The role of consultants in organizational learning

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Abstract
This paper aims to find out how the consultants' roles affect organizational learning processes (i.e. 4I model) and activities. Through the case study of a Chinese SME which implemented a consultancy-led lean project, it is found that the importance and content of each process can be largely affected.

Keywords: Organizational learning, Consultants, Lean

Introduction
As the competition among organizations becomes fiercer, many management concepts, techniques and methods such as mass customization, lean production or thinking, agile manufacturing, and business process re-engineering (BPR) have been developed to facilitate organizations to survive and thrive. To adopt and implement these techniques and methods efficiently or effectively, some organizations employ consulting companies which could provide useful ideas and professional service. Fincham and Clark (2002) describe the management consultancy industry as one of the fastest growing industries in the market place. However, it is worth noting that consultants play various roles in different projects. Kubr (1996) categorizes two basic consultants' roles as the resource role and process role. Kubr (1996) and Antal and Krebsbach-Gnath (2001) point out that the roles of consultants can be represented by a directive and non-directive continuum and these roles could have a strong impact on organizational learning (OL) processes and activities. In other words, each OL process could be largely affected by different roles. This paper aims to investigate how learning processes can be influenced by the roles of consultant. As there are many studies which address OL, in this paper, Crossan et al.'s

(1999) 4I model (i.e. intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing) which illustrates the dynamic of organizational learning is employed.

Literature review

Organizational learning

The definition of OL

Numerous studies can be found in the area of OL but there is no standard definition or interpretation of OL. Some researchers (e.g. Cangelosi and Dill (1965), March and Olsen (1976)) emphasize that OL means the adaption to internal or external environment changes. While Fiol and Lyles (1985) argue that although contextual factors such as culture, strategy, organizational structure and environment can affect learning activities, adaption should not be confused with learning. They point out that adaption means adjustments or modifications based on the environment changes but learning stands for knowledge and insight development and the linkages between effective past actions and future actions (Fiol and Lyles 1985). It implies that adaption is more passive rather than proactive and it may not contribute to knowledge or insight development.

Fiol and Lyles' interpretation of learning is confirmed and developed by other researchers. For example, Miller (1996) describes OL as activities to acquire new knowledge which could be implemented in decision making processes or affecting other organizations. Sadler-Smith et al. (2001) and Lopez et al. (2005) agree that OL refers to the acquisition and development of knowledge and skills to achieving better organizational effectiveness or performance. However, from Crossan et al's perspective, OL is more than knowledge creation, acquisition or development. They point out that OL is "a principle means of achieving strategic renewal of an enterprise" (Crossan et al. 1999: 522). In other words, OL could occur at all the levels of the organization such as individual, group and organizational levels and the tension between learning new knowledge and taking advantage of the learned one is the central issue of OL (Crossan et al. 1999).

OL sources

Organizations can learn from both internal and external sources. Experience of the organization such as routines which has been adopted by individuals or groups or the organization (Levitt and March 1988), organizational self-appraisal which examines and solves errors or problems or reflection of failure within the organization (Argyris 1976, Daudelin 1996, Huber 1991, Shrivastava and Schneider 1984), can be viewed as the foundations of OL sources. Those routines or activities which could achieve positive results are more likely to be accepted and adopted by other employees in the organization (Cyert and March 1963, Levitt and March 1988). However, Argyris (1976, 1977) claims that OL is associated with error detection and correction and similarly Daudelin (1996) and Popper and Lipshitz (2000) argue that failure can also be a potential source of OL. In addition to the internal sources, indirect experience from other organizations or professionals such as customers, suppliers, management consultants, governmental advisers or other successful organizations can also facilitate OL. For example, Fletcher and Harris (2012) who have investigated ten cases of Scottish organizations which attempted to achieve internationalization found that consultants could provide internationalization knowledge to these organizations. Similarly, external sources such as

consultants and professionals enable organizations to learn new knowledge based on their expertise and skills through training and implementing specific projects (Easterby-Smith and Araujo 1999).

