

## **Review of the book**

### ***Learning organizations. A model for public administration***

**(ed. Karol Olejniczak)**

**[original title: *Organizacje uczące się. Model dla administracji publicznej*]**

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For a long time already, and especially in the last decade or so, organizational learning and knowledge management processes (being a broader context of discussion) are one of the main areas of interest for theorists of management sciences as well as for managers-practitioners. This is due to the fact that these processes determine the effectiveness of the functioning of contemporary organizations, and the actual knowledge resources are of strategic importance and determine the position in the market, and even the competitive advantage. These issues are discussed primarily in terms of typical business organizations, focused on generating profit. That is why it was with great interest that I read the reviewed book, as it is the first noteworthy work in our publishing market that focuses on learning processes in the context of public sector organizations. The book fully met my expectations, as the authors successfully demonstrated that these processes are of crucial importance in public administration in terms of its efficiency, and they proposed a range of instruments (models, principles, techniques) for an effective implementation of these processes.

The reviewed work consists of an introduction, five main chapters, both of a theoretical-methodological and practical nature, and five annexes containing an overview of the used methodological tools in the conducted study.

In the comprehensive introduction to the actual considerations, in addition to the standard elements such as the objectives, the research questions and methodology as well as the structure of the work, the authors also included (in the final part) suggestions for the readers of the respective chapters, which are very useful for further study of the content.

The first chapter of the book is of a theoretical nature and constitutes a broader context of discussion. It discusses the role of organizational learning in contemporary public management. The different paradigms of this type of management were taken into consideration, i.e. the bureaucratic paradigm, the new paradigm and the co-management paradigm. The authors rightly pointed out that „organizational learning remains integrally dependent on the quality of public administration, and that without good public administration there is no efficient state,

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and without organizational learning there is no good administration” (p. 57). At the end of this chapter the authors presented an overview of considerations in the form of an interesting comparison of the three earlier mentioned paradigms, which makes it much easier to understand the differences between these paradigms and it provides a convenient starting point for creating the model of organizational learning in public administration in the fourth chapter. Furthermore, this comparison makes it possible to partially overcome the weaknesses of earlier considerations, such as the difficulty of perception of the presented contents, resulting from the significant differences between them, and the hermetic language used.

The next chapter of the book is, much like the previous one, of a theoretical nature and contains a comprehensive comparative analysis of several concepts of organizational learning and knowledge management. The authors identified the major trends in the research area under consideration, i.e. organizational learning, learning organizations and knowledge management, presenting them in an interesting quantitative approach as well. Table 16 is particularly useful for illustrating these studies, presenting the leading research studies categorized into the three mentioned trends. Subsequently, the authors presented a comprehensive characterization of the research studies in terms of these trends, including their origins, an overview of the main sources and – most importantly – the advantages and limitations. Both foreign and Polish literature on the subject was taken into consideration. When summarizing these considerations, the authors aptly emphasize the main differences and similarities between the identified research trends and they point to the significance of the discussed issues in the theory and practice of modern management. As in the case of the first chapter, following the line of reasoning is not an easy task. This is most likely due to the „overload” of the content with a considerable amount of factual data, which is, however, a typical drawback of review studies. On the other hand, the reliability and versatility of the authors when creating this kind of work is impressive.

The subject of discussion in the third chapter of the book are the determinants of learning and knowledge management, identified and analyzed based on the results of empirical research. The authors made an overview of previous research studies (secondary sources) and presented the conclusions of their comparative research. They included the following factors among these determinants: leadership, strategy, structure and systems, organizational culture, communication and teams, staff, information system and relationships with the environment. It appears that the list of mentioned factors is coherent and complete, reflecting all the relevant aspects and determinants of the processes of organizational learning and knowledge management.

