

HR Leadership and Cohesion of Continuous Improvement: The Case of a Sri Lankan Garment Factory

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Abstract

Achieving cohesive function of an organization for its continuous improvement is one major challenge faced by its management today. Under this debate, many researchers have emphasized the uniformity of organization and its cohesive function than its divisive potential. Subgroups with different educational, ethnic, gender and other divisive potential have limited the cohesive function of organization towards its continuous improvement to a greater extent. By using the multidimensional perspective of cohesion towards continuous improvement and adopting the case study research strategy, multiple data gathering methods, and qualitative data analysis, this paper tried to examine the research issue mentioned above pertaining to a popular Sri Lankan garment factory which has won several continuous improvement oriented business awards. The paper reveals that the human resource leadership (HR leadership) of the organization has played the initiative role in making its different work groups (i.e., associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers) cohesive, which substantially contributed to its continuous improvement over time.

Keywords: cohesion, continuous improvement, HR leadership, Sri Lankan garment factory

1. Introduction

1.1 Background, Issue and Purpose

In scientific research, cohesion has been emphasized as one of the most important determinants of success in small group activities in organizations (Carron & Brawley 2000). Many authors (e.g. Cota, Evans, Dion, Kilik & Longman 1995) have attempted to define and operationalize the cohesion concept for the purpose of business research. Traditionally, cohesion has been defined as a unitary construct and it was regarded as the total field of forces contributing members to remain in the group (Festinger 1950). In fact, Forsyth (1999) saw cohesion as analogous to the glue (compatible with Schein 1983) that holds the group members together. Thus, the cohesion has been operationalized in research as the attraction of group members to a sense of “oneness”.

More recently, a multidimensional view of cohesion has been defended saying that task commitment should be added to interpersonal attraction (Zaccaro 1991). Carless and De Pola (2000) suggested a three-factor model: task cohesion, social cohesion, and individual attraction to the group. These findings along with the growing body of literature on the concept (e.g. Mullen & Cooper 1994) support the view that cohesion is a multidimensional construct.

On the other hand, continuous improvement of an organization is one major challenge faced by its managers today. Under this debate, many researchers (e.g. Dale 1994; Kaye & Anderson 1998; Kaye & Dyason 1995; Kroslid 1999; Padhi 2000) have emphasized on the uniformity of the organization and its cohesive function than its divisive potential towards continuous improvement. Subgroups with different educational, gender, and other divisive potential tend to limit the cohesive function of organization towards its managerial performance to a greater extent (Martin 2002; Martin & Frost 1996; Deetz 1996; Willmott 1993; Kunda 1992).

Many efforts of continuous improvement in Sri Lankan organizations have undergone with the preceding limit, where the managers faced the challenge of making different groups cohesive to the new improvement efforts of the organizations. Few past studies tried to understand this phenomenon tracing some organization-wide issues such as the mismatch of cultural values and managerial behavior in Sri Lankan organizations (Nanayakkara 1999), political bureaucracy and poor administrative set up of the Sri Lankan public sector organizations that led to discourage their new management system implementation (Samarathunga & Bennington 2002; Gunathunga 2003; Wickramasinghe & Hopper 2005; Wickramasinghe, Hopper & Rathnasiri 2004), and politicization and multiplicity of labor unions that have become two major obstacles to create and maintain good industrial relations in Sri Lankan organizations (Opatha 2001). Moreover, Kaluarachchi (2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b) suggested the importance of the role of democratic leadership of the CEOs and supportive organizational culture for continuous improvement of Sri Lankan public hospitals.

In a recent effort of continuous improvement of a popular Sri Lankan garment factory which has won several continuous improvement oriented business awards, its HR leadership has played a major role in making different work groups of the organization more cohesive towards its new improvement efforts to be substantially successful and meaningful to the management (Sections 3 and 4). Thus, the present study was given motivation to examine the role of HR leadership of the organization in making its different work groups more cohesive

towards its continuous improvement efforts.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Theoretical Perspective

The present study theorized the said research issue using the multidimensional perspective of cohesion earlier suggested by (Zaccaro 1991). More precisely, the three-factor model: task cohesion, social cohesion, and individual cohesion to the group suggested in Carless and De Pola (2000) was adopted in order to understand the cohesive function of continuous improvement of the study organization along with the role of its HR leadership in interconnecting different work groups towards the continuous improvement. The role of HR leadership and cohesive function of continuous improvement addressed in this paper however was conceptualized theoretically further using the review of literature on HR leadership and continuous improvement (Section 2).

