

A Philosophical View on and a Technical Approach to Leading a Learning Organization

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Abstract

From a philosophical viewpoint and a technical perspective, this paper claims that learning organizations are the most effective organizations which 1) demonstrate transformative leadership practices, 2) work to instigate a learning-based organizational environment, and 3) continually promote learning behavior at all levels, to name a few of its key characteristics. Like other organizations, educational organizations would exhibit individual behaviour, collective actions and interactions which define their norms and values. The purpose of this paper is to explore: what it means to be a learning organization; what are and should be its key characteristics; and how to create a learning organization. The findings of this study show that learning organizations are characterized by a collective struggle to achieve organizational goals, where culture and climate concerns become paramount, and learning is viewed as part of everyone's business regardless of individual differences, roles, and responsibilities. It is the leadership in a learning organization that builds the culture and climate conducive to bring about transformation at individual, organizational and societal levels with the concepts of lifelong learning.

Keywords: Learning Organization; Organizational Learning; Lifelong Learning; Organizational Citizenship Behavior; Transformative Leadership

Introduction

The concept of *Learning Organization* has recently gained significant attention from both individuals and organizations. The philosophical underpinnings of a learning organization inform that “in the absence of learning, organizations and individuals simply repeat old practices and improvements are either fortuitous or short-lived” (Hamad & Shalabi, 2013, p. 1). In addition, organizational members, as a community of practitioners (Sergiovanni, 2000), need to create a facilitative and supportive environment and develop a

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culture of constant change where learning becomes the life of individuals and organizations. Thus a learning organization believes in working together in learning, towards generating knowledge through collective and collaborative learning, and planning to bring about necessary improvements (ChoonTeo & Low, 2015). Learning organizations create an environment that enables teams that take the lead in a globally competitive market.

Thus, understanding the concept and creating the conditions necessary to initiate activities that support learning at all levels have become fundamental. This paper looks at the origin of and perspectives on the learning organization, and further justifies its importance with special focus on the associated characteristics, theories, and frameworks. Moreover, this paper attempts to explore how an organization/school can be developed into a learning organization through a complex process of learning, research and development and by re/building particular elements and characteristics that are the key indicators of a learning organization.

Exploring the Origin of and Perspectives on Learning Organizations

The work of Argyris and Schon (1978) appears to capture the attention of managers, administrators, leaders, policy makers and planners and so forth at different levels of organizations to explore the nature of their organizations. However, the concept of ‘learning organization’ originated from the world of business and was gradually taken into every corners of life by both the public and private sectors (Walker, 2001), which furthermore became an icon of hope and notion of change in organizational culture around the globe. With the passage of time, this view gained momentum beyond the limits of the business world.

Similarly, the term ‘learning organization’ is extensively used by academia, consultants and firms to understand its philosophical underpinnings with specific reference to learning for improvement. However, in this journey a few questions remained unaddressed. The questions like, ‘how does it work as a process of lifelong learning; what are its implications regarding the reforms in organizations and changes in behaviour of every individual in an organization; and what are the key factors that affect the entire process and culture of an organization to improve the existing conditions’, are pivotal aspects this paper attempts to explore further.

Louis (1994) argues that reforms are required to improve the existing conditions of organizations. However, and it can be achieved by engaging teachers in developing a professional learning community (Pirtle, 2012). However, adopting an *effective approach to change* that could engage everyone in collaborative and cooperative learning cycles has been considered as a challenging task for leaders, policy makers and academia working in organizations. With this notion of change, to bring about improvements in the existing practices in traditional organizations requires a complex process that highly demands dynamic inspiring-visionary leaders.

This view led us towards exploring the nature of leadership in organizations. To this end, understanding multiple levels of change is important for leaders to see how these changes affect the overall organizational life and provide further guidelines to foresee an abnormal state of actions. This requires ‘*leadership maintenance*’ through a leader’s ‘*psychological, sociological and physiological*’ (Rajbhandari, 2016) parameters to generate the wellness of leaders and the wellbeing in the followership domain for bringing about conducive environment that facilitates the process of learning. In so doing, a leader walks on the path of transforming self and others within the organizational culture (Qutoshi, 2016). Therefore, the most important aspect of change is the change from within the learning conditions at all levels of any organization. Fullan (1993) suggests that the hardest core to crack is the learning core. Building on this idea, he further asserts that “changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills and beliefs” (p. 49).

