

## **SCIENTIFIC REVIEW**

# **Examples of Good Practices that Generate Trust, Learning Cultures and Organization Resilience**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The development of a learning culture has been a priority for organizations around the world for decades. Its importance has been further highlighted by the onset of the pandemic and other events in the VUCA world. However, in practice, achieving this goal proves to be challenging, possibly due to the low levels of trust observed within organizations. This paper examines the crucial relationship between trust generated in an organization through certain practices and the level of development of a learning culture. Besides a theoretical review highlighting the significance of this relationship, the paper presents results from a pilot study conducted in 2020 with a sample of 101 employees from organizations in Serbia. The findings confirm the hypothesis of a significant correlation between practices that generate organizational trust and the learning culture. The*

*strongest correlations with the learning culture are found in managers providing relevant feedback, support for learning through micro-lessons from managers, and the openness of superiors to show their weaknesses and gaps in knowledge and skills. Based on these findings, recommendations for applying the results in practice are formulated.*

**Keywords:** *trust, learning culture, corporate culture, organization*

**JEL classification:** *D23, I21*

## INTRODUCTION

“No desire is shown to share their knowledge with colleagues or to be mentors,” “they have free courses available but do not use them,” “they do not want to learn anything outside of working hours”—these are just some of the complaints that can be heard from managers or professionals in various HR roles within companies. Most of these complaints likely relate to a general unwillingness among employees to learn proactively and to take on mentoring roles. This is often interpreted as the “laziness of our people,” which is seen as an obstacle to continuous development. While this explanation is easily accepted, it is very likely inaccurate. Indeed, the strong desire of management to develop a learning culture within their organizations and to remain competitive in the unpredictable VUCA world may face its greatest opposition from the low levels of trust generated within the organization. The trust crisis that has been recorded for decades, with continuous progress, manifests in various ways [1]. While companies invest significant amounts of money to help employees improve their current job skills (upskilling) and learn new types of jobs (reskilling)—with some estimates reaching up to \$1,300 per employee annually [13], it is quite possible that they are

investing in unprepared "ground". Why don't employees embrace this wholeheartedly? Why don't they see a clear mutual interest in it? Could the key to both the problem and the solution lie in the level of trust generated within the organization? It is quite realistic to assume that in an environment where employees do not trust management, colleagues, and organizational practices, and where management does not trust the people it leads, and teams do not trust one another, high value is not placed on learning. It is particularly interesting to examine which practices within the company, which can be observed almost with the naked eye, are related to what we call a learning culture or its absence.

However, to fully understand the relationship between trust and learning within an organization, it is first important to explain what we mean by these terms.

A *learning culture* involves a community of people who share a certain attitude towards growth and development, who are eager to learn and apply knowledge to help the organization, and who also feel a sense of duty to share their knowledge with others [5]. According to Marquardt [11], learning culture characterizes an organization that considers learning to be an important factor of business success and an integral part of business. Groysberg et al [6] list this culture as one of eight typical company cultures that can be developed by an organization, with characteristics such as exploration, openness and innovation. These authors find that innovation, agility and easier learning are some of the advantages of a learning culture, and they cite the company "Tesla" as a typical representative". "*Learning organizations*", as organizations with a developed learning culture can also be called, according to Gavin [4], show progress in five domains: systematic problem solving, experimenting with new approaches, learning from past experiences, adopting best practices from others and knowledge transfer quickly and efficiently through the organization. For the sake of clarity, it is important to note here that although some

authors make a distinction between the terms organizational and company culture, in this paper they are treated in accordance with the prevailing opinion - as synonyms.

Trust in an organization is a complex concept, which can be viewed in several ways. In the simplest form, it is a "secure relationship with the unknown" in an organizational context [1]. According to a somewhat more complex definition, it implies: 1) faith in one's competence - the ability to perform certain actions, 2) faith in one's behavior - willingness to act in accordance with the promise, and 3) faith in one's communication - willingness to keep confidential information [7]. It can also be seen as "the willingness of one party to be exposed to the moves of another party, based on the expectation that the other party will make a certain move important to the creditor, independent of the ability to monitor or control the other party" [17]. According to one of the models, trust in an organization can be seen because of: 1) the tendency of a certain person to trust (personal dispositions of members of the organization or someone who externally cooperates with it) and 2) the perceived reliability of the other party - the organization itself and its practices [17].

