

PASSION FOR LEARNING: CONSIDER THE PROJECT MISSION

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Organisational learning is a concept that has proliferated within the discourse of construction management research over the last decade. Proponents of learning espouse that it is imperative for construction organisations to learn in order to maintain survival and success. However, the concept of organisational learning remains unclear and the semantics confusing. Moreover, the onus of learning rests upon individuals and hence it is necessary to consider how individuals learn that might contribute to project success. This paper therefore explores the individual's passion for learning and attempts to link this with project performance. It is believed that passion derives from knowing what the project mission is all about. Through a reflection of two case studies, we endeavour to show that passion for learning stems from the clarity of the project mission and the buy-in of the individuals that work on the project. Additionally, we suggest that high passion for learning would impact on project performance in terms of meeting time and cost targets.

Keywords: case studies, learning, performance, project.

INTRODUCTION

The terrain of organisational learning as an academic concept is a well-trodden one. According to Burnes *et al.* (2003), scholars such as Argyris have been writing about organisational learning for decades. Yet, following Senge's (1990) publication of *The Fifth Discipline*, organisational learning "have moved [...] from being a subject for serious academic study to a hot board room topic in the West", perhaps due to "the pace of change and the competitive threat posed by globalisation (Burnes *et al.*, 2003: 452)". Indeed, the recognition in the West of the rising knowledge economy signified for example by the Lisbon 1996 agenda of lifelong learning and the mantra of continuous improvement have seen a soaring interest in the role of learning in securing competitive advantage. Some writers are even adamant that organisational learning presents the only form of competitive advantage (see e.g. Stata, 1989; Kululunga *et al.*, 2001).

Notwithstanding the tide of interest in organisational learning, there is growing dissent with the concept. Huysman (2000), for instance, suggested that we have not fully understood the conceptual processes of organisational learning, whilst Lahtenmaki (2001) observed that the reconciliation between individual learning and collective organisational learning has not materialised. Lipshitz *et al.* (2002) also reiterated that the concept, like many concepts in social science, remains ambiguous and attributed

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this to the fact that many researchers have jumped on to the bandwagon of organisational learning resulting in a multitude of analytical perspectives.

Some scholars view learning as intertwined with organisational routines, which can alter and adapt to the dynamics of change. For example, Tranfield *et al.* (2000: 253) emphasise the systems approach to learning where the combination of cognitive, structural and behavioural aspects of routines work with resources to create organisational competencies. Still, other scholars prefer to concentrate on the socialisation aspects of learning. Wenger (2000), in particular, promoted the notion of communities of practice in the pursuit of learning. Despite the “heat of the battle” (see Weick, 2002), the common assumption cutting across the different lens is that learning is good for organisations that engage in continuous improvement and adaptable to change. However, the impetus for organisational learning is increasingly gaining attention of researchers.

Harrison and Leitch (2002), for instance, were quick to point out that change alone does not imply that learning would take place and hence change should not be the sole precursor for organisational learning. Harrison and Leitch (2002) suggested that the process of becoming a learning organisation was more crucial than the study of the learning organisation as a being (i.e. an end) and sought, in their action research case study, to involve individual persons within their case study organisations in “analytical dialogue [...] as a starting point for a process of self-development and self-awareness (p. 115)”. Chan *et al.* (2005) focussed on the challenges for construction organisations to embrace organisational learning in practice and added that the interorganisational dynamics of learning in project-based environments have yet been distilled. Chan *et al.* (2005) were especially frustrated with the motivation for organisational learning espoused by academic researchers and proposed a research agenda that goes beyond the promotion of continuous improvement at the organisational level to consider the benefits to employees and skills development. At the heart of these debates lies the importance of the individual in the process of learning.