Thus, learning organizations perceive the concept of change as not only limited to achieve the objectives of organizational development but also conscious about the implications of change at different levels of the organization and beyond. For example, organizational leaders sometimes, with good intentions, start reforming policies and practices, however, the implications in the long run may not be as good as perceived and might hurt the interests, beliefs and emotions of the people involved in that particular situation. Therefore, leaders must develop “highdeep” (Saldana, 2015, p. 4) level of *implication-wisdom* on how philosophical, systematic and technical approaches can significantly contribute to improving the organizational life. In so doing, leaders need to address a few basic questions of the kind: “why do we behave in certain ways, what are the factors that influence us to perform in a certain way, whom are we affecting (both positively and negatively), and what are the lessons that we learn?” However, Levitt and March (1988) state the early views of a learning organization by “...encoding inferences from history into routines that guide behaviour” (p. 319) of people involved in the organizational life. This view explains the importance of studying organizational culture to bring about improvements at multiple levels that may guide the behavioural patterns of people in an organizational setting. Initially, this change in culture was very closely associated with the concept of creating a collaborative learning environment and developing Organizational Citizenship Behaviour (OCB), where everyone feels cohesive and collaborates for better performance of oneself and others. Therefore, continuing this philosophy of change embedded in OCB offers the core values of the learning organization.

Probably, these were the fundamental perspectives and perceptions of theorists to develop theories of learning organizations to transform organizations into centres of excellence. Using these notions of change and leading organizations/schools to perform at the highest level in order to have an edge in the open market also seems to be one of the indicators of learning organizations. However, it was found that learning organizations were

being encouraged and enhanced with technical approaches to bringing about meaningful changes in the organizations.

Moreover, these approaches seem to focus on research and publication initiatives at the organizational level, training and development, structural reforms and so forth. The purpose of all these activities appears to bring about changes in the learning conditions for the sake of improvement in the overall performance of the organization by improving the ingredients associated with the final performance of an organization.

Conceptualizing Organizational Learning and Learning Organization

Small and Irvine (2006) focus on how to understand the philosophy of learning embedded within the organizational/institutional life. However, in one hand, the dichotomy of the term 'learning organization', its meaning, conception, and conceptualization were initially explored, discussed and then developed by Argyris and Schon (1978). On the other hand, the writers, before developing the concept of organizational learning, critically evaluated the work of Dewey (1938) regarding experiential learning or learning through experience and the concept of change (Lewin, 1935) in behavior through interaction of people in the environment.

Distinction Between Learning Organization and Organizational Learning

These literary contributions of the writers and researchers associated learning to take place in the organizational settings which ignited curiosity in emerging researchers who thereby wanted to unpack the terms 'learning organization' and 'organization learning'. During the explorations, a few distinctions emerged, especially while understanding the meaning of learning related to organizational life. Three differences as indicated by Eikeland (2012) covered (a) learning in organizations, (b) learning organizations, and (c) organizational learning. Meanwhile, attention towards the importance of a learning organization was captured significantly.

Learning comprises all sorts of activities initiated in certain places or systems, specifically, in the organizations or workplaces. The most important common factor is *learning* at the personal, intuitional and institutional level. However, one of the clear distinctions between the 'organization learning' and 'learning organization' is that the former depends upon the managers to guide, support and direct the workforce to improve performance at different levels but the latter is influenced by leadership which inspires every individual in the organization at different levels (Qutoshi & Khaki, 2014).

The prescriptions of many writers are closely linked to the questions of how an organization, as a body consisting of people, resources, and interactions of people, altogether holds a system for generating an ideal learning environment. Perhaps, these ideas provided a basis to define organizational learning. The concept of organizational learning is a complex and multidimensional phenomena (Malhotra, 1996) because it is a

multifaceted process of facing the changes to meet the demands of time and space. To this end, organizations use two types of strategies to improve their performances.

The first is *explorative learning* which is closely linked with taking a variety of initiatives and procedures to test new techniques to bring about some desired changes at the level of performance. Secondly, organizations use *exploitative learning* which is linked with reflections and modifications in the existing activities or procedures of the organizations based on their performances (Dewey, 1933). The process of using different strategies of learning initiated to improve the performance of an organization altogether are termed 'organizational learning', where all working forces are guided, supported and encouraged to focus on the performance of the organization.