The relationship between learning culture and trust in organizations is directly and indirectly addressed by numerous theorists and individual researchers [22]. Wahda and colleagues [20] find in their research that organizational trust directly and indirectly, through organizational justice, positively and significantly affects the organizational culture of learning in a sample of employees in hospitals in Indonesia. Grossman [5], among the prerequisites for the development of a learning culture, mentions, among other things, encouraging honesty and openness, which refer to the free discussion of ideas and questions without fear, as well as taking risks and the possibility of making mistakes. And openness and freedom from fear are precisely manifestations of trust. It is stated that it can also be seen in the philosophy of the

agile movement. Namely, for the development of agile organizations, which are necessarily also learning organizations, as stated by Hayward [7], it is important that people experiment, learn along the way, move quickly without much caution and change on the fly as needed. The author states that the demonstration of such behavior is based on high trust. Specifically, trust in leaders, trust of leaders in those they lead, and trust between teams. The author points out that creating such an environment is not a simple task, which can also explain the failures in creating a learning culture in numerous organizations. "It takes energy and time to create faith in people that, even when the results of their actions are seriously problematic, you will act fairly and in the faith that they did it with the motivation to create something good" [7].

According to McKenna [13], some of the obstacles to the development of learning organizations can be found, among other things, in the fact that organizations do not encourage experimentation and do not allow mistakes that are natural in the learning process. This author sees the development of flexibility as a prerequisite for the development of a learning culture, in addition to the adoption of an organizational learning philosophy (e.g. how learning is valued, what methods are used to support it, etc.) and finding organizational cultural barriers to learning - primarily in the sense of how and where people learn. The latter makes a clear connection to trust - if you don't trust people, you won't give them the opportunity to be flexible about learning. The connection between flexibility and trust came into focus after the outbreak of the pandemic, when managers, as well as colleagues of the same rank, expressed their reluctance to trust employees who work outside the office [16].

For research on the relationship between trust and learning in an organization, it is important to pay attention to the characteristics of educators and the quality of their relationship with those they learn. Beyond formal organizational practices and procedures, for successful learning and desirable learning behaviors there must be trust between the giver and the receiver of knowledge ([2]; [18]).

Cochrane and Newton (2019), state that "the educator is like a cultivator", by which they mean that the educator assumes a positive parental role. Describing the role of the supervisor, these authors say that "establishing trust with an individual or group, modeling competence, permission and protection" [10] are the key roles in the process of individual development. Thus, successful learning largely depends on what is not only the policy and practice of the organization, but also a reflection of the quality of outstanding individuals. But it is also true that the behavior of prominent individuals in the organization, i.e. managers, contributes to how we perceive the organization.

Considering all of the above, we ask whether organizational trust and learning culture can be linked. Specifically, we are interested in which organizational practices that are reported to generate organizational trust have a significant relationship with the development of a learning culture. The paper is based on the hypothesis of a positive correlation between the mentioned terms. The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the fact that the relationship between trust and learning in organizations, although it was the subject of theorizing, was not sufficiently the subject of research. If we identify organizational practices that are positively correlated with learning, they will represent a recommendation for the establishment of learning organizations and a potential prerequisite for investing resources in learning in all forms and at all levels of the organization.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1 Sample and applied procedure**

The paper presents part of the results of a pilot study conducted on a convenient sample of 101 employees in June 2020. The sample consisted of 33 men (32.7%) and 68 women (67.3%). The largest number of employees worked for their current employer for up to a

year - 41 respondents (40.6%), but a certain number - 11 respondents (10.9%) had more than 10 years of experience with the employer. Most of the respondents were executors - 77 (76.2%), while there were 24 (23.8%) managers. The largest number of respondents work in an organization with over 250 employees - 47 (46,5%).

Respondents participated in the research on a voluntary basis and with guaranteed anonymity. They filled out the questionnaire online.

The results were processed in the statistical program JASP. As all variables are on the ordinal level, Spearman's correlation analysis was used.