Indeed, a key international group of organisational learning scholars have begun to stress the importance of people in learning and of the individual’s passion for learning. Silvia Gherardi and Davide Nicolini, organisers of the 6th International Conference on Organisational Learning and Knowledge in June 2005 (see <http://www.soc.unitn.it/olk6> accessed on 30 November 2004) introduced the conference with this narrative: “We argue that what fuels the debate on knowing and learning has the same origin as *what drives people and their organisations to seek out knowledge: love and desire of knowledge for its own sake*. While the prevailing functional and economic explanations of the interest for knowledge and learning point to its instrumental value, we contend that knowing and learning are fuelled by passion: they stir passions and they make people passionate (*emphasis added*)”.

The notion of passion for learning being the requisite ingredient in the quest for learning should not be unheard of, particularly within the academic learning environment. However, what instils the passion for learning in construction practitioners? That is, where does the passion for learning derive from, especially in the context of project-based construction? The reflection in this paper attempts to shed some light. We believe that passion for learning is interwoven with the project mission. In other words, if learning is not a key aspect of the project mission, then it is difficult to engender passion for learning in the project participants. This paper

reinterprets two recent case studies that we have conducted so as to support this argument.

The paper is organised as follows. The next section will provide a brief background into the two case studies involved, outlining our involvement and their original objectives. Thereafter, the key findings will be presented before we discuss how these relate to our claim on passion for learning. Finally, the paper closes with a call for both academics and practitioners to focus on the project mission to encourage learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary research methodology presented in this paper is case study research (Yin, 1994). The two case studies utilised in our reflection here emanated from different contexts. Nonetheless, we were involved in both case studies because both had real-life problems/issues that needed to be addressed and the case studies were considered useful to our key research interest on skills. The first case study, PrimaryCareCo, related to the provision of primary care facilities using a new public-sector procurement strategy known as the Local Improvement Finance Trust (LIFT) initiative. The second case study, ConstructCo, was a project involving the structural phase of the redevelopment of a large retail unit by a construction company that had a parent company based in Hertfordshire that was expanding, at the time of the research, in the Northwest of England. Therefore, both case studies contained an element of newness and change and so, we wanted to observe the presence, if any, of learning.

A total of 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted across the two case studies: 22 were conducted with key participants involved in PrimaryCareCo from June to October 2004; and 18 were conducted with key participants involved in ConstructCo from November 2004 to April 2005. Each semi-structured interview lasted between 1 to 3 hours and was audio-taped for analytic reference. The interview followed an interpretive research framework intended to gather rich descriptions of what went well in the project, what went badly in the project, and what were the perceived improvements in retrospect. Immediately following each interview, a summary sheet was completed (average of 5 A4 pages per interview) to enable the researchers' understanding of the issues, and which forms the basis for the analysis presented in this paper. The remainder of this section will outline in greater detail the background to PrimaryCareCo and ConstructCo.

PrimaryCareCo

In the UK, there is great concern about improving healthcare outcomes for patients, reflected in the healthcare modernisation programme (DoH, 1998). The LIFT initiative was born out of this agenda, conceived by the Partnerships for Health (PfH), a partnership formed between the HM Treasury (public sector) and Partnerships UK (private enterprise) in 2000. Ostensibly a public private partnership (PPP), the LIFT initiative was formulated to allow NHS Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) and their local partner organisations (e.g. local authorities) to redevelop primary care facilities with the aid of private sector involvement. Apart from developing healthcare facilities (e.g. GP clinics, surgeries, dentists, pharmacists), LIFT projects could potentially go further to provide such other amenities as community care and local authority services (e.g. libraries, job centres), with the ultimate goal of regenerating deprived urban areas.

This study is concerned with one of the LIFT localities – Locality F (see Figure 1 below) – in the Northwest of England, which was part of the first wave of the

implementation of the initiative. The selection of this locality rests upon a number of reasons. First, locality F was geographically most accessible to the research team. Second, locality F was the only locality that served three distinct geographical regions in the Northwest of England, making it the largest and undoubtedly the most ambitious locality to be implemented in the first wave of the initiative. Another reason for selecting locality F was the fact that at the time of the researchers' involvement, the LIFT partners had just achieved financial close (i.e. completion of the design stage) on a selection of schemes known as the first tranche. By that time, the partners had incurred time and cost overruns (planned date of achieving financial close: August 2003; actual date of financial close: August 2004). And so, this gave rise to our research opportunity to investigate the issues/problems that led to the outcome of this contemporary initiative (Yin, 1994).

