

L.L. Bean: Organizational Learning

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The writer of L.L. Bean presents a leading merchant of outdoor gear and apparel, a company that was founded in 1912 by a man fond of hunting and fishing, Leon Leonwood Bean, and who developed a specific hunter shoes that won the attention of a large multichannel market. Julie Hodges (2012) in Hodges and Gill (2015) shows in L.L. Bean presentation, the benefits of Organizational Learning approach that L.L. Bean company used to develop its business and to attain the company set goals.

The organizational development interventions involve learning and change that are inter-related. “Change is a learning process and learning is a change process” as Rowden (2001) in Hodges and Gill (2015) “defines the learning organization as a model of strategic change in which everyone is engaged in identifying and solving problems” in such a way that the organization constantly experiences improvement and increase of its effectiveness toward the achievement of its set goals (pp. 221-222). This definition of the organizational learning approach is applicable to Leon L. Bean who understood how to organize the participation of teams, groups, and even the outside customers in regular tests and surveys, feedback processes and data collections, as well as his own continuous development, to improve his quality experience in the manufacture of hunting shoes. Leon L. Bean made his company become a learning organization. He started first with a single product, the “Maine Hunting Shoe” and then developed a new type of product called the “Bean Boot” that he was selling through a four-page mail-order catalogue.

Bean counted on the inquiries he undertook as a source of learning to develop his own understanding of what the customers would need and be satisfied with. He learned from the testers what he would do to improve his product quality, make shoes feel more and more

comfortable. He set up a money back guarantee policy that created more customer confidence in his integrity as one that proclaims guaranteed satisfaction, when the customers knew that they could return the merchandise if they were not satisfied with the quality or comfort. L.L. Bean had to adapt to every customer's response to product test and make changes accordingly. Garvin (1993) in Hodges and Gill (2015) defines a learning organization as an organization that has developed the continuous capacity to adapt and change. The interesting understanding of this definition about L. L. Bean's strategic approach is when Chen (2005) in Hodges and Gill (2015) takes Gavin's definition further to say "that a learning organization is one that is skilled at creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge, modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge. . . thereby achieving both sustainability and development" (p. 223). In his learning and change, and development process, L. L. Bean went to those he knew, to the people who had used the product and had experience of quality and comfort. Thus, the final product had significant result on the market. The sales increased more than 85% over the previous year.

As the founder and president of a non-profit organization, NCR, Inc., my peers and I had established various social work programs to assist the neighborhood community with food, clothes, and after school program specially designed for the single mother's children. We help the kids do their homework, and offered them other activities such as playground, basketball, or watching the "Barney" videos for the younger ones. After a couple of years, the program was growing in demand due to the number of families. We were running out of materials and finance. As the head of the organization, praying with the church and the trustee board, I organized a series of brainstorming meetings with six board members to find a solution, how to generate funding and find a better location for our program. When defining brainstorming, Shockley-Zalabak states that "leaders help guide individuals, groups, and entire organizations in

establishing goals and sustaining actions to support goals” (p. 219). Managers of various programs came together for a brainstorming, using a technique that would generate ideas and help solve problems that were real burdens for us and the community as well, and this was done through the maximum idea generation (Shockley-Zalabak, 2015, p. 266). We decided to partner with the large Capital Area Food Bank, where each one of us had to be trained in a specific area of activity, how to run a non-profit organization of that caliber, and generate funding through government and private grants, as well as other donations. After a year, our new location was inaugurated, and I was elected in the Advisory Panel of the Food Bank. NCR, Inc. became one of the leading agencies in the city, representing the entire ward 4 at the council. NCR, Inc. has continued to be a learning organization to this day, and our operations now have gone beyond the Atlantic Ocean.

Learning can create more change through training and development. L. L. Bean could double its expansion by moving from the single-loop learning to the double-loop learning which is a “generative learning” (Hodges & Gill, 2015, p. 223). This approach would lead to transformational change, which is “learning how to learn” and would continuously minimize losing and maximize winning, by targeting the market expansion beyond the current boundaries.

References:

Hodges, J., & Gill, R. (2015). *Sustaining change in organizations* (pp. 8-11). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Shockley-Zalabak, P. S. (2015). *Fundamentals of organizational communication knowledge, sensitivity, skills, values* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.