## 2.2 Variables and instruments

The research observed a correlation between organizational practices that generate trust [21] and the employees' subjective assessment of the development of a certain organizational culture at the employer. Correlation was also observed between employees' statements about trust in the organization and management and organizational practices, in order to confirm that practices have a significant relationship with trust. For describing the sample, the following were recorded: gender, years of experience with the current employer, type of position and size of the organization where the respondent works. The following instruments were used:

The Organizational Trust Factor questionnaire [15] was constructed for the purpose of monitoring the potential for generating trust in organizations. The questionnaire makes 16 statements about the practices of the organization in which the respondents are employed and includes a five-point Likert-type scale on which the respondents express their degree of agreement with the fact that these practices are present in the organization (1 - "not true at all", 5 - "completely true"); Attachment 1). The claims

stem from eight strategies for establishing trust in organizations, established in the work of Zak and colleagues [21]: 1) recognizing excellence, 2) setting challenges, 3) providing freedom at work, 4) giving interesting jobs, 5) openness or transparency, 6) building connections between people, 7) helping human growth and 8) showing vulnerability - vulnerability. The results of Cronbach's coefficient of internal consistency indicate the high reliability of the instrument ( $\alpha = 0,92$ ; [14]).

Questionnaire of eight typical organizational cultures (adapted version; [6] is a Serbian, shortened and adapted version of the author's original questionnaire, in which each "typical" culture recognized by the author is represented by one item. It is about the cultures of: Learning, Enjoyment, Results, Authority, Safety, Order, Care and Purpose. In the questionnaire, respondents express to what degree the description of the given culture corresponds to the organizational culture of their employer on a seven-point Likert scale (1- "not a little", 7 - "completely"). In the original scale of Grojsberg et al., respondents ranked the descriptions, in the sense that they assigned a score of "one" to the culture that most describes their own, and "eight" to the one that least corresponds to the employer's culture. The total score on the questionnaire Organizational trust factor statistically significantly positively correlates with six out of eight types of organizational culture - Learning ( $r = 0,73$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ), Briga ( $r = 0,73$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ), Enjoyment ( $r = 0,61$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ); Purpose ( $r = 0,57$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ); Results ( $r = 0,57$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ) and Order ( $r = 0,39$ ;  $p < 0,01$ ) [14].

The subjective assessment of the level of trust in the organization and management by the respondents was measured with a single item: "I trust the organization and management." Respondents rated the accuracy of this statement on a five-point Likert scale, where 1 meant "not at all accurate" and 5 meant "completely accurate".

The questionnaire on socio-demographic variables included

questions about: gender (male - female), years of service with the current employer (up to one year, 1 to 3 years, 3 to 5 years, 5 to 10 years, over 10 years), type of position held by the employee (operational or managerial position), and size of the organization (up to 10 employees; 10 to 50; 50 to 250; and over 250).

## RESEARCH RESULTS

To examine the relationship between the organizational factor of trust—specific organizational practices that generate trust—and the respondents' claim of having trust in the organization and management, Spearman's correlation analysis was used.

*Table 1 – Descriptive statistics of score distribution and Spearman's correlation coefficient of the organizational trust factor and trust in management*

	AS	SD	$\rho$
OTF	2.95	.899	
I trust the organization and management.	5.37	1.932	.661**

Note: N = 101;  $p < .01$

Based on the results shown in Table 1, it can be observed that there is a statistically significant positive correlation of strong intensity between the overall score of the organizational trust factor—practices that generate it—and the respondents' claim of having trust in the organization and management.

To examine the relationship between the learning culture and practices that generate trust within the organization, Spearman's correlation analysis was used, and the results are presented in

Table 2.

Table 2 – Descriptive statistics of score distribution and Spearman's correlation coefficient of the trust in the organization indicators with the learning culture

	AS	SD	$\rho$
OT1	2.61	1.428	.441**
OT2	2.25	1.389	.418**
OT3	3.64	1.197	.396**
OT4	3.36	1.277	.585**
OT5	3.22	1.205	.298**
OT6	3.41	1.320	.318**
OT7	2.61	1.378	.499**
OT8	2.69	1.426	.563**
OT9	3.47	1.368	.413**
OT10	2.73	1.406	.335**
OT11	3.12	1.402	.494**
OT12	2.35	1.330	.500**
OT13	3.28	1.328	.632**
OT14	2.89	1.476	.629**
OT15	2.68	1.378	.666**
OT16	2.91	1.289	.393**
Učenje	4.90	1.911	1

Note: N = 101;  $p < .01$

Based on the descriptive statistics, it can be observed that in our sample, the organizational practices that generate trust are most prominently expressed in the structure and clarity of deadlines and goals (OT3 and OT4), as well as communication about the employer's business successes and failures (OT9), time management autonomy (OT6), and quality feedback from superiors (OT13). On the other hand, the indicators for rewarding collegiality (OT12) and recognizing individual or team achievements (OT2) are least expressed. However, it should be noted that all mean values are around the theoretical average.