1.2.2 Research Strategy

The case study research method (Yin 2003) was used for conducting and presenting this research. A large-scale garment factory located in the Seethawaka International Industrial Estate in Avissawella of the Sabaragamuwa province in Sri Lanka was selected as the case, in which the empirical research work was carried out. The organization was selected as the present case study conveniently in particular giving the significance for its successful practice of continuous improvement and the achieved results and awards with the repute in the industry (Section 3).

1.2.3 Approach to Data Gathering

The primary data of the study were gathered through direct observations, short-time interviews, obtaining documentary evidence, participative observations, and in-depth interviews (Yin 2003) to mainly understand how HR leadership of the organization under study has played the major role in contributing the development of cohesive work groups within the organization towards its continuous improvement efforts. The data gathering techniques mentioned above were mainly carried out at the HR Department of the organization but the gathered data were further cross-checked (Yin 2003) through the documents, interviews, field notes, and observations involved in the data gathering phase. The HR Director, HR Executives, factory workers, Training Managers, team leaders, supervisors, and leaders and members of the JCC were the informants of the study. The Annual Report, Monthly reviews and checklists, policy manuals, process charts, brochures, and notices prepared and placed by the organization were used as the documentary evidence of data gathering.

1.2.4 Approach to Data Analysis

A substantial part of data analysis was completed using qualitative data (Yin 2003) by examining how HR leadership of the organization has played the initiative role in making its work groups (i.e., associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers) more cohesive towards its continuous improvement efforts. In particular, a multidimensional view of cohesion which has been earlier suggested by Carless and De Pola (2000) as a three-factor model with task cohesion, social cohesion, and individual cohesion was adopted in the present study to understand how these three factors of cohesion behaved in the study organization towards its continuous improvement. The data gathered from the interview transcripts, field notes (data gathered during the direct and participative observations), and documentary evidence were used for the identification of a pattern of relationship (Yin 2003) between the HR leadership and its role of making the work groups more cohesive towards the continuous improvement efforts. The relationship was in particular investigated through the natural data inquiry used as the informants' narratives of the study (Section 3). The case study results were discussed and linked further with the relevant literature used in the paper as the enhancement of theoretical contribution of the study (Section 4).

2. HR Leadership and Continuous Improvement

HR as a function has not always been perceived as one that is important to the success of an organization. This is changing, however, as senior leadership teams tend to understand the value that effective HR leaders can add to a business. Effective HR leaders have the expertise in knowing how organizations can manage people and keep them aligned and engaged to achieve business outcomes (Australian School of Business 2010). HR professionals are in particular well placed to help current leadership and to produce the next generation of leaders by establishing leadership brand, assessing the gaps in the present leadership against this brand and, investing in future leaders (Ulrich & Brockbank 2005). Moreover, effective HR leaders align their Departments with the organizations they serve and match their resources with business requirements. At the top, HR needs to help make the entire organization greater than the sum of its parts and to implement practices (in the present paper, the continuous improvement practices of TJJ which successfully implemented them with the effective leadership given by its HR director) that support corporate strategies, build shareholder value, and shape corporate image. At the business unit level, HR leadership needs to focus on strategic objectives, identifying and serving target customers, creating wealth in the market place and delivering employee value proposition (Ulrich & Brockbank). As a result of the restructuring and repositioning of the HR function, many organizations tend to redefine the roles of HR leaders so that they may be direct contributors to business performance. Leadership roles are being

redefined to increase emphasis on how to work with management to lead the business change effectively through the management and people. While many HR leaders are moving swiftly into these broader roles, others encounter difficulty in adjusting to the new role demands and demonstrating the required capabilities (Walker & Reif 1999). Thus, within this theoretical domain of debating on the role of HR leadership in achieving the success of business, this paper intended to examine the role of HR leadership of TJL towards the success of its continuous improvement oriented practices.

3. The Case

Textured Jersey Lanka (TJL) is a large-scale garment factory located in the Seethawaka International Industrial Estate in Avissawella of the Sabaragamuwa province in Sri Lanka. The commercial operations of the company began in August 2001 producing fabric for MAS Holding Ltd. The joint venture partners changed in 2004 where Textured Jersey UK had the joint venture partnership and was replaced by Pacific Textiles, one of the largest and most profitable mills in China. With the technical expertise of Pacific Textiles, the capacity of TJL was expanded twice, in 2005 and 2007 by 100% respectively. Presently, the total number of employees belong to TJL is 1179, which also have a substantial diversity in their civil status, gender, work experience/service, and age. The employees have been placed in their jobs as associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers. These five types of positions can be identified as different subgroup categories of employees of the company. A substantially clear-cut career path has been placed for these employees to climb their organizational ladder from the associate level to the managerial level.

