

On-the-Job Learning among CEOs in Malaysian Private Organizations

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Abstract

This article aims to explore Chief Executive Officers' (CEOs') past experiences in shaping the learning process that occurred at the workplace. A theoretical framework for this study is anchored from the situated learning theory. The primary elements of the situated learning theory are communities of practice and legal peripheral participation, which these concepts were investigated among the CEOs of private organizations in Malaysia. The study is interpretive in nature, employing a qualitative research approach with in-depth interviews to gain in-depth insights on the topic. The findings are meant to capture empirical insights that broaden the framework for a better understanding of situated learning in a workplace context. According to the study, experiences gained from the roles and responsibilities in contexts of learning-in-practice increase awareness and knowledge. Understanding learning occurs as a result of social experiences that include ways of thinking, perceiving, problem-solving, and interacting, in addition to declarative and procedural knowledge.

Keywords: CEOs, situated learning theory, learning experiences

1. Introduction

For a developing country such as Malaysia, visionary and like-minded leaders are the backbone that can lead the country to become an industrialized nation. For example, former Malaysian Prime Minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed first announced Malaysia's goal of becoming a fully developed nation by 2020 in 1991. Although this vision is still in progress beyond the target year of 2020, it shows that visionary leaders can help inspire the growth and progress of their organizations and subordinates. Leaders such as CEOs play an essential role in the performance of organizations (Grude, Bell, Dodd, & Parker, 2002). The CEO is

known as the executive leader or chief executive officer and is held accountable for the performance of an organization. CEOs spend the majority of their time in their strategic role, which includes acting as vision setters and strategists, as well as innovators, transformers, planners, coordinators, and culture creators and maintainers (Glick, 2011). He also discovers that CEOs fulfill six types of roles: strategic, operational, informational, interpersonal, decisional, and diplomatic. While all the roles mentioned are considered important, typically, the primary roles and responsibilities of CEOs involve expanding the value of a business, decision-making, motivating the employees, and presiding over day-to-day operations. Behaviors and leadership paradigms can be formed and developed over time around spiritual experiences (Fry, 2003). Whereas roles and responsibilities are tasks carried out by CEOs daily, in which they tend to experience learning by doing at the workplace. Fullagar and Mills (2008) discovered a significant link between experience flow and intrinsic motivation. Flow is the overall sensation that employees feel while they are engaged in their work (Fullagar & Mills, 2008). People engage in their work on three diverse levels – physically, cognitively, and emotionally (Kahn, 1990). Lived experiences explained this as a description of what happens in practice (Sandberg, 2005). In this study, the researcher explores the past experiences that CEOs experienced in different situations and the key learning that occurred in the workplace.

By pursuing engagement and establishing experiences in daily tasks, we regulate our relations, and the learning process occurs. People learn by interacting with one another through cooperative activities and language knowledge sharing (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). CEOs learn as they work and this involves different elements and leaders with epistemological foundations the sources of legitimate information that affect the cognitions and beliefs, and behavior of the organization are built on fundamental principles based on their beliefs, values, and paradigms (Mohamed Noor, 2002). Learning by doing enhances knowledge and skills significantly.

Learning among CEOs in Malaysian private organizations is the procedure of learning that takes place with skills, and awareness. Ideally, this newly acquired knowledge is then applied in the workplace and incorporated to support the intended performance of daily tasks and routines (Pratt, 1998). Collective learning results in practice over time, so these types of professional communities of practice are referred to as such (Wenger, 1998). Some may learn immediately, while others will take time over the repeated process of experiences over knowledge and skills. CEOs' on-the-job learning experiences need to be shared among people in the world. As pointed out by (Carnevale and Goldstein, 1983) "a substantial percentage of learning takes place on the job" (p. 38).