OL processes

By reviewing OL literature, a number of frameworks or models which describe and analyze OL processes or stages can be found. Among these models or frameworks, some researchers prefer to view OL processes as several highly structured and distinct constructs. For example, Huber's (1991) study identifies four typical constructs of OL (i.e. knowledge acquisition, information distribution, information interpretation and organizational memory). Similarly, Nevis et al. (1995) affirm that there are three important stages of OL including knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and utilization. However, it is argued by many researchers that OL processes are interacted with each other. In other words, one process or level can affect other processes or levels of OL. For example, Buckler (1996) points out that learning processes cover three elements (i.e. focus, environment and technique) and these three elements can overlap and be interdependent with each other. Lam (2001) develops a three-dimensional model of OL which illustrates how these dimensions are interconnected with each other. Williams' (2001) belief-focused process model of OL which conceptualizes and presents the social interactions between OL processes is also a typical example. Although the above examples recognize the interactions between processes, they lack a clear analysis of different levels of OL.

In this study, we employ Crossan et al's (1999) 4I model of OL which is widely accepted and applied by a large number of researchers (e.g. Holmqvist 2004, Schilling and Kluge 2009, Vera and Crossan 2004). It considers both different levels of OL, interaction between these levels and reveals the dynamic of OL processes. In Crossan et al.'s (1999) model, there are four main OL processes (i.e. intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing) that relate to three levels of learning (individual, group and organization). Crossan et al. (1999) reject the perspective that OL is purely analytical and a conscious process by positing that learning could occur subconsciously. They argue that intuiting which means recognizing patterns subconsciously at the individual level is crucial to OL processes (Crossan et al. 1999). Their perspective of intuiting is later supported and confirmed by other researchers (see Akinci and Sadler-Smith 2012, Sinclair and Ashkanasy 2005). For example, Sinclair and Ashkanasy (2005) define intuition as "a non-sequential information-processing mode which comprises both cognitive and affective elements and results in direct knowing without any conscious reasoning" (Sinclair and Ashkanasy 2005:353) and their model of decision-making clearly differentiates intuitive decision-making from analytical decision-making (Sinclair and Ashkanasy 2005). In addition to intuiting, the second process-interpreting-enables individuals to consciously explain their insights or ideas through various languages and develop their cognitive maps (Crossan et al. 1999).

It is agreed by researchers that language is central to interpreting (Walsh 1988, Weick, 1979). As individuals may explain the same phenomenon differently, the issue of equivocality could occur. However, according to Crossan et al. (1999), this issue can be solved by group interpretive process. Compared to interpreting, the process of integrating emphasizes the development of collective action based on shared understanding across group members and the deeper shared understanding can be achieved through dialogue among group members (Crossan et al. 1999). The process which distinguishes learning at organization level from learning at individual or group level is institutionalizing. By proposing the assumption that OL does not

simply equal the sum of individual or group learning, Crossan et al. (1999) indicate that some learning results can be integrated and embedded in organizational strategy, structures, systems, practices and investments. They also suggest that it is not necessary for learning to go through every process and sometimes, some processes can be skipped. Although Crossan et al.'s (1999) study shows a rich and in-depth understanding of OL processes, some researchers argue that as OL includes various sources, it is also meaningful to extend the understanding of the 4I model from intra- to inter-organizational level (Crossan et al. 2011, Jones and Macpherson 2006). In other words, researchers should clarify how these 4I learning processes within the organization can be changed or affected by the inter-organizational level which in this paper we use management consultancy as a proxy.

Management consultancy

The definition of management consultancy

Trying to find out one unified definition of management consultancy can be problematic as it is defined differently by researchers. According to Sturdy's (2011) study which reviews and examines the literature of management consultancy, there are two dominated types of definitions. One type highlights activities that could assist or facilitate organizational change or improvement (Block 2000). It implies that in addition to the experts or professionals outside the organization, any employee within the organization that provides help to others or the organization can be considered as the consultant. Compared to this broad and inclusive definition, the other type gives a narrower definition. It proposes that management consultancy is a special and professional service provided by specially trained and qualified persons (Greiner and Metzger 1983). Based on these two distinct definitions, Kubr (2002) suggests a clearer and more fundamental definition of management consultancy which is employed in our study. From his perspective, management consultancy or consulting is defined as "an independent professional advisory service assisting managers and organizations to achieve organizational purposes and objectives by solving management and business problems, identifying and seizing new opportunities, enhancing learning and implementing changes" (Kubr 2002:10).

