learning) had no factors loaded at the minimum of .40. Three dimensions of learning organization dimensions were used in the hypothesized model in analyses for a structural model.

Table 1: Initial Variance for DLOQ

Total Variance Explained			
		Initial Eigenvalues	
Factor	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
1	10.29	49.02	49.02
2	1.37	6.51	55.53
3	1.17	5.56	61.09
4	.95	4.54	65.63
5	.84	4.02	69.64
6	.76	3.55	73.20
7	.68	3.26	76.46

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

To measure transformational and transactional leadership style in the Thai hotel industry, this study employed the leadership questionnaire developed by Saetang (2004) in Thai, based on Bass (1985), to measure the leadership style of school principals in Thailand. The questionnaire consists of 30 items with 5 possible responses (1 = not at all, 5 = frequently or always). The result of Saetang's study indicated that the underlying

constructs of transformational and transactional leadership in Thai context of Hard Worker, Training and Encouraging Employees, Rewards, Strategic Planning, Democratic Workplace, and Employee Development. Development represented a transformational leadership style, while Rewards represented transactional leadership style (Saetang, 2004). Saetang (2004) reported an overall reliability of .98 using Cronbach alpha.

Confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to confirm the validity of the instrument in the Thai context.

Table 2: Standardized Regression Weights, Critical Ratio, and Model Fit Indicators for the Leadership Style Questionnaire

Factor	Standardized Regression Weights	Critical Ratio
Strategic Planning	.67	9.49
Hard Worker	.87	13.24
Training and Encouragement	.70	11.45
Democratic Workplace	.82	13.06
Rewards	.43	7.17

Significant at 0.05 level

Table 3 reports several fit criteria used to assess the measurement model, including chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Tucker & Lewis, 1973), and Goodness of Fit Index (GFI). Root Mean Squared Residuals (RMR) (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1996) and Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) (Steiger, 1990) were also evaluated. The statistical analyses revealed that the leadership style and satisfaction scales used to measure leadership style and satisfaction with supervision showed a good fit. Factor loadings of the five factors for leadership style ranged from .45 to .85 ($p < .01$) confirming that variances in the indicators are explained by the factor. So, these analyses confirmed that five factors of the leadership style questionnaire developed by Saetang (2004) are appropriate for this Thai hotel industry context.

Table 3: Fit Indices for Measurement Model

Measurement Model	CMIN	df	CMIN/df	GFI	TLI	RMR	CFI	RMSEA
Learning Organization (DLOQ)	523.39	168	3.21	.88	.91	.08	.92	.08
Leadership Style	1186.50	395	3.00	.82	.88	.07	.88	.08

Sample

Twelve five-star hotels in Bangkok were selected to participate in this study, and all agreed to participate. All current front-line subordinates of department managers in hotels were invited to participate in this study. Front-line subordinates are those who receive an annual performance evaluation and who receive formal and informal feedback from,

and report directly to, a department manager. The data collection was conducted in June – July 2008. Of the 420 front-line subordinates who received the survey, 360 responded, amounting to a response rate of 85.71%. A majority of participants were female (n= 201, 56%), with most being Thai (n= 334, 93%).2008. Of the 420 front-line subordinates who received the survey, 360 responded, amounting to a response rate of 85.71%. A majority of participants were female (n= 201, 56%), with most being Thai (n= 334, 93%).

Data Analysis

Analysis of Moment Structures (AMOS) (Arbuckle, 1997) was utilized to process the statistic analyses. T-tests were conducted to identify the differences among independent variables and gender. ANOVA was conducted to indentify the differences among independent variables and age.

Results

Differences among independent variables and gender

Subordinates' gender was measured using t-tests and the gender differences between subordinates' perception of learning organization is shown in Table 4. Differences were found in four out of seven dimensions of learning organization with at 0.013 to 0.036 levels of significance ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4: T-test result for mean comparison of Dimension of Learning Organization Questionnaire between genders Questionnaire between genders

Variable	Mean		t Value	Sig.
	Male	Female		
Continuous Learning	3.88	3.77	0.95	0.036
Dialogue & Inquiry	4.20	4.10	0.79	0.042
Team Leaning	3.95	3.91	0.32	0.074
Embedded System	4.15	3.88	1.45	0.014
Empower Employee	3.88	3.80	0.61	0.053
System Connection	4.00	3.99	0.06	0.094
Strategic Leadership	4.28	4.09	1.50	0.013

Table 5 shows the results of subordinates' perceptions of their managers' leadership style differences between males and females. There were significant differences in all five factors of leadership style between males and females. This was consistent with a study conducted by Aldoory and Toth (2004), which reported strong preference for a transformational leadership style over a transactional leadership.