Organizational learning purely focuses on improving the performance of an organization through individuals working at different levels and it links organizational performance with that of individual performance, growth and development. However, to run organizations, managers use different techniques of management not necessarily the only effective managerial styles to transform organizations into learning domains. They try to move things in the right direction to achieve the desired objectives as effective managers do but they may not be able to do the right things as the effective leaders inspire their coworkers (Robbins & Judge, 2009). Thus, leadership effectiveness can make big differences in both the learning organization and in the organizational environment that supports learning.

This assumption is embedded with the perceptions that all leaders know and are well aware of the learning organization, but in reality they may not know how to develop a philosophical, methodological and technical approach towards developing a conducive environment that builds the basis for a learning organization. However, a learning organization, in addition to the organizational learning paradigms, creates and analyzes the: conditions for organizational learning by ensuing the components of a learning organization. Therefore, the concept of learning varies both within and outside the organization. To this end, this is the leadership that builds OCB to foster conditions for learning organizations.

Thus, building on these notions, we can further explain how single loop, double loop (Argyris, 1999) and triple loop make sense in learning organizations. This further enables organizations to rectify the barriers of their employees in understanding the problems in performing better; and to understand chaos and complexity theories in organizations. Therefore, a learning organization is an organization where individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole engage in the process of continuous learning to improve not only at the personal level but also to improve the collective performance at the organizational level. Moreover, it demands a systematic way of building capacity, aligning with the present and future needs, and developing linkages through effective use of communication channels with other organizations (Eikeland, 2012; Torlak, 2004). Thus, a learning organization

means a system where every member is well aware of the organizational shared vision, responds to the shared values and is committed to perform with high level of excellence. Likewise, an organization as a whole provides a conducive learning environment, where every individual is continuously engaged in the process of developing skills, expertise and knowledge based on research and development that is linked with the organizational vision. To this end, individuals are highly facilitated in learning organizations to access all required resources and to make use of those resources that would help them achieve the desirable results.

However, the purpose of learning is not only to develop individual capacities to perform at a desired level in the organization, face multiple challenges and welcome competitions within the local, regional and national market but also to instigate to compete with the global challenges in its area of services and with the wider community around the globe. Such kind of culture inspires individuals to develop their capacities in such a learning environment as *inspiring-visionary* leaders with a philosophy of lifelong learning and use different approaches to leadership. Leadership in a learning organization is guided by shared visions, systems thinking, team building and empowering self/others with a concept of co-evolving and co-leading (Qutoshi, 2016) that create an environment of learning for development from an inside-out to an outside-in approach (Rajbhandari, 2012).

Theoretical Framework of a Learning Organization

This framework of a learning organization is developed as a result of reflections and reviews on the essence of a learning organization and the way people engage in a process of lifelong learning, while engaging with and achieving organizational goals. It shows how an organizational identity is shaped through the philosophical views, technical and structural support systems and the cultural setting that facilitate horizontal and vertical collaborations at all levels of organization life to strengthen OCB.

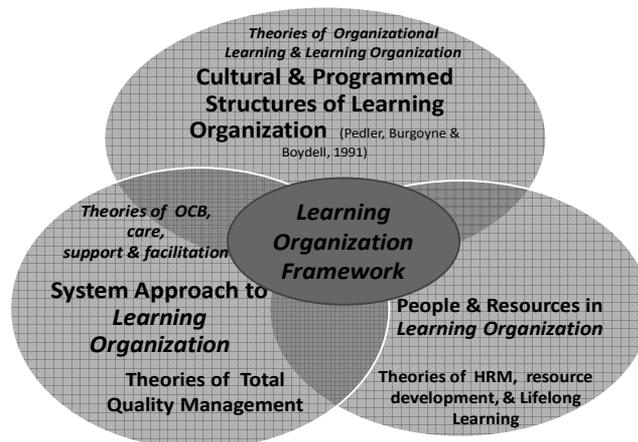


Figure 1. Framework of a learning organization integrating theoretical outline towards system approach, resources and organizational culture.