The roles of consultants

Researchers have established different typologies of roles of consultants from various perspective and dimensions (e.g. Kitay and Wright 2003, Nees and Greiner 1985, Turner 1982). Among these studies, there are two well-known typologies. One is resource (or content) role vs. process role and the other is directive and non-directive continuum. In the resource role the consultants are expected to provide a specific service to the client based on their expertise. In the content role consultants need to facilitate and enable the client to understand their own organization and its processes (Kubr 2002, Massey and Walker 1999). Kubr (2002) suggests that these two types are the basic roles of a management consultancy and given the complexity of its actual activities, he then proposes a more comprehensive typology of consultants' roles which can be presented in a directive and non-directive continuum (see Kubr 2002: 74). In this study, we mainly employ the continuum to specify consultants' roles.

Research methods

In this study, a single and in-depth case study is adopted for three reasons. First, according to Handfield and Melnyk (1998), a case study are employed for the following research purposes: 1)

exploration (i.e. to understand the uncovered domains of previous theories); 2) theory building (i.e. to identify key variables, their relationships and the reasons for these relationships); 3) theory testing (i.e. to test the previous theories); 4) theory extension (i.e. to better structure the theory based on the observed results). In this study, as the main purpose is to identify the casual-effect relationship between the roles of consultants and OL processes, case study can be viewed as the most suitable research method. Second, as suggested by Yin (2009), case study is most suitable for answering "how" and "why" questions which could contribute to both theory testing and building. In this study, as the research question is a "how" question, it is reasonable to choose a case study approach. Third, in terms of the choice of cases, Voss et al. (2002) point out that single and in-depth case study is commonly used in longitudinal research. In this study, one of the authors had a unique opportunity to get access to a Chinese SME (Small and Medium Enterprise) in the foundry industry which was implementing a lean project with the support from a consulting company from Feb 2012 to Jan 2013. During this period, the author visited this company twice: the first visit was at the early-to-mid stage of the project from Feb 2012 to May 2012 and the second visit was at the mid-to-end stage from Nov 2012 to Jan 2013.

To aid the rigorous collection of data some instruments for case study were employed. Yin (2009) suggests that the interview can be viewed as a vital source for case study. In this study, one of the most important instruments is the semi-structured interview. Gubrium and Holstein (2001) indicate that compared to structured and unstructured interview, semi-structured interview possesses unique strengths. On the one hand, some closed questions can enable the researcher to compare and contrast answers from interviewees and on the other hand, some open-ended questions can be asked to gather rich information. To understand the learning processes which occur at different levels and the roles of consultants, managers, consultants, supervisors and operators were interviewed. For managers, they were interviewed with the focus on their past experience of lean, their attitudes and understanding towards lean and reasons to employ consultants and their expectations of consultants. For consultants who were directly responsible for the project, they were interviewed in terms of their interpretation of their roles, their understanding of lean, learning and training issues or difficulties in the project. For supervisors and operators who attended different workshops, they were interviewed in relation to f their attitudes and interpretations of lean, courses delivered by consultants and learning and communication issues. All the interview transcripts were transcribed and then sent to interviewees to confirm these were a accurate recording of the interview.

In addition to the semi-structured interviews, direct observation and documentation were also employed to enrich the case study. For direct observation, the author was given access to the shop-floor, training courses and meetings to observe how managers, supervisors and operators worked and communicated with each other and how training courses were delivered by consultants or managers. The documentation included materials from, the training courses, the improvement project plan, the implementation handbook, reports from consultants and new documents of rules and performance assessment. To analyze different sources of data in a logical way, a group of codes such as consultants' roles, 4I processes, categories of lean definitions were generated and developed from literature prior to collating any data. New codes were also developed and added during data analysis.

Findings

The roles of consultants

Through the content analysis of the interview transcripts and data from observation and documentation, four types of roles are identified.

The first one is *trainer*. It is found that both managers and consultants mentioned this role frequently during the interviews. From the managers' perspective, consultants can be labeled as their "teacher" who possessed "various types of knowledge and experience" in this area and educated them to understand and implement lean. From the consultants' perspective, they were responsible for training the managers and employees in terms of the meaning of lean, the approaches and requirements of lean.