Also the fourth chapter of the book is of an empirical nature. Based on a quantitative analysis model, subsequently enhanced with a qualitative approach, organizational learning in Polish ministries has been illustrated, which constitutes the main area of research. A particular valuable part of the content in this chapter are the three, or actually four versions of the learning mechanism model (Figures 14, 16, as well as 18 and 19) and the quantification of the relationships between the elements of this model (i.e. between the factors and the processes), which is

illustrated in Figures 17 and 20. The applied methodology, which allows for an iterative enhancement of the discussed model, has proven to be a good research approach. In fact, the final version of this model made it possible to draw some interesting conclusions about the learning mechanisms in Polish government administration, which facilitates a proper understanding of the learning processes. The suggested model can be a useful tool for diagnostics (assessment) as well as for the design (improvement) with respect to these processes. The authors also see the weaknesses of the suggested model, which in my opinion stem from the limitations of measuring a number of naturally qualitative phenomena and from the subjectivity of surveys, which we usually have to deal with in economic sciences.

One small shortcoming in the presented empirical research results is the insufficient commentary on some of the expressions of a journalistic nature, contained in the statements of the respondents-practitioners, which would allow for a full clarification of the meaning of these expressions and associating them better with the theoretical models.

The final, fifth chapter of the reviewed book is a culmination of the inquiries of the authors. It contains a model of organizational learning in public administration. This is – as correctly observed by the authors – „a new look at the functioning of the Polish public sector – adapted to the challenges of the modern world” (p. 166). For elaborating this model the results of the authors’ own research were used, as well as comparative studies found in world literature and an overview of solutions (good practices) used in the twelve OECD countries. Another noteworthy aspect of the work is that the discussed model has been elaborated based on a „metaphor of public activities as experiments” (p. 166). Also the role of knowledge and organizational learning in public policies is discussed, in terms of cause and effect. Subsequently, organizations as the subjects of learning processes are characterized, rightly treating the department as the fundamental system for these processes. The authors focus on the mechanism of organizational learning, identifying the processes and supporting factors within this mechanism as well as the relationships between them. Especially the by the authors suggested interpretations of these processes and factors are worth mentioning (see sections 5.3.1 and 5.3.2). Another interesting element of the work is the broader view of the authors „on the entire system of public administration as well as the characteristics of the national public debate on state policy” (p. 188), which is reflected in the content of the conclusion of the fifth chapter of the book. However, according to the reviewer, there is an insufficient use of the loop models of learning processes in order to explain the specificity of these processes in public administration.

The annexes provide detailed descriptions of the auxiliary research tools used for the adopted methodological approach and they are in themselves interesting and valuable, useful in both a theoretical and practical dimension. This observation applies particularly to annex I, which contains impressive comparative lists of definitions of the key concepts as well as trends occurring in the considered area of research, i.e., organizational learning, learning organizations and knowledge management, as well as the methods and techniques specific to these research trends.

These lists have a high cognitive value not only for researchers in the field of organizational learning and knowledge management, but they can also be successfully used in teaching in this field. The remaining annexes are useful especially for less experienced researchers, as they can provide valuable methodological assistance in planning and conducting research projects. Also the literature on the subject can be considered valuable. The authors have managed to draw up a list of the most important bibliographic references from the considered area of research.

In conclusion, this study deserves a high rating for its content. It can be recommended to several groups of readers. Firstly, to scientific and research staff, as a theoretical and methodological basis for research in the field of organizational learning and knowledge management, both in general and in public administration. Secondly, to practitioners, employed in the offices of both the central government and local governments, because it provides a series of model solutions. And finally, to students as a valuable teaching aid for learning and understanding the process of organizational learning and knowledge management. It is difficult to identify any weaknesses of the reviewed book that would significantly reduce its usefulness. The only thing that can be pointed out is that some parts (especially in the first and second chapters) are written in a relatively difficult, specialized language, making the perception of the content more difficult. However, on the other hand, this stimulates the interest of the reader, at the same time encouraging a greater focus and additional literature studies for a proper understanding of the logic of the reasoning. The other shortcomings of the work, which have been mentioned when evaluating the respective chapters, are of less importance. The things that should be particularly emphasized are the high reliability and versatility of the approach as well as the impressive research effort and thoroughness of the authors of the reviewed book. In further works, what could be regarded as interesting and inspiring, is the implementation of the suggested methodological concept in other organizations of the public sector, such as hospitals, schools, or cultural and educational institutions.