1.1 Situated Learning Theory

According to situated learning theory, learning takes place through everyday social activities in everyday settings. The physical and social environment that learning takes place in, such as the one that is established when working in a specific organizational position, is integral to the learning process (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). This is perhaps because CEOs are always in positions of power, they are the most senior corporate executives in the

organization (Glick, 2011). They acquire authority due to their position and the types of responsibilities they are assigned (Bandiera, Guiso, Prat & Sadun, 2011). They make important decisions at work, and decision-making is one of the most important tasks in their position, which is one of the key elements explored in this research. CEOs' positions epitome the most influential and significant positions in corporate hierarchies, CEOs career success drives concern the individual as well as organizations (Koyunchu, Hamori, & Baruch, 2017). Thus, learning is not viewed as an individual acquirement of knowledge but rather as a social participation process in which social experiences are gathered in different situations. Lave and Wenger (1991), consider learning to be an essential part of social practice in the actual world where people come across learning scenarios in the context of their immediate settings with many interdependent elements such as people, objects, environments, and jobs to complete. Many educational researchers have recently become interested in situated learning theory (Billet, 2002; Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wilson, 1993). According to this theory, people learn through their daily activities and experiences. CEOs are engaged in learning aspects at work, and the learning component is developed through the process of becoming a full participant in a sociocultural practice. CEOs are exposed to receive certain experiences within the culture of an organization while considering the authentic culture that exists in Malaysian private organizations. Learning among CEOs in Malaysian private organizations can be viewed through the situated cognition lens which accumulates rich knowledge to life by embedding their roles and responsibilities within the culture of the organizations. For instance, formal roles and responsibilities can be learned by repeating the interaction of knowledge and experiences every day at the workplace. This provides an opportunity to meet that appropriate balance ideal between situated and transferable knowledge.

Situated learning theory helps to understand Malaysian private organizations' CEOs learning experiences. Lave and Wenger (1991) projected situated learning as a theory of learning in a community of practice. Thus, the theory creates a better understanding of how CEOs discover, shape, and make explicit their knowledge through situated learning within a community of practice. Situated learning assumes that people learn through contextual social interaction with others, within learning communities or communities of practice such as the workplace or a professional organization. This is considered paramount for organizational performance since CEOs have a significant impact on the performance of any organization (Grude, Bell, Dodd, & Parker, 2002). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), "learning is an intrinsic component of generative social practice in the real world," and they define legitimate peripheral participation as a "descriptor of engagement in social practice that entails learning as an integral constituent." Legitimate peripheral participation provides a dimension of a two-way bridge between the production of a person and the production and reproduction of communities of practice. This explains why learners who appear to have different perspectives on work will be different, and their comprehension of the practice will change throughout the learning-by-doing process. Recent research on situational learning theory suggests that it may be a viable medium for revitalizing understanding of, and prescriptions for, how knowledge is developed and organized in workplaces (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although Brown, (1989) mentioned that knowledge is

developed within workplaces, the research conducted typically related to the analysis of situated learning about classroom teaching. According to research, executives regard learning from work-related experiences as a more powerful force than classroom learning, which is constrained by several factors such as time and purpose. Therefore, this research on CEOs learning within the organizational environment will explore their prominent learning experiences within the experiences they often in; at the workplace.

Situated learning theory, or portions of it, is becoming more widely recognized as a potential resource for revitalizing theories about how knowledge is created, structured, and organized in workplaces (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Humans are naturally fascinated by other people's social lives, and they learn most effectively by interacting with others in these ways and by actively participating in various activities. This social interaction involves people, the environment, context, culture, activity, and discourse. context, culture, activity, discourse, people, and environment. The study of human learning that occurs while doing something in both the physical world and the virtual world is known as situated cognition. As a result, learning occurs as a contextual activity with social, cultural, and physical contexts. While the terminology used to describe situated learning may be unfamiliar to many employees, the concepts are not. According to Dopson (2010), using and adopting knowledge entails a series of social processes such as sensing and interpreting new evidence, integrating it with existing evidence, including tacit evidence, and strengthening and marginalizing it through professional networks and communities of practice. It also contends that relating new evidence to the needs of the local context and discussing it with local stakeholders leads to collaborative decisions about its implementation, which can result in changes in practice.

Modern theorists' conceptions such as Brooks and Brooks (1993) and the constructivist movement and the contextual learning viewpoint make for good philosophical partners since they both promote a collaborative approach to the creation of new knowledge. This means learning takes place among humans and supports the idea that learning happens when an individual is doing something. The knowledge that was experienced and learned by CEOs in the workplace context in this study is situated in activities that are bound to social, cultural, and physical contexts. These are closely tied to the related issues of gaining knowledge and turning that knowledge of the basic effort into practical means.

