The University of Botswana as a learning organization: The challenges of fostering change

Isaac N. Obasi
University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana
obasiin@mopipi.ub.bw, zikobasi@yahoo.com

Baakile Motshegwa
University of Botswana, Gaborone, Botswana
baakilem@yahoo.com, motshegwa@mopipi.ub.bw

Abstract: One critical element of a learning organization is its ability to ‘respond quickly and effectively to change’ (CAPAM, 2004). Such an organization is not only skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights (Garvin, 1993), but more importantly, it ‘facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself’ (Pedler, et al, 1991).

With a well articulated but nonetheless an ambitious vision of being ‘a leading academic center of excellence in Africa and the world’, the University of Botswana boldly embarked on the task of fostering change in its teaching and learning in response to the rapidly changing character of higher education driven by the forces of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in a highly globalized world.

How far and how well, has it gone in this continuous task of fostering change and getting its staff adapted to it? This question forms the central focus of the analysis this paper. To do this, the paper uses the model of a learning organization put forward by Kandola and Fullerton, (1994), as captured by Armstrong (2003) as a framework for assessing the extent to which the University of Botswana can rightly be described as a learning organization in Africa.

Keywords: universities, learning, organizations

Introduction
African universities have been at the receiving end of the rapid changes brought about by the combined forces of information and communication technology and globalization. Most of the universities have not been fast enough to respond to the challenges posed by these forces. Some of them have remained only consumers of knowledge and unable to make meaningful contributions in the global production and dissemination of knowledge. The cause of this has more to do with the inability of the States in Africa to support their universities than the absence of creative minds needed to move the universities to new frontiers.
However, Botswana is one of the few states in Africa that have been able to provide the necessary support to their university. Consequently, the University of Botswana (UB) has long become an organization of choice for migrant high-flying academics from many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Learning organizations are where energetic and talented people want to be, and according to Armstrong (2003), an organization of choice is where people desire to join and once there, to stay. If we go by only these characteristics, the University of Botswana would easily be described without further investigation, as a learning organization. But as we know, there are many other important features that all together combine to create the concept of a learning organization than these characteristics.

This paper examines the efforts the University of Botswana has been making, as well as the challenges it has faced, to be a learning organization. In doing this, the rest of the paper is divided into four sections. The first section provides a theoretical foundation for subsequent discussion, while the second provides the empirical evidence on the characteristics of the University of Botswana as a learning organization. The third section examines the efforts critically, while the last section provides the conclusion.

**A theoretical foundation**

Regardless of its dynamic nature, change is a constant feature in human activities. Consequently, organizations are usually challenged to find ways and means of adapting to the inevitable impact of the forces of change. Since the last century, society has been under a constant state of flux due to the forces of globalization and the information and communication technology. Leading organizations in the developed parts of the world, have adopted numerous ways of coping with these forces. The learning organization concept is one of such ways, which according to David Skyrme Associates (2003) ‘is seen as a response to an increasingly unpredictable and dynamic business environment’.

Learning is a process of acquiring new knowledge, skills and capabilities (Reynolds, et al, 2002). A learning organization therefore is one which is ‘skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights’ (Garvin, 1993). For Pedler et al, (1991) it is an organization which ‘facilitates the learning of all its members and continually transforms itself’. Emphasizing the team or collective spirit of a learning organization, Senge (1990) defines it as place ‘where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together’ (see Smith, 2001, and Armstrong, 2003, for excellent reviews of the definitions of a learning organization).

However, a learning organization is regarded as an ideal (Smith, 2001) or a vision (see Human Resource Development Council, 2005). This vision according to Finger and Brands (1999) is towards which organizations have to evolve in order to be able to respond to the various pressures facing them. As David Skyrme Associates (2003) rightly pointed out, for managers who want to develop learning organization capability for their organizations they have to note that learning organizations are (a) adaptive to their external environment, (b) continually enhancing their capability to change/adapt, (c) developing collective as well as individual learning, and (d) using the results of learning to achieve better results. On the other hand, such managers should note that there are some inhibitors to becoming a learning organization and these include (a) operational/fire fighting preoccupation (ie not being able to create time and sit back and think strategically), (b) being too focused on systems and process to the exclusion of other factors, (c) reluctance to train or invest in training other than for obvious immediate needs, (d) too many hidden personal agendas, and (e) too top-down driven, over-tight supervision resulting in lack of real empowerment (David Shyrme Associates, 2003).
A model of a learning organization as presented by Kandola and Fullerton (1994) and aptly captured by Armstrong (2003) attributes the following six features to such an organization. These are (a) shared vision, (b) enabling structure, (c) supportive culture, (d) empowering management, (e) motivated workforce, and (f) enhanced learning which results from the existence of processes and policies that promote a culture of learning among the workers.