Table 5: T-test results for Leadership Style between genders

Variable	Mean		t Value	Sig.
	Male	Female		
Democratic Workplace	3.80	3.71	1.20	0.022
Hard Worker	3.92	3.85	0.82	0.041
Training & Encouragement	3.71	3.40	3.45	0.001
Strategic Planning	3.59	3.52	0.84	0.039
Rewards	2.90	2.75	1.68	0.009

Subordinates' age was measured in five categories. An ANOVA was conducted to test the age differences on subordinates' perception of their hotel as a learning organization, with the results shown in Table 6. Age produced significant differences in three of the seven dimensions of learning organization, namely continuous learning and inquiry, and team learning. The other four dimensions showed no significant difference based on age.

Table 6: Learning organization differences by age by ANOVA

Variable	Mean					F	Sig.
	21-28	29-35	36-42	43-49	50-60		
Continuous Learning	3.92	3.89	3.61	3.28	3.15	3.46	0.009
Dialogue & Inquiry	4.27	4.21	3.97	3.25	3.69	3.30	0.011
Team Leaning	4.02	4.04	3.70	3.42	3.39	3.21	0.013
Embedded System	4.07	3.93	4.12	4.02	3.12	0.87	0.478
Empower Employee	3.97	3.75	3.71	4.41	3.12	2.38	0.051
System Connection	4.04	4.08	3.91	3.45	3.45	1.94	0.102
Strategic Leadership	4.23	4.25	4.02	4.35	3.24	2.21	0.067

Table 7 shows differences in subordinates' perceptions of their managers' leadership styles by age. The findings reveal no significant differences between subordinates' perception of their managers' leadership style by age.

Table 7: Leadership Style differences by age by ANOVA

Variable	Mean					F	Sig.
	21-28	29-35	36-42	43-49	50-60		
Democratic Workplace	3.78	3.82	3.53	3.88	3.60	1.82	0.123
Hard Worker	3.92	3.87	3.74	3.71	4.02	1.18	0.318
Training & Encouragement	3.49	3.63	3.50	3.66	3.30	0.79	0.530
Strategic Planning	3.57	3.63	3.37	3.55	3.52	1.15	0.331
Rewards	2.89	2.84	2.70	2.84	2.22	2.02	0.090

Discussion and Implications

Differences in learning organization by age and gender

The purpose of this study was to answer two questions related to the learning culture and leadership style of hotel employees. The first of those questions was: To what degree do hotel subordinates' perceptions of their hotels as learning organizations as defined by Watkins and Marsick's seven dimensions of the learning organization differ based on their gender and age. Differences were found in some dimensions of learning organization which is different from the findings by Le Cornu (1999) who reported no correlations between learning organization and gender. The findings are consistent with the results reported by Wang, Wu and Wang (2009), who found that age differences moderate the effects on m-learning. Three of the seven dimensions of learning organization (i.e., team learning, system connection, and empower employee) demonstrated no significant differences between male female respondents. The results indicated shown that male respondents' perceptions of their hotel as a learning organization were higher than female respondents, in the four dimensions of learning organization of continuous learning, promote inquiry and dialogue, system connection, and strategic leadership. There were significant differences in subordinates' perceptions of their hotel as a learning organization and subordinates' age as shown in Table 6. The results were consistent with a study conducted in China by Wang, Yang and McLean (2007), but different from a study from Korea by Lim (2003).

Le Cornu's (1999) findings also showed significant differences in the two variables. The findings demonstrated that three dimensions continuous learning, promoting dialogue and inquiry, and team learning showed significant differences based on age. The younger subordinates tended to have higher perceptions of their hotels as learning organizations than the older employees.

Differences in leadership style by age and gender

The second research question for this study asked about differences in subordinates' perception of managers' leadership style based on gender and age. T-test results showed significant differences in subordinates' perception of managers' leadership style, based on Bass' (1985)conceptualization of leadership. Male respondents rated higher in both transformational and transactional leadership styles. Subordinates' age differences demonstrated no differences in their perceptions of their managers' leadership style.

Recommendations for Future Research

As with other studies in this field, the present study had its limitations. The sample in this study was department managers' front-line subordinates in five-star hotels in the Bangkok area. It is suggested that future studies should be conducted in other industries in Thailand to examine different viewpoints. This study investigated subordinates' perceptions of the three constructs; leadership style, satisfaction with supervision, and learning organization. This findings were based on subordinates' viewpoints. Managers' perceptions should be addressed in future research to observe both subordinate and manager perspectives. Finally, the relationships between learning

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