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Author: Polo, Federica; Cervai, Sara

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The Role of Training in Organizations: a Comparative Case Study of Employees and Management Perspectives

Federica Polo, School of Technology and Innovation, University of Vaasa, Finland
Sara Cervai, Department of Humanities, University of Trieste, Italy

Abstract

The transition to a more collaborative way of working brought a change in the role played by training in organizations, representing not exclusively a way to develop employees' core competencies but also a strategic tool to govern team processes and organizational outcomes. As a consequence, training became a system embedded in the organizational context, developed on the basis of values, beliefs and practices commonly adopted within the organization. In this regard, the literature still lacks an in depth analysis of how training is perceived in the organization and how the perspectives of different members vary. Therefore, this article aims to fill this gap comparing and analyzing the meanings and values attributed to the training by management and employees. The analysis has been carried out through the implementation of the *Training Culture Scale* (TSC) that allows to point out the meanings and values of training at individual, team and organizational level. Employees' characteristics, tenure in the organization, gender and level of education can be predictors of the different perception of training within the organization. The comparison between managers and employees perceptions allows companies to develop strategies to strengthen the *Training Culture* of the organization.

Introduction

The increasing complexity and competitiveness of the business environment require employees to face several organizational challenges and changes (Kim et al., 2015). In this situation, training constitutes a strategic leverage for human resource management (HRM) to maintain, update and increase individual knowledge and skills, as well as it represents a powerful tool to prevent the obsolescence of the human capital at organizational level (Ballesteros-Rodríguez et al., 2012). Furthermore, training has a central role in the development of core organizational competencies, with an impact on the strategy development process and on decision-making within the organization (Cappelli and Crocker-Hefter, 1996). Many factors can influence the training perception in a specific organization, and among the most relevant there are the organizational context and culture, together with the HRM practices implemented in the organization (Ballesteros-Rodríguez et al., 2012). Indeed, utilizing HRM practices oriented to promote training develops values and beliefs that are strongly connected to the importance of continuous learning and training in the organization (Wei et al., 2008). Therefore, analyzing the *Training Culture* of an organization becomes important in order to have insights regarding meanings and values attributed to the training in a specific context, furthermore the comparison between management and employees helps organizations in pointing out differences and improvement areas (Polo et al., 2018). In this regard, previous research has shown a possible discrepancy in the managerial vision of training at different levels in the organization. Indeed, managers covering strategic positions in the company might acknowledge the relationship between skills development and sustaining competitive advantage, more than other groups in the organization who might favor short-term priorities (Smith and Dowling, 2001). Therefore, research examining managers and subordinates attitudes towards training is still needed, in order to develop long terms perspectives able to have an impact on the strategy development process.

In light of these considerations, the aim of this article is to compare managers' and subordinates' perceptions of *Training Culture*. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

- (1) to what extent does managers and subordinates perception of *Training Culture* agree?
- (2) what are the factors that influence managers and subordinates perception of *Training Culture*?

In order to answer to the above mentioned research questions, this article is organized as follows: in the next session we review the literature pointing out the research gap, in the third session we describe the methodology used and the data collection process. In the last session we discuss the results of the study and its implications and limitations.

State of the art

Previous literature shows that managers play a crucial role in facilitating subordinates' learning and training (Hasson et al., 2013). Nevertheless, managerial attitudes towards learning, training and human resource development (HRD) in general, are not always unitary (Smith and Hayton, 1999). As previously mentioned there could be some substantial differences in training's perception between top management - attributing to training a long term strategic value - and junior/middle management - that having a more operational approach might be reluctant in releasing employees for training (Smith and Dowling, 2001). Moreover, in the actual business environment - characterized by revolutionary changes in the workplace and in the nature of work itself - subordinates engagement in learning and training activities becomes crucial to acquire, adapt and differentiate knowledge, skills and abilities according to the new needs (Bezuijen et al., 2010). In this regard it is important to highlight that most of the studies regarding learning and training adopt a managerial perspective, despite to analyze the meanings and values attributed to the training and learning activities in an organization is required the involvement of different stakeholders (Yang et al., 2004). Indeed, the impact of training is detectable at different levels: on the individuals, on the working team, on the organization and, on the society (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009; Alhejji et al., 2016). In this regard, Kim et al. (2015) categorized training into two types: individual training, where the impact of training is strictly related to the individual performance and organizational training where the training impact is not directly detectable by individuals but it is important for the sustainability on the long run of the organization as a whole. Although research on training has usually addressed individuals as primary unit of analysis (Aguinis and Kraiger, 2009), followed by the organization, there is evidence in the literature of the importance to include also the team level. This dimension refers to the impact that training has on the teamwork process (Cannon-Bowers and Salas, 1998). Analyzing meanings and values attributed to the training at individual, team and organizational level allows organizations to have an overall picture of how training is perceived (Polo et al., 2018).