In 2008, the shareholding of the company changed with Pacific Textiles and Brandix Lanka taking over the joint venture partnership and allowing TJL to become a public limited liability company in 2011. The company during its short history of business operation has been able to secure the best brands in the global fashion industry and capturing the niche markets in manufacturing Viscose, Modal, Micro Modal and Tencel fabric incorporating the latest technology.

The success story of TJL began in 2005. Then the world-renowned Italian retailer has become one of TJL's most strategic partners, sourcing a significantly large volume of material each month. At present, TJL provides fabric for the range of intimates of men and women and outerwear, as well as for Tezenis kids wear.

“We strive to be the benchmark strategic supplier to Intimissimi and Tezenis with high quality total fabric solutions and unmatched customer service”

The relationship is so open, flexible, and with deep understanding. The company as a “one team” has always been committed to delivering the best of quality and customer service to maintain a symbiotic business relationship. In future, it aims to become Calzedonia's fashion solutions provider for the region.

3.1 Task Cohesion and HR Leadership

The perceptual trap of both educated and less-educated employees of TJL has been made meaningful by its HR Department towards continuous improvement of the company as well as employees themselves. For example; mapping the territory, menu-meals, prescription to medication, etc. have made meaningful for employees to engage in their day-to-day operational activities in the company. These slogans and physical substance helped management to improve both quality and productivity of the tasks of employees as more cohesive groups. As a result, employees at TJL have not considered their work targets as threats to them rather they motivated to achieve those targets at their risk. The HR Director has played the key role of change agent behind this attitudinal change of employees with the influence of value-based change in time-line of the company business. The company has placed an ERP system, complete automation of the factory, ISO 9000 standards, environmental protection practices, safety standards and Japanese 5S methods, and the customized Toyota methods as its continuous improvement practices. The HR leadership had the mindset of customized fixation of the task/work jargon, the rituals, and the symbols of continuous improvement with employees rather than focusing on the mere substance of operational improvement. With this new focus, the core values that the company highly expects from its employees are:

- Empathy
- Caring for people
- Honesty and integrity
- Transparency
- Passion for excellence

The company leadership, including the HR leadership seems to be strong but less formal, caring and empathic, walk the talk, not a threat but a strength to people, continuous improvement oriented, and having high level of understanding about the micro picture of the company operations. Moreover, the HR leadership tends to identify an emerged leadership in the organization by appreciating and recognizing the role of Joint Consultation Committee (JCC), not only JCC but inviting opinion makers (on continuous improvement projects, meals, traveling, and other events) through it, and having regular and structured meetings with employees and their JCC representatives. This initiative role of the HR Director has mainly contributed to create the task cohesion of

employees for continuous improvement. It was noted in a statement made by a group of employees to a greater extent as follows.

The HR Director has understood our feelings positively hence we all can forward our ideas of work through JCC sometimes openly to him. The new work environment he developed helps the employees at all levels to do their jobs with high commitment (A group of employees interviewed at the Meeting Room 2).

3.2 Social Cohesion and HR Leadership

The diversity of employees (diversity in their civil status, gender, work experience/service, and age; and also the ethnicity or religion of them) is not a threat, but an opportunity to TJL. The HR Department encourages the following practices on employees for the purpose of improving their social cohesion.

- Go by the intention than the incidence
- Address the 'route', not the 'surface'
- Corrective mentality not punitive
- Environment to 'walk-the-talk'

The HR Director further emphasized the so-called practice of social harmony at TJL claiming that:

Performing and winning as a TEAM is how we do it. Dreaming of great moments and achieving them is what makes us so inspiring. Our employees have a great sense of pride to be a member of TJL (pride of workmanship)

Moreover, the major activities/strategies involving the value-based/attitudinal change taken place in the company evidenced with recognizing and rewarding employees showing high performance grades, building relationships among its non-managerial employees and managers, connections as social groups with people and places and people and non-human entities. Among the famous employee social events facilitated by the HR Department are the self-service terminal, family days, New Year days, sports events, competitions, pilgrims, and the community building projects through employees.