The second role identified is the *advocate*. It is found that one of the most important reasons for managers to choose lean implementation is as a result of the recommendation from the consultants. During the first meeting, the consultants explained the benefits of implementing lean, such as cost reduction, quality improvement and employee quality enhancement and successful cases of lean implementation after the managers described their difficulties and problems the organization was experiencing. In this case, the consultants persuaded their client (the case company) to select and adopt a particular solution (i.e. lean) and the introduction of benefits and successful cases convinced the managers that lean is a suitable and valuable solution. Additionally, the consultants also designed and proposed the detailed plan and guidelines for lean implementation. It is worth noting that the role of the advocate should not be confused with the collaborator in problem-solving or identifier of alternatives. The *advocate* tries to promote specific ideas or solutions and persuade managers to accept and adopt these ideas or solutions rather than providing alternative solutions. In the case of this project, the consultants offered one detailed plan for the whole project which they believed could be the most suitable and comprehensive approach (including organizational, operational and technical levels of changes) rather than several alternative plans. Additionally, when applying lean tools such as 6S and visual management, the consultants directly provided 6S implementation and assessment method which formulated what, why, where and how to change the status quo by using 6S.

The third role is the *fact-finder*. The consultants investigated the status quo (e.g. organizational structure, culture, employee quality, shop floor management) of the case company through interviewing managers and employees and observing their management, production processes and shop floor during the preparation stage to identify the problems, potential improvement areas and the main focuses of the project.

The final role identified is the one of *technical expert*. When interviewing managers, it was found that they described themselves as having a "lack of sufficient knowledge of lean" and therefore the most important reason to employ consultants is for their experience and knowledge to cope with problems. In other words, the consultants could provide a professional service. For the consultants, it was evident that they had developed their lean based knowledge from both direct and indirect experience. For indirect experience, they invited professors in academia and experts in the consulting industry (who had successfully completed lean implementation projects) to deliver lean based training courses to enable them to better understand the concepts and practices. Additionally, the consulting company purchased some databases which cover a wide range of trade magazines and academic journals to enable the consultants to learn from various cases.

For direct experience, the consultants were required to submit monthly reports to reflect the tasks completed, the results that were achieved, the problems or difficulties they identified and the plan or solutions for the next step. By the end of project, the consultants were required to submit a full project report which reflected their tasks and achievements. By writing the

reports, the consultants were able to record, review and reflect their experience in a regular and structured way and therefore, learn from this reflection. In summary, although the consultants acted as fact finder, which is closer to non-directive side at the beginning of project, it is evident that the roles in this project are more directive and resource based.

Consultants' roles and OL processes

In terms of how the consultants' roles affect OL processes, it is found that the importance and focuses or content of each process can be changed.

Consultants' roles and Intuiting

The importance of intuiting is largely reduced. As documented in Section 2.1.3, intuiting is an important process for OL. The results of this case study suggest that intuiting is weakened for two main reasons. One reason is that the process of intuiting at an individual level is largely replaced by the roles of consultants. For example, as the consultants acted as the fact finder, they were mainly responsible for identifying problems and potential solutions by using different data collection methods (i.e. interviewing employees and managers, getting access to company documents, sending mini-questionnaires and observing shop floor) and analytical tools (i.e. statistical analysis such as descriptive statistics of mini-questionnaire, content analysis of company documents or reports and interviews). Through this analytical work, a report of the 'status quo' can be generated. This report can also be viewed as the source for their planning process and evidence for persuading managers to accept their plan. In other words, instead of the employees or managers, consultants recognized patterns or problems by using professional data collection methods and analytical tools. It may be argued that the consultants could recognize patterns subconsciously or directly identify patterns based on their expertise and experience. However, when interviewing the consultants, it was found that they rarely use intuition. The consultants explained that they needed to show the evidence for their proposed plan or guideline through scientific methods. It implies that when playing a directive role particularly as an advocate, consultants needed to list and analyze reasons and benefits to persuade managers and therefore, it is automatically a counterintuitive process. The other reason is that lean itself is counterintuitive. Emiliani (1998) points out that managers' intuitive or natural way of thinking is batch and queue production mode rather than lean. Hence, wastes identified by lean thinkers cannot be recognized by managers unless they are educated to learn lean tools or lean concepts (Emiliani 1998). In the case of this study, most managers and employees have not been trained or taught lean based knowledge. Therefore, it is less likely for them to intuitively recognize waste or process improvement opportunities.