Programmed structures provide the basis to understand how to ensure Total Quality Management (TQM) of organizations (Pedler, Burgoyne, & Boydell, 1991). According to this approach, there are: first, a structured way of *learning approaches* to policy formation, implementation and evaluation; second, *participatory approaches* to policy making; third, *use of Information and communication technology* (ICT) for effective communication; fourth, *improved financial systems* to facilitate learning activities; fifth, *developing 'internal exchange'* enriching their thinking out of the box to improve services and products; sixth, *introducing new ways to rewards*; seventh, *developing flexi role structures* to respond change effectively; eighth, enabling workers to be sensitive to *environmental scanning*; ninth, *developing learning* through joint activities, such as, training, partnerships in investment, in research projects and 'job exchanges'; tenth, *developing a culture of learning* through mistakes and experiences; and eleventh, *providing opportunities* for personal growth and development to every workers within the organization and outside.

In a learning organization, people are considered the most valuable resources of the organization, while other resources are considered as basic needs to assist employees in achieving the organizational goals. The purpose of a learning organization is therefore to develop a systemic approach to re/shaping and moulding individuals through capacity development, care, support and facilitation of all kinds that are essential for creativity and high performance with mindfulness.

Thus such a systems thinking approach to empowerment not only plays a key role in enhancing efficiency and effectiveness of individuals in their jobs but also enriches OCB element. In addition, individuals and groups with OCB feel proud to help other colleagues voluntarily in order to achieve organizational objectives. To achieve this objective, learning organizations create a culture that enables everyone to perform at the highest level and develop programmed structures that further strengthen the idea of how to develop OCB among employees.

A learning organization framework provides a way to understand the organizations with reference to employees' growth and development with peace and justice. To this end, the employees' proactive behaviour with OCB can highly contribute to the organizational growth and development in line with TQM. Thus, the central theme of TQM appears to be embedded in the framework of a learning organization. This framework is based on the integration of different theories which altogether build an organization a learning organization. The theories, for example, Organizational Citizenship Behaviour, Human Resources Management, Total Quality Management, Organizational Learning, and theories of organizational culture seem to support how to make sense of lifelong learning for the highest level of creativity and innovation, and are the ingredients of a learning organization. However, it is the effective leadership that makes a big difference in the lives of followers. In so doing, these effective leaders build a clear understanding of organizational lifeworld

and integrate a set of complex theories into actions which empowers employees to contribute towards the learning organization.

Technical Approach to Learning Organization

There are many theories of learning that can be used as bases for learning organization to understand the philosophical, cultural, structural and environmental frameworks, where individuals and organizations as a system seem to engage in a process of continuous learning for better performance at all levels (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Eikeland, 2012). The views of these theories about learning do not seem simple, linear and straightforward to experience in an easy way (Small & Irvine, 2006). Educational theories appear to be less focused on a learning organization rather concentrate on individual learning. However, social theories of learning, for example, Bandura's (1977) and others' are more focused on the relevancy of the concept with a learning organization. Moreover, Small and Irvine (2006) argue that learning theories are basic foundations to learning and development of individuals in any organizational settings. Their focus remains on improving the capacity of employees but less focus has been given to synthesize these concepts of learning associated with individuals to that of the organizational learning.

Exploring these views extensively, the result suggests that there exist many gaps in organizational learning research that need to be bridged by associating the technical approach and practice in the real life scenario. This calls for theoractive learning (learning that comes from within theory and practice) threads (Rajbhandari, Basaran, Hujala, & Kinos, 2011) for initiating the mixture of learning theory into practice. Such a learning approach leads to establish a concrete learning organizational realm. However, engaging to develop a consensus on the ever evolving definitions and approaches that break up rather than construct a theory may generate a systematic technical practice towards a learning organization. Moreover, it is still demanding to develop a holistic model of the learning organization and/or a theoretical framework for a learning organization based on the concepts of different tools for learning, means and approaches to individual learning and turning all these phenomena of learning into an organization learning theory (Lahteenmaki, Toivonen, & Mattila, 2001).