This requires what is called a ‘cultural change’ that demands organizations working with all their staff to (a) create and communicate a shared vision for the organization, (b) make information in the organization accessible to all, (c) help employees manage change by anticipating change and creating the types of change desired by the organization, (d) empower employees to act, (e) acknowledge and support the need to take risks, (f) learn to manage the organization’s knowledge by (i) keeping information current, (ii) maintaining historical knowledge and (iii) addressing increasing volumes of information (see Human Resource Development Council, 2005).

Based on all these, learning organizations are able to empower their workers, integrate quality initiatives with quality of work life, generate productive capital, encourage collaboration and share the gains, and create continuous learning opportunities. However, they can still face some difficulties such as existence of gaps between organizational words and actions, resource constraints that can inhibit training, unclear and conflicting vision (Braham, 1995); as well as the inability to make optimum use of trained personnel, and lastly inability to manage information overload. Some champions and drivers of change may constitute part of the problem as result of some factors. According to Armstrong (2003) such factors have to do with economic fears, inconvenience, uncertainty, threat to interpersonal relationships, threat to status or skill, competence fears and the shock of what is new that is suspected to upset established routines among others. Having reviewed what it takes to be a learning organization, we shall now examine the case of the University of Botswana (UB).

**Efforts of the University of Botswana at being a learning organization**

The University of Botswana (UB) has a long developmental history. Briefly, it is an offshoot of the then University of Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland (UBLS) which came into existence in 1966 on the Independence of Botswana and Lesotho. UBLS itself was an offshoot of the then University of Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland (UBBS) established in 1964. In 1976, UBLS transformed into the University of Botswana and Swaziland (UBS) following the nationalization action in Lesotho that saw its severance from the jointly operated UBLS. However in 1982, through mutual agreement, UBS became separate institutions (UB Calendar 2004-2005).

The University of Botswana consequently came into existence in 1982 by an Act of Parliament. It is made up of six Faculties and a School of Graduate Studies. It has thirty-nine academic departments and Six Centres and Units (Figures derived from UB Calendar, 2004-2005 which did not however include the newly created Dept. of Psychology). As at December 2004, UB has an academic staff strength of 788 and an industrial and support staff of 1214. The number of male academics is 557 representing 71% while that of the female is 231 representing 29%. The number of international (expatriate) staff is 275 representing 35% while the number of citizen staff is 513 representing 65% (see UB Fact-book, 2004). The current staff strength of international staff shows a decline of 5% from the 2001-2002 academic year figure which was then 40% (see UB: Annual Report, 2001-2002). The current student population is 15,414 made up of 48% males and 52% females.
Measures towards being a learning organization

First, there is a widely publicized university vision that reads: ‘The University of Botswana will be a leading academic center of excellence in Africa and the world’. Its mission also widely publicized is ‘to advance the intellectual and human resource capacity of the nation and the international community’ (UB Calendar 2004-2005). The vision and mission are anchored on some core values that serve as operational indicators and some of these are professional and ethical standards, academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

In today’s world, the possession of an effective ICT infrastructure is a fundamental requirement for being a successful learning organization. UB has an Information Technology (IT) support Department with decentralized offices in each Faculty. There are many Computer Laboratories in each Faculty. The institution maintains a twenty-four hour Internet Services throughout the week. Staff members have unrestricted access in their various offices (see Obasi, 2004a). Postgraduate students who have computers have also such access. Undergraduate students have access mainly in the well-equipped computerized main University Library and in the various Computer Laboratories within the limit of extended official hours such as in the library.