3.3 Individual Cohesion and HR Leadership

The individual cohesion of work has first been illustrated by the personal values of the HR Director, which reflect his openness to communication with the audience, forgiveness to the employees who made mistakes with the intention of good faith, empathy and responsiveness to the employees and seniors in the upper ranks, practical approach to the work encountered, and continuity of the work through the follow-up and feedback. Moreover, within this background, the HR Department seems open to identify the potential leaders of the work groups. A worker joined the company in 2001 as a Dyeing Associate and was promoted to Dyeing Executive after three (03) years replied that:

It was a great experience for me to practice a leadership role in a company like this.....

Moreover, individual workers have been given better benchmarking facilities, including their outward-bound training opportunities. Even for the associate level workers, their performance evaluation is done more systematically by the senior managers. In an annual award ceremony, respective workers are awarded for their achievements by the company Chairman. Under the supervision of the HR Department, the JCC plays a major role in empowering individual workers at different levels in the organizational hierarchy. This was highlighted by:

One worker came with a nice idea in a Vesak Bhakthi Gee ceremonial event, organized by the HR Department. JCC has informed the workers about the event in advance. The workers are engaging in these types of activities while they are working (A JCC representative).

While upgrading the employee welfare-budget annually by the Commercial and Finance Department with the active involvement of HR Department, employee discipline management is done tactfully in line with the areas like employee safety moves, staff attendance, and quality control. These controls are done using both formal and informal methods. However, it seems to be an exception to the famous "Hot-Stove Rule" in employee discipline management.

From planning to raw material procurement, manufacturing and quality testing, a skilled workforce used to drive TJL's manufacturing operations up to the requirements for the 21st century. Its strong spirit and family bond have been established on a foundation of core values which it treasures. Protection of its team members and their families is a priority which has developed great loyalty and trust amongst the workforce. Employees, the driving force of TJL are provided with comforts and amenities. Transport is provided for the staff members living in distant areas, while medical facilities and a spacious cafeteria are some other benefits to employees. Executive level employees are provided with complete on-site accommodation with a TV lounge and gymnasium.

Every effort is made to maintain the optimal health and safety standards. As a result, TJL recently received the National Industrial Safety Award for exemplary Health and Safety Standards.

JCC helps the company to introduce and develop leadership, commitment, and partnership amongst the associate level employees. It has proved a major asset to the entire organization with the dedication of its members to both self-development and the continued advancement the company. In this respect, TJL is presently benchmarked in

employee relations by many other Sri Lankan organizations.

Following the innovations taken place in the international apparel markets, TJL as a cohesive entity has undergone with number of changes for its continuous improvement under the active leadership given by its HR Department. In its successful journey, TJL has won number of awards for its continuous improvement efforts: Akimoto 5S Merit Award in 2002; British Computer Society National Best Quality Software Silver Award in 2006; National Industrial Safety Award with the all island first runner up, Fast React Accredited Client Oeko - Tex Standard 100, and Limited Brands Quality System Gold Awards in 2008; SA 8000: 2008 Certification and Fair Trade Certification in 2009; Organic Exchange (OE 100 & OE Blended) HRM Award and Sri Lanka National Energy Efficiency Award in 2010; and ISO 9001:2008 Certification and Most Flexible partner award at the Brandix Vendor Summit in 2011.

It is the passion that has brought the team together to put forward the challenging strategic intends of the company which is to be "The No.01 Fabric Solutions Partner in South Asia" in the future.

4. Discussion

It is noteworthy the work of Carron and Brawley (2000) which has considered cohesion as one of the most important determinants of success in small group activities in organizations. The qualitative data analysis of TJL case illustrated that the corporate mission of the company has been streamlined into its operational level as "one team" with the active involvement of its different work groups/teams (i.e., associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers or associate level, staff level, executive level, assistant managerial level, and managerial level). The key role of making these work groups cohesive and shared to the mission of the company has been played by its HR Department under the leadership given by the HR Director.

Conventionally, cohesion has been defined as a unitary construct (Festinger 1950) with the mere understanding of group member activities as a sense of "oneness". However, a multidimensional view of cohesion has been placed by some authors (Zaccaro 1991; Carless & De Pola 2000) looking at interpersonal attraction and multifactor construct of the concept. The case considered in the present study illustrated the cohesive function of employees (i.e., associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers) towards the continuous improvement at three levels namely; task level, social/group level, and individual level for which the active role has been played by the HR leadership to a greater extent.

