

Case Study: L.L Bean
Katia Mayumi Kushano
Beulah Heights University

Abstract

Learning organization is an organization that has developed continuous capacity to adapt and change. L.L. Bean, Inc. is a leading multichannel merchant of quality outdoor gear and apparel that started small and overcame obstacles by honoring money-back guarantee, correcting defects and sustaining the core values of its founder. One of the strategies of the company in question is the use of inquiry to assess customers' needs. Inquiry is an important source of learning. The company entered into the double-looping learning approach: the approach consists of greater openness to information and feedback. Because of the approach, the company increased sales revenue and sustained the customer service excellence culture. This paper discusses learning organization and the use of inquiry to identify strengths in L. L. Bean's products and examine the level of satisfaction of their customers. Additionally, this paper aims to adapt inquiry as a source of learning in ESL classrooms. The paper suggests an investigation of a link between collaborative learning in ESL classrooms and teaching effectiveness.

Keywords: L.L Bean, learning organization, inquiry, source of learning

This paper aims to discuss the case study *L.L Bean* (Hodges & Gill, 2015 pp.223-224) by examining aspects of learning organization. Hodges and Gill (2015) explain five pillars as the basis for a learning organization: 1) vision; 2) infrastructure; 3) culture; 4) learning dynamics and 5) training and development. The case study illustrates how L.L Bean has relied on inquiry as a source of learning to increase its understanding of customer needs. L.L. Bean, Inc. is a multichannel merchant of quality outdoor gear and apparel. L.L Bean started small and overcame obstacles by honoring money-back guarantee and correcting defects. Additionally, the company still sustains the values of its founder: love of the outdoors, dedication to quality and a culture of customer service excellence. Next, the paper discusses what the benefits of the learning approach L.L Bean utilized as a source of learning are.

Benefits of the Learning Approach

In *L.L Bean*, the reader learns that the company utilizes inquiry as a source of learning to deepen its understanding of customer needs. The company relies on field testers, consumers who are experienced users of their products. According to Shockley-Zalabak (2015), appreciative inquiry is an organizational change process that affirms the best qualities of the organization through discovery, dream, design, and destiny. The process of inquiry searches for strengths to move forward as opposed to focusing on weaknesses or problems. L.L Bean utilized inquiry to identify strengths in their products and examine the level of satisfaction of their customers. The reader learns that the company decided make a move: the transition from single-loop learning to double-loop learning in order to become a learning organization. Hodges and Gill (2015) explains that double-loop learning is “generative learning, aimed at changing the status quo” (p. 223); additionally, the approach consists of greater openness to information and feedback. In *L.L Bean*, the reader also learns that during the test period, the company encourages detailed feedback and formally asks for it at three major points: when the product is received, at the

midpoint and at the end of the testing process. The midpoint evaluations are revealing because Bean employs creative approach. The company structures the evaluations around constant interactive feedback and chooses key people to test the products. According to Luhn (2016), by implementing a learning organization culture, organizations gain problem solving ability, a value increase of the human capital and a higher satisfaction of the employees. The strategy of inquiry that aimed to gather more information and feedback helped Beans to increase sales revenue and sustain the customer service excellence culture. Next, the author of this paper discusses how the approach utilized by Bean might be adapted to an organization she works in.

How to Adapt Inquiry as a Source of Learning in ESL Classrooms

The author of this paper recognizes the importance of values that promote valid information, free and informed choice and internal commitment (Hodges & Gill, 2015). Additionally, this author believes the use of inquiry as a source of learning to deepen the understanding of customers or to better assess the needs of employees is an important aspect of learning organization. This author believes that inquiry as a source of learning can be used in schools as well, more specifically in ESL (English as a Second Language) schools. This author works for a multicultural school where students come from different parts of the globe to learn or improve their English skills. Teachers of ESL can employ different exercises to practice different skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and ask for students' feedback on what the strongest aspects of each exercise were. Hodges and Gill (2015) state that collaboration is one of the characteristics of a learning organization; by allowing students to share their opinion and assess the strengths of each activity, teachers can examine the level of effectiveness of different practices. Next, the paper discusses what else L.L Bean might do to be defined as a learning organization.

Learning Organization

As cited previously, according to Hodges and Gill (2015), there are five pillars as the basis for a learning organization. In order for L.L Bean to be defined as learning organization, it has to sustain the five pillars: vision, infrastructure, culture, learning dynamics and training and development. Vision refers to the ability people in an organization have to define and communicate a valid and appealing vision of the future; additionally, vision specifies direction, provides a motivational force and a basis for developing new norms and structures. Infrastructure refers to the accessibility of knowledge and information. Culture refers to shared values as a core theme and practice. Learning dynamics refer to continuous learning in organizations where errors are accepted and training and development enable an organization to be more flexible in order to enhance learning (Hodges & Gill, 2015). L.L Bean can take advantages of training and development in order to sustain or improve their extensive feedback evaluations and to add new sources of learning.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to discuss the case study *L.L Bean* by examining the aspects of learning organization of the company in question. L.L Bean utilizes inquiry to identify strengths in their products and examine the level of satisfaction of their customers. The company decided make a move: the transition from single-loop learning to double-loop learning to become a learning organization. Additionally, this paper aimed to adapt inquiry as a source of learning in ESL classrooms. This author aims to investigate links between collaborative learning in ESL classrooms and teaching effectiveness in a future study.

References

Hodges, J., & Gill, R. (2015). *Sustaining change in organizations*. London, England: Sage.

Luhn, A. (2016). The learning organization. *Creative & Knowledge Society*, 6(1), 1-13.

doi:10.1515/cks-2016-0005

Shockely-Zalabak, P. (2015). *Fundamentals of organizational communication* (9th ed.). New York, NY: Pearson.