This brings us to the UB library which is regarded as one of the best in Africa. In terms of available information resources, the library has a physical collection of 379,272 volumes of books, 20,000 pamphlets, 1,555 periodical titles, 9000 multi-media titles and 15,000 full text journals in addition to Botswana Collections and archival materials (see UB Fact-book, 2004). Its strength is electronically based reflected in its holdings in electronic databases (Obasi, 2004b). It also has access to over 3,000 books freely available through the Net Library on the library Web page (UB Library: Facts and Figures).

UB has a robust staff training policy in practice. Attendance to international conferences by members of staff is highly encouraged and supported by UB. Apart from the existence of a unit in charge of long term staff training needs, there is also a very active Educational Technology Unit part of whose mandate is the organization of an in-house e-learning workshops for academic staff on regular basis. This training helps staff to re-tool in order to be at the cutting-edge of their disciplines. This Unit organizes e-learning workshops almost on monthly basis. During the 2003/2004 academic session, 386 academic staff (representing about 49% of the staff) attended these workshops (see Molelu, 2004). Practically, the application of the knowledge acquired in the e-learning training through the mounting of online-courses (web-based courses) has shown some appreciable increase over the years. From a modest figure of 7 in the first semester of 2002 when it began, it rose to 42 in the first semester of 2004/2005 session. In all, 117 courses have been mounted online between 2002 and 2004 (see Molelu, 2004). This practice has enabled some students to do collaborative courses with their counterparts in the United States of America.

As an institution that encourages innovation in teaching and learning, UB has instituted prizes to reward academic excellence. Lecturers are encouraged to experiment and use available state of the art equipment supplied by the Educational Technology Unit in their teaching. There are plans to enable those who win the prizes carry out studies on their new innovative teaching techniques.

Related to this is the enhancement of knowledge through collaborative initiatives and implementation of partnership programmes. UB has promoted many collaborative activities with external bodies in the Republic of South Africa, Europe, Australia and the United States of America. There is a floodgate of Institutional affiliation requests from PhD research candidates and post-doctoral fellows from Europe and America on regular basis and those who were selected do present seminars to share their ideas with UB staff in the affiliated departments.
The administrative system in UB is electronically based. The emails have today become the yesterday’s Office Messengers that carried physical mails from their point of origination to their destination. This is made possible because certain minimum requirements for a successful e-administration exist. These minimum conditions include (a) widespread computer literacy among all staff and students; (b) the existence of computers in every office and for every staff that needs to be communicated with in the administrative process; (c) a stable supply of electricity; (d) the existence of an IT support department for maintenance services; and lastly (e) the adoption and operation of a maintenance policy that ensures that no part of the organization is cut off from the administrative process due to faulty IT equipment (Obasi, 2004c). In addition to these, UB promotes organizational communication in its widest definition.

Staff dedication in teaching is self-regulatory. Lecturers are assessed by their students in terms of teaching effectiveness, punctuality to classes, regularity of attendance, application of innovative teaching methods among others and this forms part of assessment of staff for career advancement. Findings from a pilot survey of UB students on the most effective service points in the institution carried by us, reveal that staff dedication to their teaching responsibilities, was rated next to library services that came first (Obasi, 2004d).

An assessment of the efforts at both systemic and individual levels

Systemic level assessment

Using the model of learning organizations as identified by Kandola and Fullerton (1994), and the Human Resources Development Council (2005) among others, we can say with some measure of confidence that UB is a good example of one in Africa. We shall now provide empirical evidence for this assertion and thereafter identify some areas of concern presently.

The shared vision, mission and core values of UB are not just on paper. They are used as the drivers of daily administrative actions and activities. For instance, with respect to the first core values, UB as an institution tries to uphold the highest professional and ethical behaviour and through openness, honesty, tolerance and respect for the individual (see Obasi, 2004e) from where ideas in this section were drawn. In 2004, a history lecturer who was found wanting in the grading of examination scripts received appropriate disciplinary action. And also in 2004, the case of one administrative staff that complained of victimization received the attention of the University Council, which in turn set up a committee to investigate the matter. In many African universities, this openness and respect for this single individual would have been ignored or at best single-handedly dealt with administratively with all the attendant risks of not giving the complainant fair hearing even when denial of justice is not intended.