In this study, the social approach emphasizes the relative ways in which knowledge of on-the-job learning is made sense of and acted upon in each context, as knowing is inextricably linked to doing. Situated learning theory holds that everything people learn, perceive, and do is situated in their role as members of a community; it asserts that every thought and human action is a generalization that is tailored to the current context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In contrast with classroom learning, the future of learning is in the workplace, where CEOs will think, create, communicate, decide, and incorporate certain learning experiences that occur in various environments or situations. In the globalization era, the business world will require complex cognitive skills most of the time in the future. Simply put, businesses will differentiate themselves not only by having the tools but also by how their employees interact with one another and with the environment to make complex

decisions in the course of their work. The greater the responsibility, learning experiences, and knowledge in an organizational setting, the more people such as CEOs play a vital role. Drawing from recent research on cognition as it is evident in everyday activity, (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) argued that knowledge is situated. This approves that learning is part of a product of the activity, context, and culture in the working environment in which it is then developed and practiced. They also argued that approaches that embed learning activities such as learning while working and making intentional use of social and physical contexts are more in line with the understanding and cognition in research. Complimenting the social approach, the practical view of learning experiences encourages empirical inquiry that pursues situational learning experiences as an ongoing relational performance that is emergent, embodied, and materially embedded. Therefore, Orlikowski (2006) mentioned such an approach would entail considering the everyday interactions, objects, and people through and with which CEOs use information and knowledge, agreeing on their appropriateness, and bringing them to bear in the given situational context.

The phenomenon of work experience has become indispensable for CEOs because learning from every day at the workplace ensures that practical experience makes these CEOs experts in organizational decision-making based on social science and organizational research that is largely grounded in personal experience. It supports the idea that learning is both an innately social phenomenon and an individual one (Tusting, 2005). Nevertheless, the learning experiences of CEOs in various environments have yet to be explored. Although the normative case for CEO learning experience has been made repeatedly and increasingly, the actual reality of CEOs' everyday work knowledge in terms of past experiences in situated learning remains largely an empirical black box. In other words, we're still not sure how much CEO learning experiences are being studied and, perhaps more importantly, how they're being studied.

Despite education being the most studied form of human capital, experiences have been said to add weightage to an individual which education alone cannot (Becker, 1975). In this study, it is argued that CEOs' learning experiences are embedded in participation in everyday practice in an organizational setting. It happens as an individual makes sense of the historical, political, cultural, and social components of the workplace they experience, progressing from peripheral to center engagement (Billet, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). A conceptual framework is established from a socially situated learning perspective Lave & Wenger (1991), suggesting that learning is vital, an essential component, and an inseparable aspect of social practice'. Situated cognition theory views learning as a cognitive content of sociocultural phenomena rather than the action of an individual acquiring basic information from a decontextualized body of knowledge. Situated cognition theory, which is based on an anthropological or social science view of natural learning in natural settings, was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study. The world in which we do business has changed dramatically, leaving a significant gap in our situational theory relating to the actual work environment of CEOs. By understanding how learning are constructed within a working situation, it can help improve the challenges and gap faced by employers on the expectations of their employees and graduates in readiness to work (Mohd Salleh, Mapjabil, & Legino, 2019). The shortcomings identified in previous studies aided in the formulation of the research

questions that served as the foundation for this study. In essence, the purpose of this study is to understand the learning experiences as constructed by CEOs as situated within their working environment. The key focus of this study is looking at how CEOs learned within different environments and what social key learning that occurred at the workplace that shaped the construction of their knowledge and engagement at work.

2. Method

This study is about the learning experiences of CEOs in private Malaysian organizations. These are personal meaningful past experiences of themselves that contribute to general learning about situated cognition theory. The key respondents in this research are the CEOs, of Malaysian private organizations. In this research, purposive sampling was used whereby the potential participant was chosen based on the researcher's confidence which is believed that the participants are known as successful leaders in private organizations.

Qualitative researchers intentionally choose non-random data sources, use purposeful sampling, and choose individuals who will provide the most information about the topic under investigation. Furthermore, Patton (2002) states that it is necessary to identify and select information-rich cases in order to make the best use of limited resources. This entails identifying and selecting individuals who are particularly knowledgeable or experienced with a particular phenomenon of interest (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Respondents were selected from primarily Selangor, Malaysia due to the density of the population and availability of the intended participants within the location.