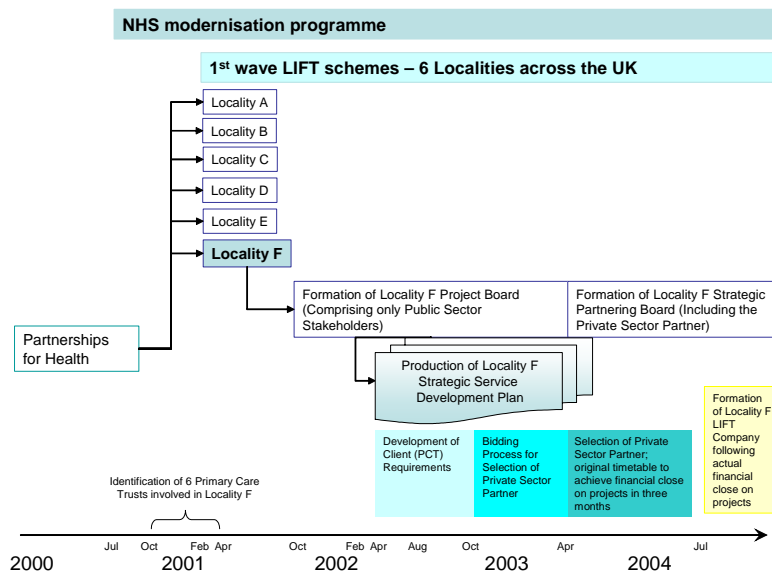


Figure 1: Chronological illustration of the development of the LIFT initiative in locality F

ConstructCo

ConstructCo is a construction company specialising in concrete operations that co-exists with three other subsidiary companies under a parent public-listed company called ConstructPLC (see Figure 2 below). Of the companies, ConstructCo is the biggest in size (based on persons employed, turnover and portfolio of activities). Moreover, in terms of employment, ConstructCo had a mix of both directly employed general labourers and subcontract labour (including self-employed, labour-only subcontractors and trade subcontractors). Thus, it was decided that ConstructCo would be most appropriate in providing us with insights into the use of skills.

The selection of ConstructCo as a case study also rested on a number of reasons. First, although ConstructCo was mainly based in Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire, it was looking to expand its operations into the Northwest of England. Hence, this provided geographical proximity to the researchers for conducting the case study. Furthermore, although ConstructCo had a division in the Midlands, it was decided by their senior management that the best approach to expand into the Northwest was to develop a regional office nearby (i.e. in Warrington). However, without the experience and local labour in the Northwest, this posed an immense challenge for ConstructCo at the outset. In a similar vein to PrimaryCareCo, this challenge translated into a vital opportunity for the researchers to investigate how the

organisation of the regional office was formed and more importantly, how the identification of skills, if any, was performed. Therefore, this again represented a contemporary issue to be investigated (Yin, 1994).