However, any learning theory that supports the concept, philosophy and phenomena of a learning organization can be helpful to understand how to develop a theory of a learning organization. Thus, an attempt has been made to develop a comprehensive framework of a learning organization. In this regard, we support Robbins and Judge's (2009) view of positive organizational culture and structure that overall frame an environment supportive to a systematic approach to a learning organization. Thus, to create an organizational culture for enhancing the learning organization environment, individuals, groups and organizational structure need to be synergized to generate conditions for learning, for example by encouraging changes and creating opportunities to collaborate in creative

thinking and sharing. The characteristics of such organizational cultures reflect how to sustain and grow from within and enable others to participate voluntarily to achieve the shared vision (Confessore & Park, 2004; Watkins & Marsick 1993).

Among the few approaches to define the characteristics of a learning organization, Senge's (1990) approach appears to be a more comprehensive one. It sums all characteristics of a learning organization by adding some new ideas like systems thinking, personal mastery, and mental models with innovations to early characteristics by building a shared vision and team learning. Senge's (1990) suggestions of a learning organization gives a clear picture to understand the essence of a learning organization and help to lead dynamic organizations effectively.

Educational Institutions as Learning Organizations

The shared vision and systems thinking emerged as the most significant contributors to form an organization, including any educational institution, into a learning organization. These concepts are used in line with the learning theories being implemented in an organizational culture to develop learning habits of individuals and groups. This, however, needs appropriate leadership approaches and styles to stimulate growth and development of an organization (Rajbhandari, 2013).

Schools are social organizations, where students, teachers and support staff are formally engaged in a process of interaction with each other for the purpose of learning; whereas parents, community and society at large informally or non-formally interact with the school or influence it through different ways. Therefore, schools as learning organizations need to be very sensitive to responses, interactions and demands and aspirations of different stakeholders and more importantly, time and space to ensure powerful learning through re-culturing rather than restructuring (Fullan, 2007; Hopkins, 2007).

According to Day, Peters, and Race (2004), learning organizations are like humans that need to learn to achieve the highest level among others. The notion of such learning comes with a clear vision shared by all members of the school as an organization, using the most appropriate approach to learning at all levels. Developing a shared vision is one of the important characteristics of the learning organization and it is the effective leadership that facilitates the whole process of doing so (Day et al., 2004; Senge, 1990).

Systems Approaches to Learning Organizations

A learning organization promotes systems for assessment and evaluation of performance and ensures effective utilization of under-utilized resources. Such systems enable an organization to locate its position for present and envision its future in line with the shared organizational vision. In such a learning organization, it appears to be a common dream of all the members to reach at a clearly pictured position by enriching their learning within the organizational arrangements.

However, it could be a challenging job to critically analyse every aspect of the approaches so as to improve the current practices and to inform future directions at all levels. Secondly, it is equally challenging to analyse the skills, which presently appear suitable and helpful to perform certain jobs that may not be fit for tomorrow's needs. Thus, learning organizations need to keep developing continuously the knowledge, skills and attitude of employees individually and collectively and facilitate with new technological resources to enhance their performance at all levels.

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), learning exists in the organizations at individual and collective levels and these individuals consciously or subconsciously engage with the process of continuous learning. Such an approach to learning leads towards the concept of lifelong learning. Once individuals in such organizations start believing in the philosophy of lifelong learning they appear to ask and reflect on the question, 'How do I improve what I am doing' (Whitehead, 1998)? This is the leadership that creates a kind of environment where individuals not only think about how to improve their own performance but also remain conscious about improving the performance of others in the organization (Day et al., 2004).

In learning organizations, every individual learns and remains eager to share learning with others. It is believed that learning organizations are very sensitive to this aspect of learning of every individual because every individual is unique, but at the same time, is also an important component of the whole system. Thus, any kind of low level of performance due to poor level of learning may affect the whole performance of the organization. Therefore, individual learning is equally important as the collective learning, system learning or the organizational learning.

Team Learning in Learning Organizations

Learning is not limited to an individual activity rather it is a collective engagement to improve organizational performance. Individuals in an organization form teams and members of the team learn through collaborating and cooperating with each other in line with the organizational vision. Learning in teams is a cooperative activity but it is also challenging when organization lacks effective teamwork and understanding of team learning.

A learning organization develops everyone to be cooperative and collaborative to achieve the organizational goals through the organizational learned behaviour following the common purpose of achievement. This enables people to help each other in tasks by developing an organizational citizenship culture through the mechanistic and organic organizational structured system.

