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How Learning Atmosphere is Connected to Quality Practices: - A Case Study of A Korean Service Firm.

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Abstract

The purposes of this study is to identify the degree to which employees exhibit the concepts of learning organization(LO) and total quality management(TQM) practices in a Korean insurance company and to verify the relationship between the sub-concepts of LO such as Shared Vision(SV), Mental Models(MM), Team Learning(TL), Personal Master(PM), and System Thinking(ST) and the sub-practices of TQM such as Teamwork(TW), Continuous Improvement(CI), Process Management(PMGMT), and Customer Focus(CF) in their workplace. This research finds TL, ST, and PM have significant relationship with CI; TL and SV with TW; and ST with CF. Based on the results, the research find ST is most strongly related to CF and TL have the strongest relationship with both TW and CI. This research supports that “TQM and LO are mutually dependent” advocated by previous researches but LO concept did not cover the whole TQM concept in this firm, although some specific LO disciplines had consistently high relationship with some of TQM principles.

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Keywords: Learning organization, Total quality management, Service firm

1. Introduction and research questions

Total Quality (TQ) has become a popular management approach for organizations to meet multiple demands and to increase their performance. Unlike traditional quality management which focuses on reducing the amount of

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defects of manufacturing and service, total quality management (TQM) has been defined as a structured system for creating organization-wide participation in quality improvement, and as a continuous improvement process, designed to meet the customer's needs (Brower, 1994). According to Evans (2005), TQM is "a whole system approach with a people-focused management that aims at continual increase in customer satisfaction with lowest cost" (p. 31), and takes place across all functions, levels, and even their suppliers and customers. TQM has also been highlighted as an efficient management system (Crosby, 1979; Deming, 1986; Juran, 1989). Further, many countries, such as the United States, the European Union and Korea have facilitated TQM to take place at a national level by granting the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award, the European Quality Award, and the Korean Quality Award respectively.

Similarly, as a more recent concept, the learning organization concept (LO) has been recognized as one of the major management approaches to pursuing more complex dimensions of performance. Senge (1990) defines learning organization as an organization where people continually expand their capacity to create desired results and where new patterns of thinking are nurtured. LO is also characterized as an organic structure which anticipates the developing needs of its customers, and responds to them with innovative products and services (Slater & Narver, 1995).

The relationship between both concepts TQM and LO has developed as stated in the management literature. Senge (1990) claims that TQM underpins the first phase of a learning organization. Garvin (1993) also insists that if TQM is practiced as a philosophy, for example, continuous improvement, or a set of techniques like Deming's PDCA cycle (Plan, Do, Check, Act), it can be a vehicle for learning organization.

This study examines the extent to which the total quality management concept is related to the learning organization concept, as composed by Senge's (1990) five disciplines, in a Korean insurance company. While the five disciplines of the learning organization concept, namely, Personal Mastery, Mental Models, Shared Vision, Team Learning, and Systems Thinking will be used to measure the LO concept, the Customer Focus, Teamwork, Process Management and Continuous Improvement will be used to measure the four fundamental principles of TQM.

Research Question 1: Is there any relationship between Senge's five disciplines of the learning organization concept and the four fundamental principles of total quality management?

Sub-question 1-1,2,3,4: How does the learning organization concept, composed of Senge's five disciplines, relate to customer focus(1-1), teamwork(1-2), process management(1-3) and continuous improvement(1-4), and which discipline has the strongest relationship with customer focus(1-1), teamwork(1-2), process management(1-3) and continuous improvement(1-4)?

2. Methodology

This research is designed as non-experimental survey research using self-administered questionnaires. The population of this study is an insurance company in Korea. The sample is stratified and randomly assigned to a Korean life-insurance company that has successfully adopted the TQM philosophy and that has done rapid-growth business for over two decades. This company has a TQM team that manages quality for the entire company (300 employees) under the slogan, 3Q: Quality people, Quality product and Quality service. The company has been named winner of National Customer Satisfaction Index (NCSI) award in life insurance industry area for last 7 years.

Stratified random sampling was used in this research. Senge's (1990) five disciplines (i.e., Shared Vision, Mental Models, Team Learning, Personal Mastery and Systems Thinking) are considered as learning organization factors. These variables have been originally operationalized by a 48 item survey instrument (5 scale) developed by Tetrick, Jones, Latting, Da Silva, Slack, Elchegaray and Beck (2000) at University of Houston. They implemented a pilot test of the instrument (N = 97 students) and exploratory factor analysis that reduced the number of items to 75. Based on subsequent analysis, the final number of items recommended by Tetrick and his colleagues was 48. Reliability of the scales was assessed by using Cronbach's alpha. All alphas for 5 disciplines are above .75 except mental models (Cronbach's alpha = .63).

The three principles of TQM, teamwork, continuous improvement and customer focus, are examined by Dean and Bowen (1994). Morrow's (1997) questionnaire operationalizes Dean and Bowen's fundamental quality principles.

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