Nevertheless, research exploring the extent of agreement between managers and subordinates perception about training is still lacking (Hasson et al., 2013). Furthermore, previous research considered some organizational characteristics as factors influencing training (industrial sector, size of the company...) (Acemoglu and Pischke, 1999; Black, Noel and Wang 1999; Guidetti and Mazzanti, 2007; Dustman and Schonberg, 2009) while still little research explores employees characteristics, tenure in the organization, age and level of education as predictors of different perceptions about training within the organization (McNamara et al., 2012).

Therefore, in this study we attempt to provide a case analysis about *Training Culture*, comparing

managers and subordinates perception and identifying possible other factors that might influence the training perception.

Methodology and sample

The study was carried out in a Finnish multinational company, through the implementation of the *Training Culture Scale* (TCS) previously validated in healthcare sector (Polo et al., 2018) according to the guidelines for the scale development process (Bagozzi and Edwards, 1998; Carmines and Zeller, 1979; Churchill, 1979; DeVellis, 2003; Hinkin, 1998; Netemeyer et al., 2003; Slavec and Drnovsek, 2012). The items of the questionnaire were developed following the three Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire (DLOQ) (Marsick and Watkins, 2003): individual, team, and organizational. The TCS allows to gathered data on the perception about *Training Culture* in the organization, through this study we explore the possible implementation of the TCS in corporate sector. The data used in this article have been collected by researchers during the training sessions provided by the company. The scale was tested on the sample trough a principal component analysis followed by a confirmatory factor analysis.

The sample is composed of 417 units: 249 employees and 165 subjects with managerial responsibility. Specifically, there have been surveyed 4 Vice-Presidents, 15 Directors, 19 General Managers, 63 Managers, 17 Line Managers, 11 Supervisors, 21 Team Leaders and 2 Project Managers.

Measures

This study investigates the *Training Culture* perception at three levels: (1) individual, (2) group and (3) organization. We used the 23 items of the TCS. Respondents were asked to indicate on a visual scale from 0 to 100 their level of agreement for each statement.

The results of the principal component analysis suggested the presence of three factors, confirmed by the confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) (see *Table 1*).

The preliminary data analysis conducted in this article consisted of the implementation of some t-statistics in R. Further, we performed some regression models to verify how employees and management perception about training might vary and what are the main factors influencing the training perception at different levels.

As first step we verified if there is a statistically significant difference in the *Training Culture* perception between managers and subordinates. As second step we verified if other variables influence the *Training Culture* perception in the organization using some control variables. The control variables utilized in this study are: gender, tenure in the organization, division/unit, seniority in the organization, level of education and number of days spent in training in the previous year.

Results and Discussion

The results of the CFA pointed out that the structure of the TCS implemented in corporate sector is based on three factors. *Table 1* shows that the first factor corresponds to what we refer as organizational dimension, the second factor includes items regarding the individual dimension and the third factor constitutes the team dimension. In this article, we use the three factors of the TCS to understand if there is some difference in the *Training Culture* perception between management and subordinates and what are the main elements that influence the *Training Culture* perception in the case organization.

The results of the analysis performed pointed out that there is no statistically significant difference between management and subordinates perception about *Training Culture* in the second (individual) and third (team) factor but in the first (organizational) factor there is a statistically significant difference between the two groups (p-value 0,053). The first factor includes the items regarding the organizational dimension. Therefore, there is a difference between managers and subordinates in considering training as a strategy to improve the organization, promote organizational learning, value human resources and planned on the long term. Furthermore, to answer to the research question number one we can state that managers and subordinates have a quite homogeneous perception about the role played by training at individual and group level with some differences concerning the organizational level. The literature supports the results highlighting that when the perception of a phenomenon in the organization is shared among the members the culture of the organization can be considered strong. Moreover, the homogeneity of managers and subordinates perception brings more positive outcomes to the organization (Ostroff et al., 2005). In light of these results, we explored what are the factors that might explain a different *Training Culture* perception within the organization. The results of the implementation of the regression model show that the unit the respondents belong to in the organization is one element that influences the *Training Culture* perception. Indeed among the different units analyzed (Operations, Marketing/Sales, Supply, Technology/R&D, Production, HR, Finance/Accounting) people working in production show a statistically significant difference in *Training Culture* perception regarding the first and the third factor (p-value 9,056e-03, 3,073e-6) that correspond to the organizational and team dimension. More specifically, results show that for people working in the unit of production training constitutes a risk of inefficiencies when colleagues are attending the courses, more than in other units.

Following, we analyzed also the main differences in the *Training Culture* perception accordingly to the gender (male-female) and the role of the person in the organization (blue collar-white collar). The results show that concerning the gender there is no statistically significant difference between male and female, while concerning the role, white collars and blue collars show a statistically significant difference in the first (p-value 3,021e-03) and third factor (p-value 4,524e-10) that correspond to the organizational and team level of *Training Culture*.