Transformative leadership in a learning organization establishes a system of team learning that keeps every individual as an integrated part of the whole system. These mechanisms are like the gems for learning organizations which connect every individual

as part of the organization and present organization itself as a system (Moilanen, 2001). Learning organizations possess such type of mechanisms that work at individual and organizational levels to achieve the desired objectives efficiently and effectively through proper utilization of the available resources.

System Analysis in Learning Organizations

A learning organization has an inbuilt system to analyse its policies and practices. It analyses all the available resources, identifies the required resources and creates opportunities to ensure learning to occur. In this whole process of analysis and identification, a learning organization uses its system in a free and fair manner that provides evidence for reliability and transparency (Day et al., 2004). Moreover, in creating opportunities for learning, a learning organization manages to change the culture of the organization, which helps the workforce to engage in continuous learning by developing capacities (based on knowledge, skills and positive attitude) and learning new things within the culture of change. Thus, a learning organization provides all kind of opportunities to learn by using all kinds of resources (Robbins & Judge, 2009).

Centres of Learning in Learning Organizations

Schools as learning organizations develop their own centres of learning. These formal structures of learning symbolize the importance, commitment and inbuilt mechanism for teaching, learning and development. These centres develop all the workforce through on-the-job training, workshops and seminars. The learning organization aims to develop its human resources, invests in individuals, ensures growth and development, and uses expertise of seniors as mentors to train the employees.

Research activities are carried out through these centres of learning and the employees are encouraged to publish their research work to disseminate the findings and share with others. These centres of learning connect the organization with other organizations and use their learning to reflect on their own areas of development. In addition, they try to learn from others' experiences and mistakes as well.

Reflective Practices and Learning Organizations

In a learning organization, reflective practices are fundamental. Reflections on-actions and reflections in-actions are considered as roots of powerful learning for sustainable development (Argyris & Schon, 1978). The organization reviews every performance in the light of research and development and encourages the culture of critique for further improvement.

Reflections and reviews on learning is a professional and learning oriented-activity. It is not something just for the sake of keeping records and evidence for management to use for decision-making rather it is important for learning purposes. This kind of learning through

reviews and reflections comes from the existing system structures like a learning centre in the organization, which is one of the most important pillars of a learning organization.

Total Quality Management and Learning Organizations

The concept of Total Quality Management was coined by Deming who stated 14 principles of quality management to ensure quality as a central focus in a learning organization. To ensure TQM, the leadership in a learning organization needs to be very sensitive and proactive. According to Day et al. (2004), “Learning about quality is an inseparable part of a learning organization, which stresses upon, how to do the whole thing right, not just bits of it... a good system meets the quality standard” (p. 102). A learning organization develops and facilitates a culture of teamwork and it is a collaborative and cooperative way to doing things for self-satisfaction (Fullan, 2007). Thus, a learning organization expects everyone, under the leadership of an effective *inspiring-visionary and transformative leadership*, to be well aware of all its characteristics and also to know how to acquire these qualities of standards.

A learning organization is a place where individuals, in line with the organizational vision, learn, improve and develop skills and knowledge with a philosophy of lifelong learning. In so doing, employees become ready to take initiatives and enjoy learning through experiences and experiments. In other words, a learning organization is a platform where the workforce from the top to the bottom level extends vertical as well as horizontal support and facilitates each other to learn and to improve the organizational effectiveness.

For a learning organization to ensure TQM, a conducive learning environment is created by encouraging ‘senior managers’ to work as ‘professors’ in order to facilitate learning at all levels within the organization (Day et al., 2004). The purpose is how to educate everyone and raise awareness on organizational vision, mission, values and mechanisms and how to use all kinds of resources for effective performance of the organization. To this end, a learning organization develops ‘Centres for Learning’ and engages senior managers as mentors, teachers and supporters for the juniors and/or new employees.

A learning organization establishes a strong network of communication within its structure to disseminate information, knowledge, and research findings at all levels very effectively. It is like a proactive and effective human being who believes in high competence to meet the TQM objectives with care, love and support for all employees as a strong community of practitioners (Sergiovanni, 2000). Thus, it is the leadership of a learning organization that uses the philosophical and technical approaches to develop such a strong community of practitioners who possess OCB to achieve the highest level of results in line with the organizational goals.

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