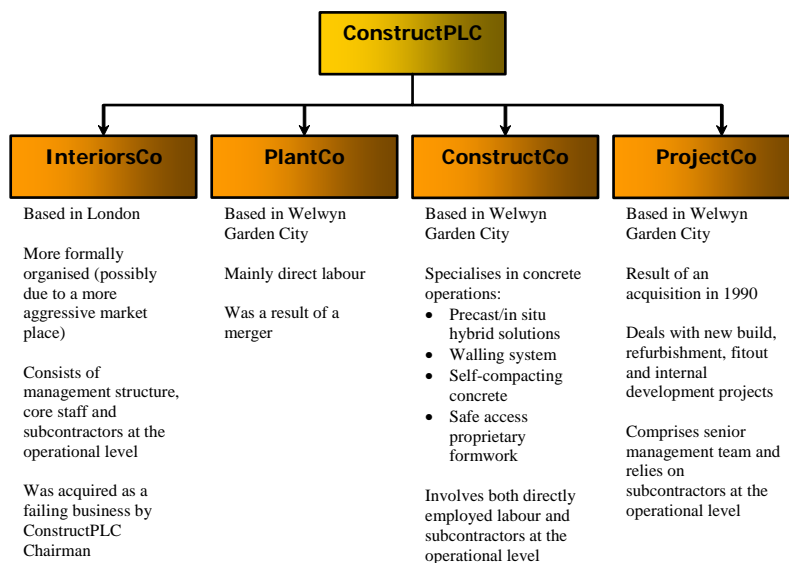


Figure 2: Organisational structure showing the location of ConstructCo

KEY FINDINGS

This section outlines some of the key findings obtained in the analysis of PrimaryCareCo and ConstructCo.

PrimaryCareCo

As mentioned earlier, LIFT was a new procurement mechanism for the provision of primary care facilities, which embodied a new way of working. On one hand, healthcare and social care practitioners from the public sector side of this PPP had to integrate their working practices in a manner that was never conceived of before. So, for example, general practitioners found themselves having to co-locate with such other healthcare specialists as podiatrists. Some schemes also attempted to integrate healthcare practitioners with local authorities and so forth. While the idea of integrative working was designed to increase convenience and speed by means of a “one-stop shop” for the general public, there was no consensus on the model of integrative working from the public sector. In effect, each scheme was unique and there was no standard template of service delivery to be followed. Therefore, this presented an opportunity for the various healthcare and social care practitioners to learn from each other in terms of their specific operating requirements so that redesign of primary care delivery could be feasibly conducted. This, however, did not take place.

According to an interviewee, LIFT was meant to take the “burden” of dealing with the construction aspects of the facility away from the PCTs and transfer the responsibility to the private sector partner. This was contingent on the public sector stakeholders providing the private sector partner with a definitive set of output requirements from which the bids and designs could be worked upon. Because the healthcare and social

care practitioners were used to working independently and facilitation of dialogue between the various practitioners on the redesign of primary care delivery was inadequate (on a number of schemes, identification of which practitioners to approach for consultation was uncertain), there was no service model to base the definitive set of output requirements on. Often, practitioners from the public sector did not see consultation for a building design as a core activity and many cited the lack of time as a reason for not being involved. Yet, the very design of the facilities would impact on their operations when construction is completed. As a consequence, this lack of forward-thinking resulted in numerous iterations to the requirements capture process and hence, time and cost overruns.

For the private sector partner, the involvement with LIFT created a sense of certainty in that the partnership could potentially last for 25 years (i.e. construction and facilities management). However, it was perceived by the public sector interviewees that the private sector partner approached the design and construction of the primary care facilities as if it was another hospital. Again, while the LIFT vision was to enhance the quality of primary care facilities, the failure of the private sector partner to develop an appreciation of the intricacies involved in primary care meant that the private sector partner were not playing an effective professional role where advice on developmental, design and construction issues were concerned. Coupled with the thin resourcing by the public sector stakeholders in the consultation process (most healthcare and social care practitioners driving the schemes forward only had a part-time commitment e.g. 2-days a week), this quickly translated to delays in confirming requirements and signing off designs. Arguably, LIFT also presented an opportunity for the private sector partner to learn about the needs of primary care and enable the public sector stakeholders to become informed clients on the process of design and construction (and also facilities management). Unfortunately, this did not take place.

ConstructCo

As mentioned above, ConstructCo wanted to expand their operations in the Northwest of England. This resulted from the perceived opportunity by the senior management of ConstructCo and ConstructPLC to create a long-term partnership with a major contractor that had a number of high profile, large scale projects planned for in the region. However, ConstructCo did not have a presence in terms of having employees in the Northwest and this posed an initial challenge. What ConstructCo did was to transfer a number of core members of staff (e.g. project manager, site engineer and general foreman) from their Welwyn Garden City office (who have worked in ConstructCo for over 10 years) to set up the site office at the project site in Manchester. At the same time, a decision was made to recruit a regional director and a regional project manager to set up a more permanent base in Warrington.