Based on the results of the non-parametric correlation analysis, it can be concluded that all indicators of developed organizational trust statistically significantly and positively correlate with the learning culture. These correlations are moderate to high, with the strongest correlations between the learning culture and indicators related to the role of superiors in providing relevant feedback (OT13) and support for learning through mentoring (OT14), as well as the assessment of whether superiors are open to showing their weaknesses and areas for further development (OT15). Furthermore, the highest moderate-intensity correlations were found between the learning culture and the appropriate setting of goals for employees by managers that align with employees' interests (OT4), as well as the opportunity to develop one's own ideas during working hours (OT8).

The lowest correlation was found between the learning culture and time management autonomy during work (OT6).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study began with the question of whether we can link organizational trust to a learning culture, specifically whether organizational practices that generate organizational trust can be related to the development of a learning culture. The research findings first confirm that the organizational practices covered in the study, in line with Zak's claims [21], have a strong connection with employee trust. The hypothesis regarding the existence of a relationship between practices that build the organizational trust factor, and the learning culture was also confirmed, particularly highlighting the importance of certain practices.

It has been shown that organizations where employees "receive regular and high-quality feedback from their superiors" and where "on a daily basis, superiors share links to learning content, book recommendations, interesting articles, good practice examples, etc.

with their subordinates" are those most frequently perceived as having a learning culture. These two aspects stem from the trust development strategy that Zak (2017) refers to as "supporting human growth." This strategy involves encouraging mentorship and the commitment of superiors to the development and progress monitoring of those they lead, often through "micro" lessons. The strategy also includes managers' interest in the overall life and functioning of those they lead, such as work-life balance [15]. Practices described through items that show the strongest connection with the learning culture clearly indicate that managers are part of a community of people who share an attitude towards growth and feel obligated to share knowledge, as described by Grossman [5] in defining a learning culture. Providing feedback can stimulate the development of employee competencies, even in a crisis, such as the pandemic during which this research was conducted [8]. Feedback is a powerful motivational and educational tool; if given effectively, it can enhance the perception of self-efficacy by highlighting what has been done well and effectively within the current achievement and providing concrete, specific information on areas for improvement. Constructive feedback increases self-awareness in employees, offers options and choices, and encourages personal development [9], which is often associated with a strong desire for further learning.

Furthermore, the results also show that when "people in managerial positions openly discuss what bothers them, areas where they are not skilled, or which knowledge and skills they lack"—a component of the trust-building strategy termed "showing vulnerability"—this also leads to a high perception of a learning culture. This refers to the vulnerability of leaders, the significance of which is particularly emphasized by Botsman (2018), and is associated with increased oxytocin release in employees, as evidenced by neuroscientific studies [21]. It can also be seen as an empowering permission for "not knowing" and imperfection,

which is highlighted by Transactional Analysis theorists (a framework for understanding personality and psychotherapy; Stuart and Joines, 2011) or assertive communication theorists. It is likely that the willingness of superiors to clearly articulate their development areas, without fear of judgment, provides subordinates with an impetus to recognize where they can improve and communicate that

Significant moderate-intensity correlations were also found between the learning culture and statements indicating that in the organization “the manager sets goals for employees that align with their interests and are challenging but achievable” (a challenge-setting strategy) and that “there is an opportunity to engage in socially beneficial activities or develop one's own idea during working hours” (a strategy of providing interesting work). Challenges are clearly crucial for perceiving an environment that promotes learning, and the same applies to experimenting through projects that are personally important to us. Although this is not the type of experimentation within work tasks discussed by the Agile movement [7], it is still a form of employee experimentation that is organizationally supported. Research also shows that employees who reported high organizational support and believed that the organization was committed to them even in crisis situations reciprocated with strong dedication and commitment to the organization's goals [3]. One such example, as mentioned, is the increasingly common establishment of a learning culture within organizations.