The existence of an enabling structure and supportive culture cannot be doubted given the already identified e-administrative system, regular e-learning workshops carried out by the Educational Technology Unit, availability of Internet facilities on a twenty-four basis, modern e-based library facilities, availability of stationeries for effective performance of duties, availability of modern photocopying facilities to facilitate staff duties, a competitive conditions of service, openness in administration, availability of relevant and vital information, effective communication networks and IT facilities, and the presence of a corps of motivated workforce.

Assessment at the individual level

Although we did not set ourselves the task of assessing UB from the point of view of Senge’s (1990) definition of a learning organization, it is still important to make some observations based on this very important definition. A critical look at universities in Africa reveals that a lot of system-induced constraints make it very difficult for scholars to really measure up to Senge’s definition. Many of the universities are
still under the firm control of the state. For example, institutional autonomy and academic freedom are still a major problem in African universities. Although, Botswana is still an exception in this regard, the declaration of Professor Kenneth Good of the Department of Political and Administrative Studies at the University of Botswana a prohibited immigrant by the President of Botswana, has raised a lot of critical questions as to whether the country is still exceptional. But in spite of these legitimate fears arising from the unfortunate incidence, the fact that the Government never gave a directive to the University of Botswana to terminate the contract appointment of Professor Good which it could have quietly done and which would have been the case in some other African countries (where the state is intolerant of critical scholarship), remains a credit to the government of Botswana. But judging from the overwhelming support given to Professor Good by his colleagues (such as protest march to the Vice-chancellor's office, protest march in the city, solidarity at the High Court where the case was being handled) there is evidence that UB lecturers can achieve some of Senge's characteristics of a learning organization.

The evidence that lends credence to this assertion is a robust and active culture of scholarship in UB driven mainly by the insistence on sustained academic publications as basis for advancement. There is evidence of collaboration, team-work and shared knowledge among academics in research and publication activities. Many conference papers are through joint efforts while senior academics are required to show evidence of academic leadership through mentoring of younger colleagues. Although attendance at regular training programmes for re-tooling (both for old and new staff) is not very high as expected, there is still strong evidence that at individual levels, UB academics are adapting (even though slowly) to the institutional efforts at fostering change. We shall now discuss more on the 'pockets of resistance'.

**Islands of resistance to change**

However, the efforts of UB at being a learning organization, where change is seen more as a challenge than a problem, have witnessed some difficulties not unexpected in similar organizations. Many people have not yet embraced the e-learning teaching culture either due to mental block or inertia rather than lack of time cited by many. As seen in the statistics on attendance at the e-learning training workshops, only 49% (just about half of the staff) have benefited from this privileged opportunity. The computerization of the entry of examination grades is one area that exposed how slow some staff can be in embracing IT facilities.

A deeper insight into the problem revealed that the introduction of the semester system created a lot of adaptation difficulties for some staff. Many of the older lecturers who were used to the old system have been finding it difficult to adapt to the fast and dynamic nature of the semesterized system. For example, the new system led to a multiplicity of courses which some of the lecturers saw as additional workload. The students on their part resisted the new system up to the point of going on demonstration. They were particularly angry over the abolition of the resit examinations.

Another problem that some lecturers have cited is the explosion in student enrolment that places additional burdens on them. For example, the enrolment figure in 1997/98 academic session was 6,831 and by the 2004/2005, it rose to 15,414 students.

In spite of these problems, there are those whose major problem towards adapting to change is inertia (ie mental fixation to the old ways of doing things). Some others who have phobia for new technologies have equally taken cover under the excuse of heavy workload. Resistance to change therefore is a problem that UB needs to address.

Fortunately, it is currently using the Performance Management System (PMS) as a new change mechanism. A PMS champion has been appointed and series of consultations on PMS are being held to secure ownership at various levels.
Conclusion

Available evidence demonstrates that UB has made remarkable efforts towards becoming a learning organization. There are shared vision and mission, enabling structure, supportive culture, a corps of motivated workforce and enhanced learning opportunities. However, there are still pockets of resistance to change that should be addressed. It is hoped that the on-going implementation of the PMS would provide a remedy for this.

References


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