Data is collected based on two ways, interview, and observation. The interview is used to obtain better information and data. De Marrais, (2004) defines the interview as a process where the researcher and the participant can connect and have a conversation that both parties can understand and that focuses on issues related to the study. The typical intent in an interview is to find out what and how the person responds to certain questions (Patton, 2002) mentioned because the researchers want to find out what is 'in and on another person's mind'. In this study, the researchers want to find out what CEOs think about their own growth and learning process, focusing on their past experiences that shaped their situated learning and identifying the key learning that occurred among CEOs in the workplace. In total, six respondents were interviewed in this study, and a discussion of the findings is elaborated on in the next section.

3. Findings & Discussions

This study elaborated on the findings of the social experiences of CEOs in various environments and learning experiences practiced by six CEOs from Malaysian private organizations. It is based on a structured qualitative research approach. Learning occurs in everyday events and settings. Authors of this theory, Lave and Wenger, (1991), consider learning as an essential component of social practice in the real world, where people come across learning scenarios in the context of their immediate surroundings that involve a variety of interrelated factors such as people, objects, environment, and tasks that need to be accomplished (Lave, 1988). Participation in this setting becomes a way for the learner to engage by "both absorbing and being absorbed in - the culture of practice" (Lave & Wenger,

p.95). Legitimate peripheral participation entails learning by doing with increasing participation, responsibility, ownership, and, eventually, membership in the community's authentic work. As a result, learning enables an individual to become a member of a community of knowledge and practices (Roschelle & Clancey, 1992).

Most of the respondents find that they have indeed had a rewarding experience both in a family environment and as well as an organizational environment. They shared their experiences of learning in different situations that occurred in their life. Not only did they learn how to deal with diverse types of people and situations, but they were also exposed to diverse cultures. To date, much research has been conducted to relate personal development and a sense of responsibility, but in this study, the researchers went a step further to examine the learning experiences in the CEO's role in different situations. In accordance with personal leadership development and the "new management trend: the use of international service-learning assignments to develop responsible global leaders" (Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011, p. 238). Long-term personal change necessitates both learning and action; learning informs action, and action generates learning (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 2011). Learning not only generates, but also adapts, expands, and deepens knowledge. Learning becomes a way of life in an organizational system; therefore, learning through actions is only natural. The respondents' range of experiences helped them build a basis on which to draw lessons from various situations and circumstances. This might serve as the impetus for many workers to develop in their future careers. The key learning variables appeared elaborated as below.

The respondents expressed learning occurs in many ways, for instance, situations around them foster learning since the day they were born. It revolves around them and one of the situations learning starts within the family environment. Perhaps it may not directly applicable within the organization but give a distinct perspective on the learning culture in the organization or employees from a different angle. These are discrete events and information shared by CEOs about their experiences that kept them engaged at the workplace. It is derived from the outside in. Situated cognition is knowing and learning, and cognition is social constructions expressed in the actions of people interacting within communities. Cognitions are enacted, unfolded, or constructed through these actions; without the action, there is no knowing and no cognition. The learning experiences they have in their family environments are fundamental to the social experiences they have in their working and external environments later in life. The situations elaborated on in this study will further explain the social experiences that start within the family environment. Once the fundamental of the learning experience builds then the social experience will grow within the working environment and expands towards the external environment. The CEOs' knowledge and skills developed initially from their upbringing within the family environment and continued dynamically in the organizational environment.

From the first research questions, there are two significant environments that helped shape situated learning among CEOs, (1) Family environment and (2) Organizational environments. Within the family environments, respondents can learn how upbringing from childhood lessons will eventually become habits in their life. Respondents learned that 'learning by

doing started in the initial stage of life. The expansion of learning by doing further developed professionally in an organizational environment. Within the organizational environment, the respondents learn by doing in two different scenarios, (1) the working environment and (2) the strategic environment. The similarities between the working environment and strategic environment are learning happens in an organizational environment and among employees. In the working environment, respondents can learn that learning on the job together with employees helped them to gain strength and knowledge. The respondents needed to learn by doing the job together with the employees to gain trust and to ensure they have control over the employees and be able to manage them with similar knowledge at the workplace. Within the second scenario of the organizational environment, respondents can develop and expand the knowledge they gained from a working environment. At the strategic level, the respondents are required to think alike and share ideas with the intellect team. The level of learning in this scenario grows exponentially. The practical activities that they have learned in the working environment have now become grounded as they learn the strategies for growth within the strategic level.