Many researchers (e.g. Dale 1994; Kaye & Anderson 1998; Kaye & Dyason 1995; Kroslid 1999; Padhi 2000) have emphasized on the uniformity of organization and its cohesive function than its divisive potential towards the continuous improvement. Subgroups with different educational, gender, and other divisive potential tend to limit the cohesive function of organization towards its managerial performance to a greater extent (Martin 2002; Martin & Frost 1996; Deetz 1996; Willmott 1993; Kunda 1992). By interconnecting these two aspects of understanding, TJL case illustrated that the cohesive function of continuous improvement of the company has been facilitated by its HR leadership which contributed to overcome the divisive potential of continuous improvement which could have gone in the other way around.

When it comes to the Sri Lankan context, many efforts of continuous improvement in Sri Lankan organizations have experienced the challenge of making different work groups of the organizations cohesive to the new improvement efforts they made (Nanayakkara 1999; Samarathunga & Bennington 2002; Gunathunga 2003; Wickramasinghe & Hopper 2005; Wickramasinghe *et al* 2004; Opatha 2001). Moreover, Kaluarachchi (2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b) suggested the importance of the role of democratic leadership of the CEO to continuous improvement of Sri Lankan public hospitals. By interconnecting the findings of these past studies, the analysis of TJL case illustrated the role of HR leadership (Australian School of Business 2010; Ulrich & Brockbank 2005; Walker & Reif 1999) in making the company a cohesive entity towards the success of its continuous improvement (Section 3).

5. Conclusion

This paper intended to examine the role of HR leadership of the organization under study in making its different work groups more cohesive towards its continuous improvement efforts. The paper summarizes its conclusion using the research findings as follows.

The initiative role of making cohesive groups (i.e., associates, staff, executives, assistant managers, and managers) towards the shared mission of the company has been played by its HR Department under the leadership given by the HR Director. The cohesive function of employees towards the continuous improvement was seen at three levels namely; task level, social/group level, and individual level for which the active role has been played significantly by the HR leadership. The findings further interpret the previous research findings (Carron & Brawley 2000; Forsyth 1999; Zaccaro 1991; Festinger 1950; Carless & De Pola 2000). The findings also lead to further interpret the past scholarly arguments of symbolic view (Dale 1994; Kaye & Anderson 1998; Kaye & Dyason 1995; Kroslid 1999; Padhi 2000) as well as the critical view (Martin 2002; Martin & Frost 1996; Deetz 1996; Willmott 1993; Kunda 1992) on continuous improvement and managerial practices of organizations.

The company being a Sri Lankan organization has functioned as a cohesive entity towards the success of its continuous improvement. As a result, the company has been presented with number of awards for its successful journey of continuous improvement over time. The achievement of the company further interpret the past research findings in the Sri Lankan context (Nanayakkara 1999; Samarathunga & Bennington 2002; Gunathunga 2003; Wickramasinghe & Hopper 2005; Wickramasinghe *et al* 2004; Opatha 2001; Kaluarachchi 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b).

The results and findings of this case study could also be helpful for both practitioners and researchers understand the vital role of effective HR leaders in managing i.e., aligning and engaging people to practicing continuous improvement oriented methods in order to achieve the success of business (Australian School of Business 2010; Ulrich & Brockbank 2005; Walker & Reif 1999).

To overcome the limitations of the present study which selected a single case organization from the garment sector in Sri Lanka, future studies on the topic need to be carried out as comparative and/or multiple cases or survey research in particular, they may also examine the role of HR leadership and cohesive function of continuous improvement efforts of the organizations operating in other industries in Sri Lanka.

Acknowledgment

The author would first like to extend his warm gratitude to all academic and academic support staff members of the University of Colombo and all academic and academic support staff members and students of the Faculty of Management and Finance of the University for their kind cooperation throughout his so far academic career there. He wish to kindly remind the names of Masao Yokouchi, Yongdo Kim, and Noriko Taji, the professors attached to the Graduate School of Business Administration of Hosei University, Tokyo. They guided the author as the supporting supervisors during his PhD study (2007-2011) at the same graduate school. He honorably offers the special gratitude to the late young scholar, Professor Tomofumi Amano who attached to the Faculty of Economics of the University of Tokyo. Professor Amano guided the author as the academic supervisor during his PhD study period mentioned above. The author also would like to thank the all study participants of TJJ, who gave the fullest cooperation during the data gathering phase of the present study.

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