Consultants' roles and Interpreting and Integrating

The importance of interpreting and integrating is enhanced and these two processes which could occur at both individual and group levels can be viewed as the core processes for both the managers and employees to understand lean. As training courses delivered by the consultants were the main pathway for managers and employees' learning, how to interpret lean in an understandable and acceptable way can be a difficult challenge for consultants. By observing their training courses, it was found that these were mainly delivered through lectures (the consultants acted as trainer or teacher while the managers or supervisors or operators acted as students). However, when interviewing some of the "students" after the first training course, which mainly focused on organizational structure and job responsibility, negative feedback was

received. Some "students" complained that they could not memorize what the consultants had said as they were not familiar with conceptual words or phrases such as flattening and hierarchy. Several "students" highlighted that the examples or cases employed by consultants did not link closely with their daily jobs and thereby, they did not know what or how to change. It implies that the consultants failed to develop common language to interpret the training materials. Additionally, as "students" could not memorize or understand the training course, it was difficult for them to change their existing mindset, or develop shared understanding or engage in the project. Hence, finding a common language or at least an acceptable language to interpret the training courses became a core issue. To deal with this issue, the managers and consultants decided to change the training method. As managers knew their company and employees better than the consultants, and also as the consultants worked closely with the managers during the project, the consultants attempted to train the managers first. Managers were then expected to deliver the training courses with the common language to supervisors or operators. In this case, the consultants acted as "head trainers or coaches" who educated managers. Managers acted as "assistant trainers" who were responsible to educate employees in their department. For example, one of the important training courses is 6S implementation. As this course was mainly associated with the OM department, the head of OM was expected to be the "assistant trainer".

As a result of interviewing consultants and managers, it was found that compared to the previous training method, the new method provided more opportunities for both managers and consultants to discuss or communicate with each other and this immediate communication enabled consultants to gain better understanding of the situations in the company. By interviewing supervisors and operators, it is highlighted that it was easier for them to understand the managers' language and cases or examples provided by managers directly reflected their daily jobs. Based on this training course, some collective actions can be found in several workshops. For example, two supervisors mentioned that their operators began to clean machines and floors after the training course. Another supervisor reported that operators realized the importance of safety and they proactively checked whether their colleagues wore helmets and gloves.

Consultants' roles and Institutionalizing

The importance of institutionalizing can be strengthened and its efficiency can be improved based on directive consultants' roles. This study found that as the consultants acted as the technical expert and advocate, they were responsible to re-design and re-organize the organizational structure, policy, job responsibility, and performance assessment criteria based on their knowledge of lean. For example, organizational structure was flattened and improved as management layers were reduced from six to four layers and equipment maintenance department and quality control department were added. The safety and quality policy was developed by consultants. The assessment of Total Productive Maintenance (TPM) and 6S was included in the supervisor and operator's performance assessment criteria and related activities incorporated in their job responsibilities. This implies that the process of institutionalizing can be led by consultants rather than managers. Consultants could directly and efficiently embed their knowledge of lean into organizational level change within a relatively short time period as they possess sufficient knowledge and experience. Managers and employees were then persuaded and trained to accept or implement the re-designed organizational structure, policy, job responsibilities and performance assessment criteria. However, it is worth noting that efficiency does not mean effectiveness. For example, this study suggests that many employees did not

understand the first training course which emphasized organizational structure and job responsibility. In this case, the consultants drafted the documents relating to the organizational structure and job responsibilities in a relatively short time, but whether these documents, without proper interpretation, could be adopted and implemented by managers or employees effectively remains as an issue.

Conclusion

This paper aims to establish how the learning process can be affected by the role of consultants. By reviewing the literature of OL, the 4I model which illustrates the dynamics and different levels of learning is employed to identify learning processes. Besides, Kubr's (1996) typology is used to identify different consultant roles. Through a longitudinal and in-depth case study of a Chinese SME which implemented a consultancy-led lean project it was found that the process of intuiting is weakened. However, the processes of interpretation and integrating are enhanced. The process of institutionalizing becomes more efficient but its effectiveness can be largely affected by the process of interpreting. This paper enriches the OL literature (particularly 4I model) by investigating learning activities and processes at an inter-organization level and illustrating how these four processes can be affected by external professionals such as consultants. As a single case study, the generalisability of these findings is limited. Therefore the long-term research aim is to investigate more cases and compare and contrast different roles of consultants and their effects on 4I learning processes.

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