The expansion and growth of the organization depend on how the CEOs manage it. To manage well, CEOs are supposed to have significant knowledge and skills in managing people. The working level and strategic level are the two environments with different sets of people that they engaged. Engagement with the employees at both levels requires the CEOs to work together, learning by doing will co-produce knowledge through activities. Knowledge fundamentally grows through active participation and lived practices within a community. Working is a basis or context in which many individuals have opportunities for developing and excelling at new skills. Employees usually stay in the same job for many years, enabling them to build knowledge, social skills, communication skills and technical skills. Impact on developing one's skills is often experienced as a challenge that gives focus to doing job. While at job, the process of acquiring skills, working environment can be a significant source of meaningfulness. Addition to that, in organizations that create an innovative environment aimed at personal growth, workers typically experience more meaning in their work (Lysova et al, 2019). Such personal growth or development of an individual enhances the meaningfulness of work (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).

The fundamental idea is the principal role of leaders and in this research, the CEO is to create a condition within an organization through which all members will first want to learn and then learn how to learn, and then finally internalize the habit of continuous learning by doing throughout their service. Prior to that, Schein (1992) mentioned, that believing the establishment of a strong organizational culture will further strengthen its foundation and that the most crucial role of senior executives is to instill their own ideals into the organization through processes that embed culture. Based on the limitations of traditional research approaches which were not intended to explore questions about individual experiences. This means little attention has been paid in the past to studying how CEOs and other leaders learn on the job. Leaders must strengthen the patterns and conventions that prevent learning as much as they promote the right culture by praising those who set an example. The clarity in the learning experiences of CEOs provides vital advantages which are necessary for

continuing growth of any organization. Based on past literature, the utmost significant element in the achievement of the Malaysia National Vision 2020 is the quality of the human capital. According to the pertinent insights human capital development will be comprehensive embracing the acquisition of knowledge or skills and intellectual capital including science and technology while entrepreneurial capability through the field of education, training, and lifelong learning. To maintain this, the Education Development Plan (2001-2010) emphasizes that, tertiary education is the primary means of meeting human resource needs if Malaysia is to achieve its vision of becoming an industrialized nation. Leadership development is not a discrete event, it is a significant part of ongoing work-related experience (Day & Harrison, 2007). In this study, we focus on CEOs' learning experiences in the workplace context. Past experiences are the most potent and essential ways to acquire crucial leadership qualities, based on research. The use of key experiences should be complacent and not replaced. These experiences can be particularly critical in providing a proving ground for high-potential leaders before a long-term commitment is made to any individual in an organization. This paper has tried to fill in the gap by analyzing the CEOs' past experiences and key learning at the workplace. Data gathered in this research from several CEOs helped the researcher as well as the novice researchers in developing the framework and the attempt to understand the CEOs' external and internal changes through their experiences. This research also confirmed the need, as previously investigated by other studies (Ewenstein, Smith & Sologar, 2015), for the involvement of individuals at all levels, for a clear goal, excellent communication, and information exchange all necessary for the execution of a change.

4. Conclusion

A few conclusions were drawn from this study. The researcher started the investigation on the grounds of the need to understand how learning experiences shaped situated cognition among CEOs. This study has provided valuable information which will be beneficial for future CEOs and for those with responsibility for the selection and development of CEOs in private organizations. This study could also be valuable to the notion of adult learning and learning theory. This study will enable potential leaders as well as novice researchers to prepare on how to respond and react when in a state of making decisions in companies.

Besides that, through this study, we will be able to set the right processes/resources in place to manage the transfer of knowledge from departing CEOs, and the learning of the younger generations. In terms of culture, we will learn what and how culture should we best develop and aspire to among employees in private companies. Specifically, when considering the responsibilities that are associated with roles, they are sometimes expressed in terms of tasks and activities, or in the case of managers, in terms of the people they manage. It is almost impossible to conclude whether a specific role scheme including the responsibilities that are associated, guarantees meeting the project goals. Especially when mapping roles to people, we find different personal perspectives for the same roles and no shared understanding amongst role holders regarding who is responsible for what, however in this research, the researcher will identify what and how learning by doing fundamentally influences the situated learning among CEOs. As this was an exploratory study, future studies may consider emulating this study by extending it to a larger sample for more wide-ranging perspectives on

this matter.

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