Therefore, this allowed ConstructCo to expand in the Northwest of England with a new organisation and team, but with the learning opportunity for the new team to align with the culture of ConstructCo with the presence of the core members of staff from Welwyn Garden City. According to the interviewees, the relationship between the new and the old worked very well and this was supported by the fact that the newly-recruited regional director, despite his seniority in the organisational hierarchy, constantly made reference to the invaluable advice of the core team from Welwyn Garden City. In particular, the project manager and general foreman from Welwyn Garden City office were instrumental in terms of the contacts they established in the Northwest before the regional director and regional project manager were recruited.

Furthermore, the decision to create a partnership with the major contractor meant that it worked in the interest of the new team at ConstructCo to maintain open lines of communication and trust with the major contractor. The project was not without problems. First, since the project involved the redevelopment of a large city centre retail unit, the structural phase of the project was fraught with variations due to the complexities in dealing with existing structures. Undoubtedly, this led to delays in progress. Nonetheless, according to interviewees from both the ConstructCo project team and the major contractor, the relationship was never strained because they considered each other to be honest in terms of what could be achieved within the resources available (e.g. lack of accurate information on existing structures).

Second, the new team at ConstructCo had to align themselves with the culture of the major contractor. This happened at two levels: contractually and in terms of working practices (i.e. behaviour). Contractually, ConstructCo was obligated to employ 50% of their workforce from local labour. This was to meet the requirements and operational ethos of the major contractor. In terms of working practices, the major contractor had a zero-tolerance policy on the wearing of personal protection equipment, which stipulated the wearing of safety goggles at all times. Both these instances were problematic. Whereas the employment of local labour appear to be in line with current initiatives of building sustainable communities (see ODPM, 2004), 50% employment of local labour is very difficult to achieve in practice given the shortage of skills. It was, however, interesting to note that the project director of the major contractor exercised his personal discretion and turned a blind eye on this requirement because he understood the problems of recruiting on the ground, as well as the fact that the team at ConstructCo communicated this difficulty.

On the enforcement of the personal protection equipment policy, this was met with resistance by the core team from Welwyn Garden City at ConstructCo. It was claimed that the use of safety goggles at all times was inhibitive and potentially hazardous since much of the work was done in the dark and the goggles tended to steam up. The newly recruited regional director of ConstructCo, on the other hand, saw the need to appease the major contractor on this policy since he appreciated the importance of building a working relationship with the major contractor to secure the long-term partnership. However, he also had to address the claims by his team about the goggles steaming up. Eventually, this was resolved again by constant communication with the project director of the major contractor, resulting in a successful concession made on the personal protection equipment policy. That is, the mandatory wearing of goggles is only necessary for certain activities (e.g. welding) and not for others (e.g. lifting of materials). Arguably, in the examples portrayed here, one could defend that learning across the different parties did take place to maintain the working relationship. Such learning evidently resulted in a somewhat seamless transition between the old core team to the new team in ConstructCo and the adjustment of contractual and policy requirements between ConstructCo and the major contractor concerned.

DISCUSSION

Whether it represented the missed opportunities between the public- and private-sector stakeholders in the case of PrimaryCareCo, or the development of working relationships in ConstructCo, we attempted to explain the existence of learning that should originate from the individuals involved. So, in the case of PrimaryCareCo, it was lead personnel within the public-sector who initially did not see the need to learn (or could not see the need to learn as a result of thin resourcing) about the design and

construction process, coupled with individuals from the private-sector partner who did not learn about the niceties of primary care from the outset and instead approached LIFT as if it was the construction of another hospital building. Conversely, it was the regional director of ConstructCo who humbled himself to learn the culture of ConstructCo and ConstructPLC from the old team from Welwyn Garden City, as well as the willingness of the project director from the major contractor to learn about the difficulties of recruitment and enforcement of the policy on wearing of personal protection equipment from ConstructCo.