It is also interesting to note that the results indicate that, among the 16 practices that generate trust in the organization, the one least (though still statistically significantly) related to the perception of a learning culture is the practice referring to granting freedom in work—“you can freely manage your time and organize your work as you see fit, as long as it does not interfere with others' work and produces results.” This suggests that even in organizations where it

is not possible to offer this kind of flexibility due to the nature of the work (e.g., public services, manufacturing companies, etc.), it may not necessarily impact the perception of the learning culture.

The positive correlations between practices characteristic of organizations with a high trust factor and those perceived as a learning culture suggest an indivisible nature of trust and learning. It is also evident that managers play a crucial role in promoting a learning culture through mechanisms—practices that develop trust within the organization.

The limitations of this study concern the nature of the design's transferability and the reliance on self-report data. This restricts the ability to draw causal inferences between constructs. Additionally, as this is a pilot study, the sample size is somewhat smaller, convenient, and uneven. In this regard, a recommendation for future research would be to use a representative sample. Furthermore, it would be valuable to examine organizational trust operationalized through statements about trust in managers, teams, and the organization, as well as to consider learning culture as a multidimensional phenomenon (see, for example, [12]).

The theoretical contribution of this work lies in the further confirmation of the underexplored connection between organizational trust and learning culture. Based on the findings, it is suggested to improve practices and procedures within human resource management, particularly by enhancing feedback processes, mentorship based on genuine concern for employees, and "micro" lessons, as well as by encouraging the communication of vulnerability among managers. It should also be noted that if these trust-generating practices are misaligned or contradictory, they can lead to distrust among people [1].

In line with the research findings, it is also recommended to assess the level of organizational trust as part of evaluating the organization's readiness to develop a culture of trust or in cases where there is resistance from employees to any educational or

developmental initiatives. It should not be overlooked that where our efforts do not bear fruit, it may not necessarily be due to the seed or our effort—it might sometimes be due to the unprepared soil.

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## APPENDICES

### *Appendix 1. Questionnaire Organizational trust factor (OFP, [15])*

Rate on a scale of 1 to 5 how much the statements apply to your company's practices and culture. Note that 1 indicates "not at all true" while 5 is "completely true".

In our company ...					
1. ... those who do well are rewarded immediately after that they have achieved something above average at the workplace, and not according to some annual bonus schedule and rewards.	1	2	3	4	5
2. ... they periodically select the best individuals or teams. During the selection, the opinion of the employees, not only the manager, is taken into account.	1	2	3	4	5
3. ... employees are given clearly defined and timed benefits specific goals to achieve.	1	2	3	4	5
4. ... manager sets goals for the employee in accordance with his interests	1	2	3	4	5

and so they should be challenging but achievable.					
5. ... only successfully completed work counts, while you have the freedom to do it in a way that pleases you.	1	2	3	4	5
6. ... you can manage your time freely and organize your work as you see fit, if it does not interfere with someone's work and brings results.	1	2	3	4	5
7. ... you can choose tasks or projects that you are interested in working on or in which you want to try yourself.	1	2	3	4	5
8. ... there is an opportunity to be socially useful you hire or develop an idea of your own as part of your working hours.	1	2	3	4	5
9. ... they often report to us on business results, successes, but also failures of the company.	1	2	3	4	5
10. ... you know exactly what you need to achieve, learn or how long you have to work to get a certain raise and reached the salary of a colleague.	1	2	3	4	5
11. ... people are encouraged to socialize, celebrate birthdays and the like by managers.	1	2	3	4	5

12. ... collegiality and a good relationship with colleagues through a salary increase, bonus, promotion or another type of reward.	1	2	3	4	5
13. ... employees receive regular and high-quality feedback from their superiors.	1	2	3	4	5
14. ... on a daily basis superiors share with subordinates, links to content from which they can learn, book recommendations, interesting articles, good examples from practice, and the like.	1	2	3	4	5
15. ... people in managerial positions talk freely about what bothers them, what they are not good at or what they lack knowledge and skills.	1	2	3	4	5
16. ... management mentions what the competition is better at and what the company's weaknesses are.	1	2	3	4	5