Regarding the seniority in the company a regression model has been performed and the results show that the difference between the four groups is 0,043. Regarding the three factors of the TCS only the third factor shows a statistically significant difference among the groups (p-value 5,621e-05) (see *Figure1*).

Concerning the educational level two groups have been compared, people having a university degree versus people who do not have a university degree and also in this case there is a statistically significant difference in the third factor (p-value 7,351e-11).

The last test we performed regards the influence that the number of days spent in training during the previous year have on the *Training Culture* perception. The analysis was performed on two groups: people who spent from 0 to 5 days in training and people who spent more than 5 days in training. The results show a statistically significant difference in the first (p-value 0,007) and in the third factor (p-value 0,002).

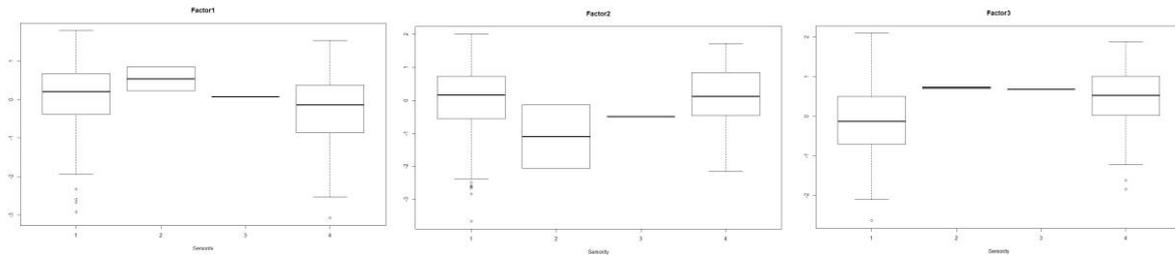


Figure 1 Seniority impact on the *Training Culture* perception (1: 0-5; 2: 6-10; 3: 11-15; 4: 16+).

Latent Variables	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
An individual opportunity to acquire new competences	0.155	0.838	
An individual opportunity to improve in my job	0.211	0.841	
An opportunity to transfer what I learnt to my colleagues	0.120	0.337	0.513
An opportunity to reflect on my own work dimension	0.157	0.445	0.411
Useful for my career development	0.232	0.519	0.247
Corresponding to individual training requests/needs	0.287	0.504	0.353
An individual duty	0.175	0.363	0.426
An individual choice	0.179	0.433	0.239
An opportunity to improve team work processes	0.270	0.436	0.490
An opportunity to offer a better service	0.403	0.449	0.295
An opportunity to improve also for colleagues	0.347	0.470	0.445
Customized for teams' needs	0.259	0.369	0.621
Shared with the team	0.251	0.307	0.699
Higher risk of inefficiencies when people are in training			0.570
More workload for colleagues			0.586
A strategy to improve the whole organization	0.896	0.156	
A strategy for excellence in the organization	0.942	0.229	
A strategy for organizational learning	0.867	0.236	0.151
A strategy to value human resources	0.630	0.222	0.184
Shared with all employees	0.453	0.212	0.366
A long term Plan	0.492	0.257	0.339
Based on an appropriate needs' analysis	0.285	0.311	0.355
A normative requirement	0.185	0.196	0.515

Table 1 Results of the CFA conducted on the TCS implemented in corporate sector.

Conclusions and Limitations

Based on the empirical findings of this research we can conclude that the results of the factor analysis conducted on the TCS previously validated in healthcare sector confirm the presence of three factors, with some differences in the items distribution that require further research to test the stability of the scale in corporate sector.

Regarding the research questions we seek to answer with this study we can conclude that managers and subordinates perception of *Training Culture* is similar concerning the meaning and values attributed to training at individual and team level with some differences in the perception of the role played by training at organizational level. This can be due to the different access to information of

the two groups included in the analysis. Indeed, managers might have a higher perception of the strategic role of training in the organization compared to subordinates.

One interesting element arisen is that the meaning and values attributed to the training at individual level (factor 2) are quite homogeneous and shared among the members of the organization.

For what concerns the factors that influence managers and subordinates perception of *Training Culture* we found that gender is not relevant, while the role of the person in the organization (white collar or blue collar), the unit the respondents belong to (production or others), the seniority in the organization, and the level of education are significant in determining the way *Training Culture* is perceived in the organization but do not have an impact on the meanings and values attributed to training at individual level.

Finally, the study has some limitations due to the fact that data have been collected in a single company. Therefore, the same analysis should be conducted in other organizations operating in different sectors, to extend the generalizability of results.

Furthermore, the analysis carried out and the results achieved represent only an exploratory effort to run the dataset that will be improved in the future. Therefore, future research should take into consideration the implementation of more sophisticated models to analyze how employees and management perception of *Training Culture* vary and how this variation can be interpreted.

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