Still, evidence from the literature suggests that it is difficult to bridge the gap between individual and organisation learning. However, as Weick (2002) warned, “if we forget that learning is as much perceptual as it is computational, then we look for learning in the wrong activities, and overlook learning in obvious places (p. S8)”. Indeed, organisational learning is not a thing! However, in our reinterpretation of the case studies, we explained the existence of learning in the way key people in project environments dealt with change. We have therefore downplayed what Stewart (2001) called “a propensity for some theorists to consider collective learning to be independent of individuals, and expressed in terms of organisational memory, cognitive systems, knowledge bases, and specific competencies and routines (p. 143)”, and emphasised the role of the individuals in learning.

So, what about the love and desire for learning, i.e. the passion for learning? Following our reiteration of the learning that exists in ConstructCo and the lack of learning at the outset in PrimaryCareCo, we have clearly shown that there is a greater passion for learning found in ConstructCo than in PrimaryCareCo. Interestingly, passion stems from the latin word *pasi*, which means suffering (see *The Chambers Dictionary*, 2001: 1190). Thus, in the love and desire for knowledge and learning, this definition implies an element of suffering. In the case studies, there is indeed no shortfall of suffering. Time and cost overruns encountered in PrimaryCareCo and variations in work progress and resistance to policy in ConstructCo are some of the examples portrayed here, which are not unheard of in the construction industry. However, it is maintained that it is the lack of passion for learning that yielded a higher degree of suffering in PrimaryCareCo, manifested by the difficulties faced in rolling out LIFT as an effective procurement mechanism for delivering primary healthcare facilities. Arguably, the greater passion for learning found in ConstructCo eased the enculturation of the regional director into ConstructCo and enabled a positive working relationship to be forged with the main contractor.

So, where does the passion for the individuals derive from? Both case studies began with a degree of uncertainty, an element of newness. This newness manifested either in terms of a new procurement strategy signifying a new way of working in PrimaryCareCo or the setup of a new organisation and a potential partnership in ConstructCo. Again, both had a vision. In PrimaryCareCo, it was the agenda of modernising healthcare and social care in the UK through the provision of high quality primary care facilities and integrative working. Similarly, ConstructCo was about expanding the business in the Northwest through the development of a partnership with a major contractor. The success of learning, we believe, resides in the individual’s passion for learning, which in turn rests upon the project mission.

We argue that in the case of PrimaryCareCo, the vision was altruistic; its implementation was problematic because individuals in the partnership did not fully appreciate this vision. The mission of integrative working failed to enable the necessary learning process, which led to the problems described. Thus, there was a

mismatch between the dream and reality of shared strategic vision (Hodgkinson, 2002). Conversely, there appeared to be greater convergence between the dream and reality in the case of ConstructCo. The old and the new teams of ConstructCo understood the desire to expand in the Northwest and endeavoured to forge a partnership with the major contractor. Incidentally, this materialised with ConstructCo commencing a new project with the major contractor on another site in Warrington at the time of writing this paper. More importantly, the individuals involved (i.e. the core team from Welwyn Garden City and the regional director) were influential in engaging in learning so as to see through the mission. Therefore, in looking for learning, we contend that it is important to consider the project mission first, understand what this means in practice (i.e. are there opportunities for learning as we attempted to point out?) and empowering and enabling individuals to learn.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper identified the saturation of studies in organisational learning and sought to return to basics by investigating the notion of passion for learning and questioned its origin. The paper began with the premise that learning resides in individuals and that it was important to consider the project mission to engender learning. Through two distinct case studies that both embodied an element of newness, we endeavoured to show that learning does indeed take place in individuals and that the passion for learning occurs from a desire in making the project mission successful. Furthermore, it was established that learning is not plain-sailing, but often laden with problems (or suffering). Still, in all the fire-fighting that occurs in day-to-day operations, we suggest that one should never lose sight of the project mission and seek out opportunities for learning, and more importantly, have individuals who are prepared to learn from each other to achieve that mission.

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